

EXTRAORDINARY ENCOUNTERS

Methodology and History in Anthropology

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Edited by Katherine Smith, James Staples and Nigel Rapport

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Authenticity and the Interview

Edited by

Katherine Smith, James Staples and Nigel Rapport



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THE INTERVIEW AS ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

James Staples and Katherine Smith

In the social sciences, publications about research methods all too often confine their discussions to issues of data collection and analysis, without exploring in much depth knowledge traditions and claims to understanding. There are, of course, some notable exceptions, including Jonathan Skinner's work (2010, 2012) on the ways in which an anthropology of the senses should be extended to the data-gathering side of ethnography; Jenny Hockey's (2002) questioning of the general perception in the social sciences that participant observation must pragmatically encompass interviews as a seamless, holistic ethnography; and Janet Finch's (1984) early work on the impact of ethical and political decisions of the social researcher in interview situations. The chapters collected in this book likewise make an important departure from the more general trend in 'how-to' publications, attempting to capture, ethnographically, the particular moments when social and personal life is imagined, discussed, documented and seen as the emerging outcome of complex personal and collective histories, rather than as mainly defined by the specificities of interview questions.

For all of the descriptive promise and analytical potential that ethnography offers, the interview itself has made relatively little theoretical impact on the ways in which anthropological methods play a part in the representation of ethnographic details. The assumption may be widespread that the interview offers uniquely privileged data, grounded in biographical experiences and social

contexts, and yet the presentation of the knowledge acquired from conducting ethnographic interviews continues to raise hoary questions concerning the relations between subjects and objects, and things as they are against things as they might be (Strathern 2004). Writing is much more than the recording of facts and observations (*ibid.*: 7), in short, and the interview is much more than a means by which to collect them.

The interview is a social event that requires continual attention because of the way in which it garners the interest of researchers and research subjects alike. An elemental part of modern social practice is the reflection and realisation of human ideas and subjectivities, and their detachment from the moment of experience as ideas are discussed in conversation with others. Within the context of ethnographic inquiry, the interview itself may, then, play a crucial role in eliciting information that would otherwise not be discussed in everyday life and conversation. People may become easily analytical about their own and others' experiences in an interview situation. The interview may be seen to provide a space for the detachment and envisioning of subjectivities at a particular moment in time, and in a particular moment of experience. As the anthropologist explains the role of the interview as the furtherance of respect and awareness of other ways of life, individuals may choose to resist or disagree with social norms and expectations as they carve out new ways of communicating particular, perhaps personal, views and imaginations that, in the interview, may take precedence over wider social expectations. Jenny Hockey (2002: 214) points out that, 'interviews are situated moments in which people engage with aspects of life which may not surface elsewhere. [Interviews] allow past and future to be accessed via the present and create space for what has been left unsaid and what remains invisible'. Here, we explore the interview as a medium through which to express a variety of lived experiences and imagined futures.

Each of the contributions to this volume approaches the ethnographic interview both as a method and as an analytical category. It is seen as an essential part of the ethnographer's 'toolkit' in order to collect data and gain a particular kind of knowledge and understanding in fieldwork, as well as a vague construction based on the field researcher's experience of immersion in fieldwork and their own academic training. 'The interview is not over-determined socially or culturally, but is a matter of point of view' (Rapport 2012: 57–58). The interview in ethnographic writing, as support and demonstration of thoughts and knowledge accrued in fieldwork, embeds what we

see here in this volume as an extraordinary encounter in what is commonly considered 'ordinary' in ethnographic practice (Rapport 2012: 57). Therefore, the following chapters offer ethnographic examples that allow for 'an interrogation of what difference it makes to an analysis of human social life to re-situate our focus on the interview' and how the interview is experienced and imagined as a particular kind of space within which personal, biographic and social cues and norms are explored and interrogated, and as a space for mutually constructed reflection and analysis, providing direction and awareness for future encounters. Collectively, the chapters offer a powerful new appreciation of the interview as a space of extraordinary encounters that, at the same time, inform everyday social relations. Considerations of the interview thus accompany broader discussions and debates concerning how social science might apprehend unique events and experiences alongside those that are more general, patterned and conventional in social life. The interview as a theme brings to the fore methodological issues of authenticity and also provides a fruitful focus on how the everyday is continuously constructed through moments of reflection and authorship.

Collectively, the following chapters demonstrate how the interview represents a different context to everyday conversation and interaction, a context that can elicit a different kind of response. Existing social relations are reflected upon, new ones are developed, and in reflecting upon the particularity of the interview and its different kind of response, the chapters in this volume, taken together, show what this means for our ('authentic') data and our contributions to the production of knowledge. We show that in the telling of a life story, in the exchange of knowledge in the context of the interview and in writing, personal lives are related to the lives of others; thus, as Brian Roberts explains, 'there is both autobiography and biography' (2002: 163).

Ethnographic examples make possible a critique of those accounts that assume the interview to be a second-rate choice in relation to participant observation (see Hockey 2002). At the same time they allow for an interrogation of those analyses in which the interview is deemed to be less effective or 'authentic' because research subjects and researchers experience the interview as a context situated outside everyday life, or talk about personal and social issues in different ways in an interview context. Looking at how the interview in ethnographic research is organised, conducted and explained provides in-roads to problematising the idea that our research participants can be represented as homogeneous, with a shared set of interests.

Critical reflection on the interview allows us to come to terms with the various ways in which the study of 'others' is not always and simply the study of the powerless (see for example Shore and Nugent 2002) but is about the realisation, reflection and expression of self, society and culture. The recounting of the interview can add to the dramatic portrait of personal engagement with the field, with people and with ideas (Rapport 1994). Tracking and documenting ideas that become paramount in the interview context, and what sorts of shifts in perspective are recounted and how, shows that there is a rupturing of the illusory experience of wholeness and the consistency between the self and the social and cultural setting (cf. Sökefeld 1999).

In sum, the interview should be seen as a special, productive site of ethnographic encounter. It is less to be distinguished from ethnography than explored as a site of a very particular and important kind of knowing: one which allows those we learn from a unique opportunity to reflect, comment upon and interpret their own actions and the world around them in their own terms. It is the co-creation of the interview as a space within which the personal reflections, memories, life stories, embellishments and justifications for actions and ideas are discussed that make this context an 'active' (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) and 'relational' (Tietel 2000) reinforcement that at once focuses and expands both the interviewer's and interviewee's experiences and senses of self. Interviews can be considered as building blocks for the construction of an image of the self that may otherwise come in and out of focus in everyday life.

In the following introductory pages we begin by problematising the notion of the interview *per se*, exploring it both as a methodology and, subsequently, as an analytical category. In setting out what we hope to achieve by bringing together the chapters of this volume we also situate the collection amid what we identify as the various genres of publications on the interview. Finally, we turn our attention to the individual chapters to explore the connections that bring them together as a whole, revealing the many ways in which interviews are, as our title has it, indeed 'extraordinary encounters'.

A Fresh Interrogation of the Interview in Ethnographic Practice

From the combative radio or television interview aimed at extracting the 'truth' from an expert interviewee – a politician or industrialist – well versed in the arts of political spin, to the cosier, sofa-style

interviews with actors and pop stars that dominate the evening schedules and fill consumer magazines, interviews are, after all, everywhere. Police officers undertake interviews to interrogate their suspects – which, even if we are not arrested, we can witness versions of in the surfeit of docudramas and serials that fill our screens – while barristers draw out information pertinent to cases in similar fashion. Counsellors, in particular, but increasingly other health professionals, offer care through talk therapies that might likewise be classified as particular kinds of interviews.

Indeed, such is our familiarity with the interview as a format that television interviewers – from the likes of David Letterman in the United States to Michael Parkinson and Jonathan Ross in the United Kingdom – are as famous, and often more so, than the celebrities to whom they pose their questions. Audiences across the industrialised West – academic or otherwise – are well used to the interview as a medium for unearthing a person's story or hearing their point of view: as a method of 'unfolding the subject's lifeworld', to borrow a phrase from Skinner (2012; see also Kvale 1996).

The utility of the interview in ethnographic research and writing traditionally involves taking notice of the use of interviews, and mentioning their importance becomes a 'fundamental section of the intact chapter, providing that foundation, in quantitative terms, assuring that all bases have been covered' (Thomas 1991: 308). The interviews themselves may take the form of 'structured', 'semi-structured' or 'unstructured' exchanges that may be recorded on audio devices, laboriously transcribed, reflected upon, selected and analysed. Interviews, as things to be dealt with, are the data that contribute to the 'knowledge', as opposed to 'information', which we as ethnographers use to think with. So why, given that interview techniques – unlike the more elusive anthropological method of participant observation – are hardly shrouded in mystery, should we need even one book, let alone another addition to the many that already exist out there, devoted to 'the interview'?

There are, of course, many possible answers to that question. The first is that precisely because of the interview's ubiquity in everyday life, we need, as social scientists, to be consciously aware of, and to reflect upon, the interview's provenance – to ask why it is such a powerful tool for mining subjective information – if we are to use it effectively and ethically as a research tool. We need to be able to see beneath the surface of the interview, whether presented for our light entertainment, news or as a source of data. It might look very simple: one person poses a question, another one answers it, and so

it goes on, each interlocutor in turn, until the interviewer terminates the encounter. Like the properly functioning body (Leder 1990; see also Haraway 2004), the interview is sufficiently unremarkable and commonplace that, unless we make a special effort to attend to it, it disappears from view. But attending to what is behind a question – what the interviewer has at stake in asking the question, and what is going to be changed by someone answering it – might tell us more than the raw data collected by the interview itself. To quote Hobart: ‘Descriptions do not occur *in vitro*, but are produced on occasions when someone plans to assert the status quo, find a reason for doing nothing or change something’ (1990: 98). Replace ‘descriptions’ with either ‘questions’ or ‘answers’ and the point is as valid in respect of scrutinising the presuppositions that might underpin a particular interview context.

We also need to remind ourselves that, despite living in what Atkinson and Silverman (1997) call ‘the interview society’, interviews are not taken-for-granted facts of life everywhere, and nor is every interview the same kind of thing. Asking someone a series of questions in rural South Africa about their disease status, as one of our contributors does (Niehaus, this volume), is not likely to produce the same results as asking a similar set of questions to, say, an ‘expert patient’ (Department of Health, 2001) in the British National Health Service (NHS), who, we might assume, is well versed in certain kinds of interview, and briefed in how to respond to questions about their conditions. Likewise, interviewing fellow anthropologists whose ethnographic practices one has some acquaintance with, as Okely (this volume) does, is a very different proposition to questioning those from profoundly different cultural or intellectual traditions. So, for all its apparent simplicity – someone asks a question, an interlocutor responds to it and so on – the outcome of any interview is heavily influenced by the contexts in which it takes place.

The State of Play

Books on the Interview

The use of the interview in other disciplines, most notably in sociology, has involved its extensive examination and structuring as a particular kind of ‘science’ (see Skinner 2012: 8). And until recently, anthropology’s relationship with the interview has been dominated by the general acknowledgement that interviews, while expected

in any credible ethnography, are the important means by which to demonstrate the long, sustained and transformative knowledge gained in fieldwork. As might be expected for a research method as established and variable as the interview, there are a number of existing books alongside which this volume might sit comfortably on the bookshelves of scholars and field researchers. Much of the existing material out there – some of it very good – fits into one of three categories. What we set out to do with this particular book is something a bit different. This book attempts to go beyond each of them.

The first category consists of critical work by sociologists, in particular, to which our volume provides a valuable anthropological counterpart. Given the relative lacuna of work from an anthropological perspective, this gives the current volume an obvious appeal to social anthropologists, but it also provides a body of material with which sociologists and other social scientists will also be able to engage in productive conversation. The book might be said to form, if you will, part of an 'inter-view' (Finch 1984), and a focused conversation with these other social science disciplines about a shared practice. Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) work is a good example of this category of critical sociological reflection on the interview, and we build here on their lead by taking further the notion of activity and agency that they introduce. Most significantly, in relating the interview to the social relations and processes that surround it – in breaking down the distinction between the occasion of the interview and the moments of social exchange of which it is part – the activity and agency of the interview can be seen to be part of the intentionality of social life. As an extraordinary encounter and the expression of non-conventional voices and identities, the interview is also to be seen as evidencing those powers of individual meaning-making by which cultural forms are everywhere animated. Here the anthropologist is able to draw on more extensive knowledge of the interviewee – gained from fieldwork – so as to put the interview in a wider and fuller context.

The second of the three broad categories is of books written and edited by anthropologists, but which only focus on the interview, if at all, as one of a much wider range of ethnographic methodologies (e.g., Bernard 1994; Clair 2003; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). Anthropologists can also be rather dismissive of the interview as an ethnographic technique. As Hockey (2002) notes, interviewing is often characterised as a second-rate methodological choice compared to the anthropological *pièce de résistance* of 'participant observation'. By contrast, while in this book we do not shy away from the richness of the data that may be created through engaged interviews, we aim

to address some of the lacuna such approaches identify by focusing specifically – and critically – on the interview from the anthropologist’s perspective. In a tradition of anthropological knowledge production, we recognise that the danger in approaching the interview as simply a practice that is shared and recognisable with certainty, is that interviews serve as a means to an end while the persons we learn from become fixed in contexts not of their own making.

The third category includes the plethora of how-to textbooks (e.g., Rubin and Rubin 2005; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Kvale 2007; King and Horrocks 2010; Weiss 1994; Galletta 2013; Seidman 2013). Between them, these volumes (and many more besides) offer a forensic exploration of everything from recruiting interviewees to the recording, transcription and analysis of interview data and its final publication. In addition to advice on the practicalities of interviewing – from expressing and ordering questions in the most effective way to using computer software packages to code the material gathered – such books also invite their readers to reflect on ethical dilemmas and to develop strategies to prevent themselves being cast in the role of therapist. This book, by contrast, is less of a step-by-step guide and more an examination of the nature of the data that interviews offer, and the ways and extents to which this data is different from what might be gained from participant observation alone. It is also an examination of the nature of the consciousness of the interviewee (and interviewer), their intentions and world views, and the way in which an appreciation of this by the interviewer affords insights into how the interviewee and others can be seen to be responsible for the everyday construction of order and sense in their lives (Rapport 1993). It works from the idea that the importance of the interview is affected by the ambivalence in social science research of what constitutes a ‘good’ and ‘useful’ outcome of the interview process. This collection of case studies, and reflection on them, sets out both to challenge and renew the ways in which the ethnographic interview is seen as a constellation of objectives in which all participants come to know, through imaginative investigation, the social worlds in which they live. Equally, by addressing the ways in which the interview may be conducted, recorded and used, our book provides useful examples for readers to anticipate and negotiate their own extraordinary encounters in fieldwork and with research data.

The Interview as Analytical Category

Examination of the complex ways in which people's inner states reflect lived experience within everyday worlds as well as within temporary spaces and transitions can disturb and enlarge presumed understandings of what is socially possible or desirable. The interview, then, is both an empirical reality and an analytic category, as each explores the agonistic and practical activity of engaging identity and society, patterned and felt in historically contingent settings, and mediated by institutional and academic processes and cultural forms.

The literary or rhetorical turn in anthropology continues to produce a substantial body of work aimed at raising an awareness of the discursive construction of knowledge and textual modes of representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Geertz 1988). The contextualisation of the interview in ethnographic writing raises the question of how 'data' is made relevant after the interview. If the goal of research is to produce 'useful and credible information' (Pelto and Pelto 1978:ix) that is 'authentic' and 'relevant', and that informs a wider view of social networks and relations, who sets the terms for this? Is the interview that explores personal and biographical views and stories really more 'authentic'? How can an interview tell us about new kinds of 'public-private involvements' (Hockey 2002: 214) when participants can contradict themselves, each other and the researcher's contributions and interpretations of social life? Biographical accounts gained in this context supply information that is often counter-intuitive and non-conventional, whilst at the same time providing information that is generalisable beyond particular social and cultural contexts. Other selves and ideas are searched for: the interview elicits information that may not be discussed or discernable in everyday social interaction. Memories, life stories, embellishments and justifications for actions and ideas at once focus and expand both the interviewers' and interviewees' experiences. An anthropology that explores methodological traditions in new ways can bring balance to, as well as complicate, more quantitative analyses that do not necessarily anticipate the value of the relations that are recalled, forged and maintained beyond the interview setting.

The Ethnographic Examples

In this introduction we have aimed to 'set the scene' by addressing the idea that an elemental part of modern social practice is reflection, and

that the interview provides a space for re-imaginings and re-articulations of personal and social practice. Each of the following seven chapters should be read both as interrogations and reflections on the interview in their own right, as well as parts of an integrated whole. The epilogue reviews what the volume can be seen to have achieved.

In the first three substantive chapters, Pat Caplan, Isak Niehaus and James Staples offer up data on their research methods that would have otherwise been absent in their published work, and on which, in some cases, they had not themselves openly reflected. In their chapters, they take that knowledge and apply it in pursuing in-depth, biographic or life-history type interviews. In doing so, they each challenge the findings of case studies that follow more conventionalised narrative structures by exploring – contra Henige’s (1988) view that life-history interviews teach us little about the wider socio-historical context – how one person’s experience can shed light on social relationships, institutions and norms in the telling of a life story. The dialectical structure of the interview – the to-ing and fro-ing between a researcher and informant – is sometimes mirrored in the scaled-up dialectic between the informant’s account and consideration of the wider literature.

In the first of the case studies, Pat Caplan begins by questioning whether her encounters with Mikidadi, the biographical subject of her chapter, can be considered interviews at all: Mikidadi’s untimely death meant he was not physically there when she began pulling together the components of his story, and much of her material relies on other sources, such as past correspondence with him, diaries Mikidadi kept for her, and memories of a relationship that dates back more than thirty years. If, however, we think of interviews in the broader sense that we have outlined earlier in this introduction, we would argue that even in the absence of the subject, as in Caplan’s case, the exchange between the anthropologist and the informant shares more than enough of the same characteristics of the interview to be considered as such. Interviews do, after all, have ‘a life of their own’, as Caplan points out, and although she has not sat down and constructed a list of questions to be posed in a particular order, she has, over a long period, asked questions – by various means – of her interlocutor and recorded the answers. The data, then, arose naturally from conversations, later recorded in her notes, and from sources like the diaries Mikidadi kept for her. The conversations might not, at the time, have had a purpose – in the sense that Robson (1993) defines – but, defined retrospectively, they were certainly utilised towards a purpose. They also, importantly, throw up information about Mikidadi’s life that it would not have

been possible to gather from participant observation alone, even if the latter – in all the cases elaborated in this book – was a prerequisite to being able to ask, and then to interpret, the appropriate questions.

In Niehaus's account, the story of Reggie Ngobeni, who has been diagnosed HIV- positive, is enhanced and interpreted through recent material on HIV treatments and narratives about public health education in respect of the syndrome. At the same time, however, his stories allow for a more nuanced, critical reading of the literature. In capturing the texture of social relationships and of subjective experience, Niehaus argues, convincingly, that a biographical interview is particularly well placed to explore the complex, multifaceted questions posed by responses to AIDS/HIV – and can help us to understand, in ways the contemporaneous participant observation alone cannot, why ordinary South Africans are often so ambivalent towards the antiretroviral (ARV) drugs that could, on the face of it, ameliorate their suffering. As Niehaus puts it, 'the capacity of biographies to capture the unfolding of shifting, indeterminate and contradictory meanings in individual lives, make them an extremely valuable addition to studies of social and cultural phenomena of a more public nature' (Niehaus, this volume).

Something of the same process is also detectable in Staples' account of the life of his research assistant Das, where a close examination of one man's life throws new light on the more general regional ethnographic literature on institutions such as caste, Hinduism, and Indian notions of purity and pollution. In both these accounts it is difficult for the researchers concerned to discern where the boundaries between the 'interview' and other methods of research, such as 'participant observation', might lie. Niehaus's telling of Reggie's story, for example, is informed by conversations with others – including Reggie's cousin – and his wider ethnographic knowledge of the context in which Reggie lives. The same could also be said of Staples' account, whose 'interviews' include taking Das back to significant places that emerge through his stories and observing his interactions with others in those places. His telling is also informed (as is Caplan's) by informant diaries, field notes and letters, which are clearly different but not entirely separable from that which might be more recognisable as an interview: a social context in which the researcher poses questions to which the informant responds.

The following chapters explore interviews of particular kinds and as spaces not just for revelation, but also for the co-production and exchange of information and knowledge between participants. Katherine Smith's encounters with members of the ladies' darts

team in 'Starlings' – a northern English working men's club – also show the interview as a very privileged kind of space in which both interviewer and interviewee can interrogate and make sense of their more informal exchanges, the meanings of which might otherwise remain unintelligible, at least to the outsider. In the incidents Smith describes, for example, she interviews the women about their practice of 'having a barter' – a quick-fire exchange of apparently derogatory banter – which, taken at face value or heard in another context, might be read as an act of verbal aggression. The interview, however, provides a bracketed context in which the women concerned can reflect on their utterances and articulate what they meant by them. In this way, through the interview, data that otherwise remains implicit can become unambiguously explicit for, in many cases, the first time: again, it provides a place for reflection for the interviewee as well as data for the interviewer.

The Catalan children who feature in Àngels Trias i Valls's chapter are likewise very aware – surprisingly, perhaps, given their youth – that the interview is a very particular kind of exchange, distinct from the other verbal encounters of everyday life. In a painstaking analysis of her video recordings of interviews with children about the gifts they were hoping to receive over the Christmas season, Trias i Valls demonstrates that children, some as young as three, were fully capable of dropping in and out of the interview context, moving aside when they became bored (to argue with a sibling or to ask a parent a question), and shifting back into a distinctive interviewee mode – focused and direct – when they were ready to return to the formal interview, a space in which information that might otherwise be left unsaid can be conveyed.

The subsequent chapter, in which Judith Okely reflects on the experience of interviewing fellow anthropologists about their own research methods, appears, on the face of it, to take our discussion in a different direction. Here, Okely attacks what she terms the 'banality of formulaic methods', drawing a marked distinction between the interview as a fixed, highly structured and, ideally, objective encounter – in which all respondents are asked the same questions regardless of their responses and, in many cases, are offered only a limited range of possible responses – and the more meandering, open-ended interviews described by most of the contributors to this volume, and which she herself undertook with more than twenty anthropologists. Although the interviews she conducted were, as she points out, of a particular kind – drawing both on personal acquaintance and shared disciplinary knowledge as the basis on which the exchanges take place – there are

also some striking resemblances between her interlocutors' responses and those of the Catalanian children and members of the Starlings' darts team described by Trias i Valls and Smith. As was the case in the other interviews, the anthropologists Okely interviewed – largely because of the open, discursive context in which their exchanges took place – reflected on their research practices in ways they might not have done previously, particularly in their published work.

There are parallels here with how the UK sex workers that Ana Lopes interviews come to understand their experiences in new, previously unexplored ways, often by self-consciously appropriating the interview format. In her chapter, Lopes discusses how, in the process of conducting 'action research' (Reason and Bradbury 2001) with these sex workers, she came to understand the interview not simply as a tool through which to elicit data for her own ends, but as a structure that might also be appropriated by interviewees to construct a better understanding of their own situations. Her interviews with sex workers came to constitute, as she puts it, 'a process by which individuals perform in-depth analysis of their own realities' (Lopes, this volume). By talking about their work, their feelings towards it and their problems in organising themselves collectively, Lopes's interlocutors were often articulating these issues openly for the first time and, in doing so, were able to order and make sense of them in their own terms. The interview context formed the basis for action – in this case for establishing a trade union.

Collectively, these chapters demonstrate the matter of perspective inherent in the interview and its utility in ethnography. They explore the construction of biographical accounts in ethnographic research and writing, addressing the ways in which life stories address concerns beyond the individual, whose life is studied in ways that are both grounded and accessible, as well as the ways in which the (dis)organised interview elicits a particular kind of information and knowledge that is unique to the interview context. What then, one might ask, distinguishes a biographical interview and the other, more routine anthropological methods – such as participant observation – into which it frequently merges? For one thing, as Douglass (1992) points out, in reality participant observation tends to be either participation or, more often, observation: watching events unfold, and maybe asking questions about them. The distinction between the two practices may, however, not always be so clear-cut and require continual attention (Smith 2012). Biographies – in common with interview data more generally – mostly require more than the contemporaneous recording of events: we need to find out, usually

by asking questions, what happened a long time before the events we are observing. Such questions might be recognisable as what we would think of as interview questions, a more or less chronological documenting of events, from the relatively banal (for example, 'When and where were you born?') to a more complex probing of the data being offered. Often, however, the questions will not be asked in a structured sense. Interviewees, once asked to tell their story, might need very few interjections at all, even though the presence of the researcher is still required in order to justify the telling of the story and to record it – a role analogous, perhaps, to that of the therapist. It is the interviewer, even when silent, on to whom the interviewee's commentary is projected. When interviewers do interject, as Staples (this volume) points out, such interjections might only take the form of prompt words, which, as in his case, make little objective sense when transcribed. He writes, for example, of one lengthy, recorded interview in which, aside from a scene-setting comment at the start to identify the period that he wanted Das to recount, his only interjections were single word prompts along the lines of 'And?', 'So?' and 'Then?', showing that there is more to the successful interview encounter than the actual words uttered.

What it means to witness and be a part of the 'ongoing reconstruction of experience' (Ginsburg 1989, cited in Rapport, this volume) of social life vis-à-vis the interview context is what Nigel Rapport, our co-editor, discusses in the epilogue of this collection. He draws out the different components and key themes of each of the contributions to this volume and revisits the notion of an interview's extraordinariness. He also introduces us to his own experiences of interviewing Ricky Hirsch, an 84-year-old Canadian, and survivor of the Holocaust, whose narration of his personal history was episodically ruptured in the interview so that he moved from the vivid personal accounts of his past experiences to detailing what sorts of feelings and emotional responses he was experiencing in the moment of recounting his past. It is this momentary tension between being-in-a-life and adopting an ironising stance in regard to it that the context of the interview can hope to elicit, Rapport contends. The interview allows for a space within which we 'can and do stand outside the experiential flow of our lives and call ourselves honestly to account' (Rapport, this volume).

Conclusion

Conducting interviews and carrying out participant observation are cross-disciplinary methodological decisions for many types of social investigations. This collection is a response to the shared task of understanding human experience, making the invisible visible. Rapport has argued elsewhere that always and everywhere, individuals are prone and able to 'detach themselves', to question the value and justification of the roles and practices in which they are currently implicated, and to envision themselves with different relationships and preferences (Rapport 2002: 153). Engaging with such 'detachments' during fieldwork animates the fact that pre-designed research methods, such as conducting interviews, become of secondary significance, as they are dependent on the researcher's ability to generate trust and establish meaningful relationships with informants (Kalir 2006: 235). Indeed, even the ever-controversial notions of introspection, reflexivity, 'self-study' and 'participant objectivation' (Bourdieu 2003; Douglass 1992: 131), which formulate the thick descriptions of participant observations in fieldwork, may not produce the desired clarity of language, through a lack of being surrounded by a variety of influences, and without the shared information of those with whom we live, work and learn from in 'the field'; hence the 'conjunctural' nature of all ethnography (Piña-Cabral 2000: 341).

The interrogation of what to know and how to know, and specifically the 'interview' as a part of our anthropological toolkit, poses theoretical and methodological challenges for anthropology: a discipline long since concerned with issues of epistemology, reflexivity, representation and power, and a discipline with a particular focus on ethnography. By subjecting the interview to a similar spectrum of analytical discussion as participant observation, it can be shown that the interview elicits information that is at once specific and generalisable, personal and social, pragmatic and conceptual, extraordinary and insightful of the everyday. The interview, approached as a particular kind of experience and a particular kind of space, is something imagined and experienced in personal ways, and yet shaped by circumstances, by personal and social histories and imagined futures. Both interviewer and interviewee may be transformed by the occasion, and so the interview is located at the cusp of remembering and re-authoring personal and shared identities, and may be responsible for making new kinds of public-private involvements.

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