

Smith, Katherine, James Staples and Nigel Rapport (eds). 2015. *Extraordinary Encounters. Authenticity and the Interview*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books. 205 pp. Hb.: \$70.00/£43.00. ISBN: 9781782385899.

This volume is entirely dedicated to the research method of conducting interviews. The interview is analysed as a social event, capable of unearthing subjectivities that are not discernible in everyday social interaction. In the *Introduction*, Staples and Smith argue that close attention to the interview itself might tell more than the raw data collected through it. In this perspective, the interview is approached as the analytical category itself throughout the book.

In *Chapter One*, Caplan argues that anthropologists should want to write biographies as they carry the potential to facilitate communication beyond the discipline. After giving both an autobiographical and a biographical account of the life of a man he knew for almost four decades, Caplan compares the two. Based on this empirical data and included letter correspondence, he manages to depict how larger political and economic developments proceeded, and how ambiguous concepts such as “globalisation” and “modernity” percolate down in one man’s life. The author aims at writing a biography rich in detail that shall serve as a testimony to future generations and also give back data and insights to the host community. In this context, he cautions anthropologists about a myriad of practical and ethical concerns that arise if the subject has, as in this case, already passed away.

In *Chapter Two*, Niehaus suggests utilising biographical narratives in addition to data created through synchronic methods. After presenting an exemplary life story of a South African HIV-positive man, he argues that the life stories of ordinary people enable researchers to gain insights into complex lives and domestic realms that usually remain covered. Thereby scholars can unveil the disjunctions between concrete acts, normative notions, and representational models.

Staples argues in *Chapter Three* for a commitment to nuanced, multi-layered biographical accounts beyond the obvious. In a similar vein to the previous chapter, he argues that people with leprosy in India are used to telling their stories well adjusted to the representatives of potential donors to attract funding. However, too often such accounts have been taken as objective representations of reality. Staple argues that while these accounts *do* give insights into the politics of representation of the leprosy-affected, they reveal little about the subjects’ actual lives. He advocates for biographical interviews that occur in both different places and stretch out over much more than a single telling to avoid the (re)production of conventionalised life stories. He concedes that such life history accounts are not more true or unmediated, but rather that the researcher can extract more nuances of the interviewee’s life experience when they are no longer obliged to conform to an overarching narrative structure. This case reminds the reader not to reduce the interviewee to their essentials as related to the story’s focus, in order not to produce “case-histories”.

The following chapter deals with banter in joking relationships that are difficult to capture. “Having a barter”, the witty exchange of insults with harmless intentions on

the one side and without taking offence by the counterpart, mostly remains unexplained, happens effortlessly and is pleasing. The exchange itself is more telling than the offensive, often politically incorrect words uttered. To elicit this inexplicable insider understanding, Smith conducted impromptu, unstructured interviews with members of a social club. She claims that the unstructured interview is particularly helpful to acquire an awareness of this unreflected, embodied routine practice. Using illustrative short interview excerpts, the author uncovers the characteristics, underlying mechanics, and language of the performative acts of bartering, and lays out the social dynamics involved. She argues that the socially indexical language when engaging in bartering does re-affirm the legacies of injurious language, but also challenges and subverts negative, stereotypical constructions attached to those performing.

In the fifth chapter, Trias-i-Valls portrays the interview as a social exchange by critically reflecting on the process of oral and filmed interviews with children. Although some parts read like an introduction to “interviewing children”, most parts are characterised by exaggerated and unclear language. Drawing upon ethnographic research on gift exchange, the author proposes an *altermodern* approach to children’s perceptions, experiences and expressions of time and recommends focusing on the delays, fractures, and challenges to adult logic. She argues that doing “interviews” is less about technique, reflexivity, and ethics, but more about the local temporality of children’s responses to our shared world with them.

In the next chapter, Okely claims to assess fieldwork accounts elicited from over twenty anthropologists in informal interviews. Although she extracted experiences from fellow anthropologists, she does not reflect on the methodology applied. The large majority of this chapter amounts to an accumulation of her complaints based on her frustrating experiences with ‘hegemonic multidisciplinary ethics committees’ (p. 128) that censor and assess anthropologists. This is much different from the past when no ethics committee existed to block our “fieldwork” or linked doctoral grants to rigid, less holistic approaches in which semi-structured interviews are dismissed as not easily controllable. In contrary, as Okely argues, it is the free-ranging narrative of interviews that can bring new knowledge, precisely because it is unpredictable and opens creative and unforeseen research avenues, including serendipity. Instead of collecting data from a distance through assumed “objective” procedures in “uncontaminated” settings, researchers shall exploit a shared identity and residence and participate and engage in reciprocal exchange instead of performing a “detached interrogations” in order to gain provable insights. Okely’s contribution sums up epistemological debates fought out, and reads more like a commentary gives insights behind the scenes of academic life characterised by bureaucracy and competition.

In Chapter 7, Lopes presents an action-research project in which she shared a political agenda with the interviewees – the unionisation of sex workers. Lopes provides a brief introduction to the origins and definitions of action research, linked to a case study. She points out that being involved, instead of a detached observer, can trigger return questions during the interview, thus inverting roles: The interviewee turns the table on the interviewer and leads the interview. Swapping roles can shorten the distance

and challenge power relations involved in non-participatory research. In what she terms “bottom-up ethnography”, interviewees are not merely contributing to someone else’s career, but also have a stake and possible benefits. Similarly to previous chapters, she has shown that interviews can provide spaces in which social norms or expectations can be resisted.

The book under review is a critical reflection on the interview as a productive site of encounter and brings about a powerful, new appreciation of the interview as both an effective method as well as an analytical category. It comes as an apt addition to clinical how-to guides and as an anthropological counterpart to critical reflections on the same, offered by sociologists. Most chapters make an easy and interesting read as the contributors of this edition manage to bring together ethnographic details with theoretical consideration on interview contamination and biases. The book under review gives many impulses to both academic and non-academic interviewers and offers new food for thought and debate with regard to knowledge traditions and claims to understanding. *Extraordinary Encounters* is an enjoyable book, not only suitable for students and teaching, but also for researchers in the field”. Readers will be more aware and appreciate the interview and the interviewee in new ways. This will possibly encourage them to attempt unstructured or even disorganised interviewing.

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