

*Anthropology* (some eight, as I recall) and Editor Ben Orlove. And Clara, as always.

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## Comments

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In this rich and wide-ranging paper, Briggs develops a number of issues—all apparently centered around a discussion of “interviews”—that need to be separated, in my view, before their larger implications can be appreciated. We might begin by noting that although the interview appears as both hero and antihero in many of the cultural projects he discusses, Briggs does not, as he reminds us many times, seek to offer a theory of the interview himself. His focus, rather, is on the ideological uses of information gathered through discursive encounters of varied genres, of which “the interview”—in its strict sense—is that generic subtype around which many social-scientific practices are organized. His more specific focus is on a commitment central to modernist ideologies of language, the idea that if what a person utters in a social interaction is evaluated mainly for its “informational” content and reduced (through writing or other technologies) to sentence-propositions, such a reduction allows a particular kind of control over social history.

Such a reduction allows the one who formulates it considerable autonomy and distance from a specific encounter with an interlocutor (a historical episode) and from the series of encounters that precede and follow it (as a social process) simply because the social-historical datum has been replaced—or at least backgrounded—by a propositional model of one of its phases. And once sentence-propositions thus extracted are metapragmatically reframed and reformulated as psychological data (as samples of “beliefs, experiences, knowledge, and attitudes” attributable to known individuals) or as sociological data (samples attributable to entire groups), they can be reinserted in subsequent social history in a trajectory of interventions that appear to conquer time by replacing their referents with these samples, over and again.

In the hands of pollsters such techniques conquer space as well or, rather, replace a multisited space of social interactions with the univocal and placeless figure of “public opinion.” Thus transformed, the fuzzy boundaries of all of the settings in which social processes unfold are regrouped in relation to the space of a “public,” presumed to exist as the enabling topos of a national imaginary, and readily used to exclude some of these settings from its sphere, and all of the enacted stances and positionalities differentiated within and across these settings are statistically normalized as a collectivized

“opinion” used as a norm against which particular stances and positions appear extranormative.

Briggs argues that such modernist ideologies of language inflect the practices of many social sciences, including anthropology. But here the specificity of “the interview” can easily distract us from the range of genres upon which these ideologies work and therefore from the wider implications of this argument. As far as anthropology goes, all of the arguments that Briggs brings to bear on the interview apply just as easily to “participant observation,” insofar as the latter is also a method of sampling encounters and generalizing from samples. It is true that in contrast to the method of interviews, the method of participant observation does not require detailed reports of what was said in the encounters sampled. But this hardly means that the social encounters through which participant observation unfolds are any less mediated by uses of language than are interviews. It is simply that the role of contextualized language use is even less fully documented and analyzed when the results of this method are documented in ethnographic reports.

What, then, is the relevance of “communicability”—in Briggs’s sense of the term—to the social processes that anthropologists study and the social processes by which they report the findings of their studies? The five-point definition that Briggs gives of “communicability”—that it constructs models of social phenomena, that it unfolds as a process within social fields, that it projects cartographies of its circulation, that it locates itself in specific Bakhtinian chronotopes, and that it generates positionalities that may be inhabited or rejected by participants—all point toward a broader view of how processes of using language (and other semiotic forms) connect places and times populated by persons to each other and, as processes that unfold in a massively parallel multisited fashion, contribute through their interconnections to the action-shaped and interpersonally meaningful patterns we call “culture.”

If the kind of anthropology that Briggs discusses falls short by failing to overcome its attachment to pieces of this larger process or, indeed, by failing to grasp, both theoretically and practically, the existence of the larger process from which these pieces are drawn, these failures do not distinguish the social process of doing anthropology in this mode from social processes in general. Getting clearer about these larger horizons is the main challenge to which this paper gestures and to which the problematics of “the interview” draw our gaze only in an initial way.

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Once more Briggs interpellates our “anthropological wisdom”—those widely accepted dimensions of academic prac-

tice which are embedded in everyday certainties and routines. Twenty years ago he urged us to learn *how* to ask; now he invites us all to take another step and learn *what* to ask (of ourselves). He does so by means of a twofold movement: First, interviews are reflexively approached both as a means and as an object of knowledge production. Second, the critical analysis of interviews is proposed not only as a methodological but also as a theoretical challenge. Thus, although Briggs's title anticipates the purpose of questioning democratic illusions, he undertakes a through questioning of anthropological illusions as well.

Inspiring texts raise questions in several directions, but my comments can tackle only two of the topics about which Briggs's article has made me think and wonder: (a) the notion of communicability that is used to put interviews in historical context as an everyday genre in mass societies and (b) some lessons extracted from the "promiscuous"—in Briggs's terms—act of comparing anthropological interviews with the practices of other disciplines and professional realms that also aim at making sense of life/reality/society through a question/answer format.

To understand the social life of discourse, I find imperative the five components that, according to Briggs, are involved in communicability. I consider effective as well his framing communicability against the "three ideologies of language, subjectivity, and knowledge" which "become modes by which we assess ourselves and others with respect to how well we are 'communicating.'"

However, the epistemological status of Briggs's notion of communicability remains awkward. Is it an ideological product—the result of hegemonic metapragmatic discourses about social discourse that aim at being "readily communicated and understood"? Is it instead the process by which "texts and ideologies find audiences and locate them socially/politically"? Is it rather a practice, as when Briggs states that "interview communicabilities sustain democratic ideologies"? Or is it mainly an anthropological trope for condensing a critical theory of discourse *à la* Norman Fairclough—a theory approaching discourse as a text, as a discursive practice, and as a social practice and acknowledging that any discourse performs textual, ideational, social, and identity functions? We have critical theories of discourse that aim at such a condensation. I believe that Briggs's major contribution may be that of identifying communicability as an epochal metapragmatic standard based upon the disputed yet prevalent linguistic ideologies that feed our democratic illusions, varied as they are. If this is the case, I wonder if Briggs's bottom line is that interviews can be seen, in a Foucauldian sense, as modes of knowledge production and normalization that play for modern life and contemporary society the role that confessions played in the Middle Ages—a discursive genre resulting from and feeding current hegemonic forms and fields of communicability much as confessions resulted from and fed the supremacy of theological truths.

Regarding the shared and distinctive features of anthro-

pological interviews as compared with interviews with "distinct pragmatic and ideological underpinnings," Briggs identifies an interesting tension. On the one hand, interviews show "a number of widely shared features" because of "deeply held feelings/ideas about how we produce discourse." On the other hand, since "there is no one single field of communicability associated with interviews," we can assume that interview communicabilities are part of different fields and that interviews perform distinctively in each of them, despite their "widely shared features."

In this last regard, Briggs claims that anthropologists are "more naïve than many of their fellow producers and consumers of interviews." But is it a matter of naïveté? Or is it instead a matter of agenda and of the linguistic games that the fields within which we constitute ourselves as subjects allow us to play? I introduce here Wittgenstein's idea of linguistic games, but I mean the routinized forms that we are trained into for entextualizing and contextualizing interviews, forms that bring about performatively the distinctive pragmatics of different fields of communicability.

Moreover, if—as Briggs states—"communicabilities project power," it seems to me that communicative hegemony *sensu* Briggs projects differential power not only within each field but also among different fields. As a result, different fields of communicability and strategies with them are not alike in rank when it comes to producing and recycling commonsense understandings. From this point of view, Rigoberta Menchú's case shows not simply "the epistemological pitfalls of communicability" but power disputes to achieve/protect/define discursive hegemony within the anthropological field of communicability and practice. I therefore wonder whether "the I, Rigoberta Menchú affair" is a leading case for analyzing the epistemological pitfalls of communicability or rather a proxy for the stakes of academic politics.

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Briggs provides a timely reminder about the limitations of the interview as a method in anthropology and its appropriation by the media and by other academic disciplines. While I agree that anthropologists should attend to the way in which interviews "produce subjects and objects, texts, and authority," I think that a focus on interviewing is too narrow. I would argue first that some of the problems inherent in interviews may be offset by "triangulation" of interviews with participant observation, life histories, archival research, visual methods, etc. Secondly, while the interview is clearly more enmeshed in the "public sphere" and everyday notions of "communicability" as outlined by Briggs, the other methods we use are subject to similar constraints and forms of appropriation. Rather than seeking to document this latter