

Gubrium and Holstein (eds). **POSTMODERN INTERVIEWING**. Sage Publications, 287 pages, \$37.95 @ www.sagepublications.com or Ukpounds 23.76 @ www.amazon.co.uk

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Postmodernism, however defined, entails a crisis in representation and skepticism towards truth claims, which have a number of implications for interviewing. “Postmodern interviewing” edited by Gubrium and Holstein provides various perspectives on interviewing in a postmodern light. Postmodernism is also characterized by the disembedding and recycling of themes across settings. And so it is with this book – all the chapters have previously been published in the *Handbook of Interview Research* from 2001 by the same editors, as has the content of another new Sage release *Inside Interviewing*. It is not clear why the previous handbook could not simply have been updated and republished. Readers familiar with the Handbook need not familiarize themselves with this publication, but for the newcomer it does offer some valuable insights and inspiration.

The initial chapter by the editors does a good job of outlining the “postmodern sensibilities” of contemporary society that interviewing must take into account. Baudrillard, Lyotard and others are invoked to outline the modernistic crisis of representation, and how it is confronted, and the methodological implications of the postmodern shift are exemplified by the use of older and contemporary anthropological descriptions. However, the outline of the book that one is expecting to find in this introductory chapter is sketchy, leaving one with little clues as to where the rest of the book will take you.

The second chapter, also by the editors, provides a fascinating analysis of the interview society, whose rise is linked to “the modern temper” and the changing relationships of the post-WWII world. Given the prevalence of interviewing in contemporary society, it makes no sense to treat the interview as a mere research procedure, being an integral part of everyday life. The many implications for this are explored. In the interview society, interviews not only construct information but also constitute subjectivity. The question of who “owns” the produced narrative is addressed, as are issues of empowerment and the relationship of the interview to other societal practices. The chapter is well written, but could have benefited from an introductory outline.

The interview society is a resurging topic throughout the book, most notably in chapter 8 “The cinematic society and the reflexive interview” by Denzin. Citing from movies and TV interviews, he makes the case that popular media representations permeate society to the point where they define cultural identities. The interview plays a pivotal part in this, in producing situated versions of the self, staged cinematic standards against which everyday life experience may be judged. The strong focus on celebrities and quotations from movies does leave the reader wondering how the cinematic interview society affect those outside the public eye, and

Denzin's solution of using reflexivity to co-construct meaning, and uncovering structures of oppression is vague, yet all in all this chapter provides for interesting reading.

The third chapter, "Postmodern Trends in Interviewing" is very much in line with the title of the book, as postmodern influences on interviewing are outlined. These include a blurring of the boundaries between interviewer and interviewee, new communicative and collaborating forms, sensitivity to issues of representation and power, and an undermining of the interviewer as the expert. Various influences, e.g. from phenomenology and feminism are outlined and new representational forms, such as staged plays or poetry, are introduced. Relatively short and well written this chapter gives an excellent overview of postmodern influences in contemporary interviewing.

Chapter 4 "Active Interviewing" by the editors, considers which form interviewing might take. Interviewing is a social encounter in which meaning is constructed. Yet, some "linguistically attuned" (p 68) approaches tend to emphasize the "hows" of interviewing on behalf of the "whats". The authors seek a balance between the two, as the meanings inherent in the "whats" serve as relevant grounds of asking questions. Meaning in interviews is never constructed from scratch, but reflects local conditions, such as the research topic and the background of the participants. The interviewers role is to activate narrative productions, by indicating "narrative positions, resources, orientations and precedents" (p. 75) and not to be confined by predetermined agendas. This is the most practical chapter written by the editors.

I was not quite sure what to expect from the title of chapter 5 "Internet Interviewing". Fortunately, the chapter does not read like baudrillardian hyper-babble, or an academic version of geeks-on-parade as the chapter is indeed a serious presentation of this new area. The authors address problems pertaining to samples, ethics and data-analysis and how to establish rapport online. This chapter is no doubt of interest to many, as Internet interviewing will definitely increase in the years to come. The extensive list of references can no doubt serve to provide an overview of findings in this area for the interested reader, yet here an updated version of the chapter would have been in its place as the area has evolved a lot since the first publication in 2001. Only one of the websites cited had been relocated as of early September 2003.

"Revisiting the relationships between participants observation and interviewing" is the title of chapter 6, written by Atkinson and Coffey. Initially, the authors reread a classic paper by Becker and Greer on the applications of participant observation and interviewing, where observation is regarded as the superior method. The authors argue such a view reflects a false dichotomy between action and speech. Instead, talk is a form of action, and may be analyzed as such: "Interviews generate accounts and narratives that are forms of social action in their own right" (p. 118). The blurring of the boundary between observation and interview is another postmodern element in interviewing.

The difference between personal and folk narratives, and the interaction of these in interviews is the focus of chapter 7 by anthropologists Narayan and George. The distinction between the two is not as clear-cut as it may first seem, as folk narratives are often invoked in personal

interviews. The authors emphasize the need for researchers to be aware of the social life of the stories that extends beyond the interview. It may be necessary to supplement interview stories with interview about stories in order to comprehend the interpretive framework of storytelling. The chapter is well-written and has many illustrative case examples.

A number of chapters explore the possibilities of non-conventional presentational forms and the inclusion of the writer's reflections in the analysis of interview material. Exploring alternate representational forms, Richardsson describes poetic presentation in chapter 10 "Poetic Presentation of Interviews". The points he makes are that for some kinds of knowledge, poetic presentation may be preferable to prose and poetic presentation is a valid method for seeing beyond scientific conventions. Poetic representation is not a way of assuring that the one and only true story has been written. But as the poetic form plays with connotative and literary structures, it has a great likelihood of engaging readers in reflexive analyses of their own interpretations, and of engaging the researcher in reflexive analyses of his/her interpretive labor. The chapter traces poststructuralist influences of presentation, gives hints as to how a poetic presentation may be created and provides some examples of poetic presentations.

Alternative presentation of interviewing is also the topic of chapter 12 "Interviewing at the Border of Fact and Fiction" by Rosenblatt. An awareness of the social constructions of reality we are more skeptical of the status of the provisional truth we hope to offer. The title is not meant to imply that "anything goes" or no truth may be arrived at, rather, as a reader and writer of fiction, the author believes he becomes a better interviewer as he carries a broader range of hypothesized selves and experiences to the interview situation. A modern quest for truth may well go hand in hand with a postmodern questioning of peoples categories of realities.

The inclusion of the writer's perspective is taken to the extreme in chapter 9 "Their story/my story/our story" by Ellis and Berger. Their review of the literature and their distinctions between different interview types – reflexive dyadic, interactive, mediated co-constructed and unmediated co-constructed - are no doubt insightful. Yet the author's continuous reflections on the interview and writing process become more than a bit tedious in the long run: They become downright annoying. As a reader you do not need the writer's reflection to appreciate the tragedy of bulimia, and you certainly have no need to know how the author's dogs behaved during the writing process! The story becomes less the shared story of the interviewer and interviewee, even less the interviewee's narrative – the story becomes the writers' self-absorbed discourse.

Chapter 11 by Smith deals with "Analytic Strategies for Oral History Interviews". In common with all types of historic evidence, interviews contain a mix of true and false, reliable and unreliable information, and must be approached with sound skepticism. For a start, interview may be tested for internal validity, the information crosschecked with other sources and read the interview with a wide historical and theoretical understanding of the subject as possible. More importantly, the limitations and the meaning of the interview can only be made visible through a dialogue with the narrator. The author makes a distinction between syntagmatic analysis, i.e. the temporal dimension of narration, and paradigmatic analysis, i.e. a focus on

recurrent images that can appear at any point in the story. Although the chapter deals with historic material, readers from other disciplines may find inspiration in the outlined practical and analytic strategies.

The final chapter “Interviewing, Power/Knowledge and Social Inequality” by Briggs draws upon the work of Foucault, Bourdieu and Bauman to address the issue of power. A power asymmetry is inherent in the interview situation in that the interviewer controls the content of what is said, the length of answers and the topics covered, and to what extent the interview may be re-contextualized. Interviews are structured by power asymmetries producing material geared towards the institutional needs for which it was created and as such interviews may give a voice to minorities that fit the overall status quo of the majority. Interview society creates the illusion that individual perspectives are incorporated into decision-making. Social inequality springs naturally from differences in what individuals know and can project onto the public sphere. Interviews play a central role in the political technologies, being central to the power of the state to enumerate citizens, doctors to medicalize the ills of their patients, lawyers to define criminals and so forth. The interview creates an illusion of social interaction and self-expression in a globalized and bureaucratic world. No doubt one of the most interesting chapters in the book.

Overall, “Postmodern Interviewing” is a recommendable and inspiring book, despite the weak outline in the introductory chapter and too much space dedicated to presentational forms. As a psychologist, I missed a chapter on interviewing from a psychological perspective. Psychologists in general and clinicians in particular know a thing or two about interviewing; yet, this knowledge rarely seems to enter the vanguard of literature on qualitative research. Be that as it may, scholars from across the social sciences, including psychologists, can no doubt find inspiration in this book.

A common theme across the various chapters is what might be called methodological dedifferentiation, the blurring of boundaries between methodologies. This blurring may be between fact and fiction (chap 9,10,12), participant observation and interview (chap 6) personal and folk narratives (chap 7), technology/media and interviewing (chap 5, 8) and action and talking (chap 4,6). However all writers stress that this methodological dedifferentiation does not imply that anything goes, a critical stance to methodology is warranted. Reflexivity is repeatedly highlighted as a key concept – although admittedly a buzzword the writers do provide some interesting suggestions of the concrete forms reflexivity may take in interview research. In the words of editors Gubrium and Holstein: “..we must think carefully about technical matters because they produce the detailed subject as much as they gather information...” (p. 29). Thinking carefully about interview matters is definitely what all the authors have done and the postmodern approaches advanced here certainly provide some very interesting perspectives on qualitative interviewing.