

## **A look on the inside**

Holstein, J.A: & Gubrium, J.F. **Inside Interviewing. New lenses, new concerns.** London, Sage, 2003

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This volume is comprised of chapters from the “Handbook of Interview Research (Sage 2001)” by the editors: James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium, who are Professors of Sociology at Marquette and Missouri University, respectively.

The intention behind the book is not to confront the reader with endless interview transcripts and pro forma analysis – boring, nice and tidy - but with actual problems. These have to do with analysing actual subjects who jump up from the transcripts and interviewing situations and act back. The result is, I think, a fresh perspective on interviewing and on “subjects” with certain demographics. Often this present a challenge to the researcher in how to deal with subjects and interviewing appropriately, e.g. how to interview people of more or less similarity to the researcher: Men, women, children, same sex subjects (who may be gay), older people and other races (than the interviewer).

The book includes a “technical section” on how to deal with reluctant subjects, telephone interviews, computer assisted interviewing (Couper and Hansen arguing that paper pencil interviewing is not inherently superior or inferior to computer assisted interviewing, only qualitatively different), computer software for coding qualitative data (Seale discussing whether Becker’s original hope - that qualitative researchers would “appreciate the full range of their data” by inclusive coding – has really been achieved), internet interviewing and much more.

The most interesting questions, I think, arise with regard to analysis: What are the questions that we want an answer for? What route did we traverse to get an answer? This can obviously not be substituted for a technical question about e.g. transcription quality or a killer application in computer software since it is not only a question of what was actually in all actuality and veridicality said, but one of intended meaning and societal significance. Here even the best transcribers, computer software or handbooks do not suffice. Field notes may be invaluable, but theory or proper thinking even more so. Thus in order to understand how meaning is constructed, actively and socially in the interview encounter, qualitative researchers must turn to theory and apply it. How is this immense task solved in this book?

In the opening chapter the editors, instead of falling into the perils of a purely narrative account of interviews, give a short historical account of modern interviewing after the WW II. They trace it through Riesman and Benney’s “modern temper”, where the individual becomes a significant commentator on her own life in her own right, whereby the interview provides a

platform to form and express public opinion. Foucault's theory is evoked at times throughout the book with regard to issues of subjectivity, i.e. how the person interviewing and the person being interviewed, have evolved historically in different institutional terms and with regard to interviewing homosexuals ("queering the interview" by Kong, Mahoney and Plummer).

In a similar vein the issue of empowerment is taken up in the opening chapter, and tackled heads on later in the book in a chapter on power/knowledge and social inequality by Briggs. In this chapter Foucault and Bourdieu are used to remind us that an analysis of power should not root power in the interview setting themselves but in various discourses in institutional contexts, which can give rise to constellations of power that influence daily life. However Briggs notes that this is a very general scheme, which is not helpful when it comes to the concrete: What discourse, what institutions evoke such power constellations? But this is in fact a general problem with this book. Even though it has its merits when it comes to the reflective turn of subjects acting back it is relatively quiet when it comes to conceiving of subjects and interviewer as embedded in a context: What institutional factors influence the interview and its theoretical analysis, and how? Though many of the writers seem to have a background in sociology, this book does not seem to want to deal with these questions about institutions at length, rather it takes a pragmatic route to "the how to..." questions. An interesting chapter by DeVault and McCoy dealing explicitly with institutional ethnography is an exception. Within this tradition the context is systematically explored and theory and method linked to understand how people say what they say.

But this general lack of contextual analysis is, I suppose, understandable given that the book wants to provide new lenses to problems relating to interviewing, not an in depth treatment of fundamental problems of social science in general. There is no doubt that the chapters on analysis provide interesting updates, discussing e.g. Grounded Theory (Charmaz distinguishes between constructivist - and objectivist - grounded theory analysis), Personal Narratives (Riessman), Oral History (Cándida Smith), and Ethnomethodology (Baker). Finally there is a very readable chapter by Ellis and Berger on the role of the researcher's narrative in the interview research.

Does this book really provide new lenses and should we expect it to? Is it not too much to ask for? No experimental psychologist would expect to find in a book called "Inside experimenting. New lenses, new concerns" all new relevant themes problematized about subjectivity and theories about subjects striking back and technical equipment to study such phenomena etc. Perhaps qualitative research is unwillingly burdened with being forced to come up with answers to everything (let alone the everyday). Obviously qualitative research is not content merely to elicit answers from subjects but wants to interpret these answers within contexts and representational frames. In undertaking this endeavour this book is a worthy companion. This is all hardly that new as the title indicates, but I would not hesitate to grant the book that it provides a cleaning of the old lenses.