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Special Issue: Interviewing Ireland

CUAN FM Radio Project for Older Volunteers (Photo: Katy Radford)

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Editorial Note (Fiona Larkan)

This special issue of the Irish Journal of Anthropology brings together a rich collection of articles on the art of interviewing, where interviewers north and south give insightful reflections and reports on their engagement with participants in very different circumstances throughout the island of Ireland. These articles are drawn from the ASA2010 Annual Conference held at Queens University in Belfast and I am grateful to our guest editor, Jonathan Skinner, for his Trojan work in bringing together a varied but significant collection.

My thanks also go to our editorial assistants, Sean O’Dubbhghaill, Richard Fitzpatrick and Tara Walsh – who have recently joined the team – and book review editors Fiona Murphy and Ioannis Tsoukalas for their ongoing support.

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Interviewing Ireland – the North and South experience

Jonathan Skinner*

Introduction
It has been declared that we now live in an ‘interview society’ (Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Gubrium and Holstein 2002), one of interview familiarity and interview expectation. The interview is found throughout the national and international media. Whether one agrees with the ubiquity of this ‘interview society’ label, interviewing can now be found used extensively in the media, as well as now throughout the research social sciences, and even in anthropology as a core practice, particularly as a dyadic encounter. There it is frequently found alongside, subsumed within, or even instead of, long-term ethnographic fieldwork. This volume – a collection of some of the best papers from the ASA2010 annual conference at Queen’s University Belfast – interrogates the interview as practice in Ireland north and south.

The interview, ‘a conversation with a purpose’ (Robson 1993: 228), ‘a professional conversation’ (Kvale 1996: 5), a glimpse into the particular world of an other, is more than just a data gathering exercise – a second choice method as it has been characterized (Hockey 2002), one often taken as implicit and unscrutinized in the anthropologists’ professional toolkit (Skinner 2012). The interview experience for anthropologists is far from straightforward and uncritical. It can be therapeutic, awkward, dialogic, dyadic and diverse, silent, physical, or involved and relational. Furthermore, writing interviews into our texts involves translation to text, and often unexamined processes of interpretation, subject construction, and re-authoring. This volume seeks to explore some of these lacunae in mainly anthropological practice. It does so by concentrating upon interviewing in Ireland north and south: Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Besides presenting cases north, south and on the border in-between, this issue should be useful for elucidating some of the potential characteristics and problems of interviewing, interviewing in Ireland especially.

The Disciplinary Interview
‘Nowadays participant observation and interview techniques are paired as the ‘dynamic duo’ of field research’ (Siperschneider 2007: 275). Whilst we might not go so far as this statement, we the contributors to this volume do believe that interviewing can now be found extensively in anthropology (and sociology) as a practice … alongside/subsumed within/instead of … ethnographic fieldwork. We also believe, after Robson (1993: 228) and others before him, that the interview is ‘a conversation with a purpose’. It is ‘a professional conversation’ (Kvale 1996: 5) between two or more people that can range from the informal unstructured exchange at one end of the continuum to the formal structured event at the other. It can be private or public, between two individuals, more (the focus group) or less (the reflection). For Kvale (1996: 6-7), the interview’s purpose is ‘to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena’. Ideally, the interview is a mutual ‘inter-view’ (Finch 1984), and not ‘a one-way pseudoconversation’ (Fontana and Frey 2003: 82) in which the researcher elicits research information by acting out a relationship but without really relating to the speaker (Benney and Hughes 1956). It is possible, so Sparkes (1997) suggests, that ‘a symbiotic relationship’ can develop during the successful interview: that it becomes an edifying, therapeutic, intersubjective experience for those involved.

‘Ethnography without questions would be impossible’ Agar (1996: 95) contends. Moreover, interviewing in ethnographic work introduces respect and efficiency into the fieldwork and relations in the field, Wolcott (2005: 98-99) suggests, in that it provides focus to encounters, and conveys upfront responsibility to one’s respondents’ data. But yet, as Jenny Hockey (2002) notes, for many anthropologists the interview remains a second choice method in comparison to participant observation. It is considered to occupy the methodological low ground: fieldwork on the cheap, stand alone, divorced and disembodied from real life, lacking in sensory experience, a punctuation point (214) in an informant’s life. Is this a fair assessment of the interview and its place in anthropology? Is it valid, particularly in the Western world – now characterized as an ‘interview society’ (Atkinson and Silverman 1997; see Gubrium and Holstein 2002 for a comprehensive overview)? And what assumptions are we making – and boundaries are we maintaining – in doing this? Hockey (2002: 220) suggests that the interviewing ‘experience-far method’ might in fact be more ‘experience-near’ in Western settings. Is the interview a more valid practice, then, in the West where so many people are considered to be familiar or experienced with the interview as a research tool or media (or interrogation [see Feldman 1991: 128-136]) practice and, indeed, might expect to be interviewed as a research respondent in our fieldwork? Certainly, in the papers considered below and featured in this volume, the interview is a foregrounded research practice.

Both the relationship between interviewer/interviewee, and the context of the interview, are also important considerations in our examination of the interview – the theories underpinning and ring-fencing it, its various techniques of practice, and its place in society and our social science professions: Biographical

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Narrative Interpretive Method; Rogerian non-directive; Responsive (Rubin and Rubin 2005); Barrett-Lennard congruence (1981); open/closed – semi/un-structured – questioning. There are particularities to the interactions leading up to, during and leaving the interview. Often the interviews are resting upon the back of extended participant observation, the quotes the tip of an ethnographic iceberg. The collection here seeks to present some of the latest interviews of children, adolescents, the troubled, those negotiating life on borders or adolescents living through liminal times as well as in liminal places.

In sociological literature, the interview is ‘relational’ (Tietal 2000), ‘active’ (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) and transformational; in its narration, there is an inevitable change to the interviewee’s memories; healing, reinforcement, re-appraisal, remembering and re-authoring in the telling of stories. To paraphrase Hertz (1997), an interview results in the interwearer retelling their past experiences whilst the interviewer lives and negotiates their present. The interview experience can thus transform self and other – just as the anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano (1980) found during his interviews with Tuhami: a shift from an ‘I–thou’ interview relationship into a ‘we’ relationship (Seidman 1991: 73). Interpretation, subject construction and expression also take place in the coding, transcribing and eventual writing about the interview – a translation from speech to text, a writing and re-righting of reality in ethnography (see Rapport 1994). This movement is equally as deserving of attention as the interview proceedings and precedings.


The One That Got Away

My interest in Interviewing Ireland comes from spending several years comparing the salsa dance scenes between Belfast, Northern Ireland, and Sacramento, California. Between 2005 and 2008 I spent 10 months dancing, training, learning, and interviewing salsa dancers in the state capital of California. This one-to-one interview research complements and contrasts with my salsa learning, teaching, performing, competing and studying in Belfast between 2004 and the present. Broadly speaking, in this Introduction, I am interested in the ones that get away, in the non-interviewee, in those who refuse, decline, evade, avoid or pass on the request for an interview. These are not simply ‘reluctant respondents’ (Adler and Adler 2002), they are instances when interview competence and potential agreement are misread by the researcher. It was very noticeable that the salsa dancers in Sacramento were more open and receptive to dance research. No dancers turned down interview requests and all expressed levels of comfort with recorded semi-structured ‘conversations with purpose’. As such, I obtained approximately 120 semi-formal interviews in clubs and homes, but mostly in coffee shops all around the affluent city. In Belfast, however, where I did the bulk of my salsa research – comparing different motivations and meanings underpinning one’s dancing – I met with different and unexpected reactions to my interviewing. A large number of dancers declined to be interviewed. Here, in creating a ‘cartography of [non]interview communicability’, to corrupt Briggs (2007: 563), I proffer some possible reasons for this in terms of trying to account for the non-interviewee.

I felt that I had similar dance relationships with people in Sacramento and Belfast, though I accept a markedly different context and a different skilled presence. Dancing in sunny Sacramento, the dancers would often socialize after a weekend practice session by going to street café’s near dance venues. Occasionally dancing on the streets would burst out from these long afternoons. Early evenings, a barbeque and salsa dancing would attract large numbers of experienced dancers welcoming the party in the back yard. These social dance occasions were on top of the regular club dance nights during the week. They frequently relied upon a promoter advertising the events and welcoming everyone or leading the dancing. It was easy there to ‘pick up’ interviews at these venues as well as to arrange other times and places for interviews.

During the US interviews, respondents were very open about their backgrounds and relations with the dance and other dancers (Skinner 2010). There is a political, economic and social context here, with many interviewees socializing in the cosmopolitan, racially mixed and affluent state capital of one of the most liberal, powerful, progressive and tolerant parts of the world – for all the State’s Republican voting patterns. In Sacramento, many people are powerful, self-confident, wealthy and successful. They control and style their lives and leisure. They are open, have little to fear from their words and had no reason to feel threatened or suspicious by a visiting researcher into their highly practiced leisure work. To stereotype further: American Californians are encouraged to be independent, self-confident and extrovert entrepreneurs. A dance class thus contained a lot of upfront bravado, direct eye contact and loud and expressive behaviour and commentary. This was in marked contrast to Belfast
classes. Furthermore, with many of the dancers holding undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications from colleges and universities throughout the United States, this mobile group of dancers is acquainted with anthropology as a subject; several of the dancers had taken courses in anthropology locally at California State University Sacramento. They were excited, curious and interested to become the anthropologist’s natives. Such receptiveness is important, as Isabel Bowler (1997) found when she tried to interview Pakistani women on the subject of maternity services but was met with a wall of incomprehension because there was no shared understanding as to how the research process works. The interview practice within the research process both need to be appreciated and tolerated for them to be enabled by the combinations of interviewer and the interviewee. This was a salsa version of contact improvisation as interview.

By contrast with this easy and receptive dynamic in California, a noticeable number of dancers I knew and know in Belfast were reluctant interviewees, evasive, or non-interviewees. Some acquaintances even withdrew their friendship rather than be complicit with a research project into their leisure pursuits. In speculating on reasons for these rejections, I note the social, economic and political context of Belfast that has some bearing upon their reactions to my solicitations. Belfast, this post-industrial, post-conflict, troubled city carries its ‘wounds’ more now in the bodies of its citizens than across its war torn and segregated streets (cf. Schneider and Susser 2003). Traumas persist in wary relations, in sizing people up on the street and checking their accent and name and school whether in the pub or on the dance floor: the ‘aphrodisiac of cordite’ (Radford, pers. comm.) can still be smelled in the streets and social and cultural life continues – segregated, sectarian, polarised (Nagle 2012: 30), ‘balkanized’ (Shirlow 2006: 100). Within a short space of time even dancers are pigeon-holed as to their sectarian identity, that is unless they hide or protect it for the sake of inclusion on the dance floor (Skinner 2007). Further context to Belfast research contact is the fact that the dancers are more mixed in age, with young as well as middle-aged dancers, students, non-university educated European rather than South or Central American migrants, and people from lower socio-economic groups with less economic and political control over their circumstances. There is a weariness about life amongst the dancers that is alleviated by the dancing. But the suspicions and cautions remain; so too the tensions and differences from off the dance floor. One recent interviewee controversially described the NI salsa scene as ‘soulless, all technique and no passion’, as she watched local dancers grappling with this exotic and alien practice.

I asked Jake several times for an interview. I had interviewed his girlfriend just before they had got together. She was supportive, but he declined. We stayed on good terms and chatted on the margins of the dance floor to keep up our friendship. I reasoned that he had declined my interview requests because he felt uncomfortable dating dancers and did not want to commit to that on tape. Other male dancers were more than happy to explain that it was the girls drawing them into the dance scene initially. More men than women turned down my requests for interviews. One of the factors in this could have been the male-to-male dynamic in Northern Ireland; the lack of rapport through not dancing with my potential interviewees; the busyness of the predatory male in demand for dancing and so with fewer spaces or pauses on dance nights in comparison to the waiting female; the fear of being seen to be behaving effeminately or ‘gay’ sitting down and having a coffee and talking intimately alone together with another male; the jealousy of an experienced dancer/interviewer, or the challenge of a masculine interview paradigm jarring against the NI machismo mode of interaction (cf. Oakley 1981; Lee 1997)?

Mary and I were close. We talked about a lot. She knew all about my dance research. She helped me as a dancer and as a friend and she wanted the best for me but when it came to talking about dance with me, the situation grew tense. If I asked her about the dancing the other night, she would reply, ‘is that a research question or a friend question?’ For Mary, the boundaries between the personal and the professional were important to her. Their blurring caused tension and difficulty in our friendship, dancing, and academic research. It became too much to contain and all three imploded.

Whilst a number of the salsa promoters in Belfast were happy to be interviewed, there were several who declined, aware that it is a small and intense and competitive world. For them, too, the personal and the professional crossed paths and interleaved. Gerry was happy to talk about the salsa scene but did not want to reveal ‘the tricks of his trade’, the commercial secrets to recruitment and retention. He also did not feel comfortable on tape. Whilst Gerry avoided the polarized street divisions and denied their existence in the dance world, he did quip and joke and distinguish between visiting teachers’ provenance, once ‘Gaelicizing’ English teachers’ names from Lee and Shelley to Liam and Sinead. ‘Off the record’ was Gerry’s preferred contribution to salsa research. Again, more of a feeling or a hunch, but it felt as though there was a desire to keep insider knowledge secret, and information and relations informal. The recording would make things formal, quotable and misquotable, as well as again stressing the intellectual as opposed to the physical and carnal – literacy’s ‘technology of the intellect’ (Ong 1989).

The context for these one’s that got away is that of the post-Troubles, post-conflict Belfast where there is a peace but one stained by the past and strained by the dissonance and dissidence of the present and still fear in the everyday (see Lysaght 1995, Kitchin and Lysaght 2002; Bairner and Shirlow 2003). In that context there is still a smouldering distrust and dislike
for the English with their imperial history across the land. There is some possibility that this is some factor in my declining hit rate at interview requests. However, I should note that there are lots of English salsa dancers and visiting teachers in the Belfast salsa scene. They are useful clients, all. Further, I should note that I am a long time resident of Belfast, having danced weekly for the past eight years. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. I have seen people – peers – move from student to teacher, the makeups and breakups, and sadly the bereavements. To the long-term Englishness, I add my residency, my sex, my character, my perceived social class and the valency of word choices made to the possible lack of rapport; perhaps I did not establish non-dancing relations with those I asked for interviews and who declined? Maybe it was the fact that I was permanently in the salsa scene and not a temporary research guest who can be tolerated and indulged temporarily, but who would embarrass after the interviews, knowing so much about everyone? Did my dancing alienate, intimidate, the potential interviewee? It could also be the reminder of intrusive work being carried out by a fieldworking ‘privacy-snatcher’ (Di Leonardo 1987: 17) during a leisure time and leisure activity, of course?

Mary, Jake and Gerry were approached in the same way that I thought that I approached respondents in the US. I had danced with or around them. We had talked and built up a relationship. There was, I had felt, an authenticity about the relationship. They saw me as a committed dancer in the salsa scene, upfront about his hobby and his research, his ‘passionate engrossment’ (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 59). This helped settle them. I was, colloquially, to use a term recognised by some of the California dancers, a ‘halfie’ (Narayan 1993) as an emotionally committed member of my subject matter (see Ohnuki-Tierney 1984: 584), reflexively positioned so as to live with a ‘bi-focal vision’ (Nagarajan 2006: 10) that enables me to gain embodied insights – inside-out rather than just outside-in, an ‘observing participant’ (Daniel 1995: 21; see also Flanders 1997; Buckland 1999) as some dance anthropologists refer to this involved status. But I was mistaken. My advances were rebuffed for uncertain and only to be guessed at reasons. Rubin and Rubin (2005: 36) characterise the interview as ‘an exchange’. In these cases there was no possibility of this, or for the development of a symbiosis between interviewer and interviewee. They were blocked, the exchange locked down. There was potentially an element of threat perceived in the suggested interactions that can only be contemplated upon, or a lack of ‘mutual concern’ (Keats 2000: 104) to develop the research. With less eye contact and more fleeting physical contact in the dance encounters, one can add a cultural difference to the openness and eye contact faced in California. It could extend to an anxiety towards the media rather than a comfort or desire for such attentions. Pierre Bourdieu and colleagues write about the problem of trying to interview those with whom you share knowledge, understanding and maybe even a personal relationship. Recruiting from personal networks can result in not only complicated negotiations, but can also lead to unproductive interviews. Interviewer and interviewee are too much in sync for there to be an explicit and explanatory conversation. As Roulston (2010: 99) notes, they can rely too much on shared knowledge and understandings. There is too much implicit knowledge, information and understanding in their relationship for it to come out effectively in the interview.

Every investigation is [...] situated between two extremes doubtless never completely attained: total overlap between investigator and respondent, where nothing can be said because, since nothing can be questioned, everything goes without saying; and total divergence, where understanding and trust would become impossible.

(Bourdieu et al 1999: 612)

Bourdieu and colleagues are practically riffing off Benney and Hughes’s (1956: 137) now classic article on sociology as the science of the interview where they suggest that, ‘[e]very conversation has its own balance of revelation and concealment of thoughts and intentions’. I frequently came across comments expressing ambivalence between these extremes, especially from those feeling inexperienced or inappropriate interviewee choices: ‘I’m no expert on this, you need to interview the teacher’; ‘I can’t think of anything to say on this!’ In these situations, I sought to persuade the potential interviewee that I was interested in their views precisely because they were new or fresh to the salsa scene, or because they were not the promoters or teachers with a vested interest in a certain representation of the dance environment. If successful, we then wrestled with making their tacit knowledge explicit for the digital recorder. Fortunately, these interview examples were successful, in part because we shared the actions of the dancing and so there was a clear and easy entry point into the conversations. The embodied intersubjectivity warmed up the exchange, quite physically. We were able to narrate the social life we had recently performed (see Atkinson and Coffey 2003: 110), though it was, for both of us, an every night life of familiarity (cf. Delgado and Munoz 1997). I thus had to work hard to remain as fresh and alert to the dance scene and colleagues back home after extensive dancing and interviewing in the US. If unsuccessful, I was left with the reflexive and performative practices of the non-interview to disinter where it had not had its run. If ‘[t]he interview elicits interpretations of the world’ (Denzin 2001: 30), then so too does the non-interview that I have been considering.
Interviewing Ireland – The Articles

This collection is not just about the ‘[in]active interview’ (cf. Holstein and Gubrium 1995). It is about interviewing different groups of people in different parts of Ireland; not a comprehensive sampling, but a selection to illustrate the interview in Ireland, its differences and distinctivenesses. Rosellen Roche opens the volume with an article reflecting on projects interviewing children in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland. She is an American anthropologist who has made a point of living where she works and has spent over ten years working with Catholic and Protestant young people from 11 to 25. Her article is a confession that some of the more one-off ‘catch as catch can’ interviewing – or perhaps, ‘hit and run’ sampling, rather – might indeed be doing more bad than good than the long-term ethnographic immersion and trust building research so favoured by anthropologists. Whilst it might be useful to get a snapshot of children and the adolescents at various ages and in particular lifestyles and psychological stages of development, there is also a danger in encouraging the exposure of the young to their traumas, their isolation (‘cocooned’ in the community) and disturbed witnessing without providing post-interview support, or without knowing how they might react to their questioning. Roche advocates a time-invested approach to working with young people at-risk so that the researcher knows where they are ‘coming from’ and can deal with both the interview and its follow-up responsibly and with sensitivity rather than leave the young cold following a truncated and alienating telling of their life world. As Roche reminds us, anthropology in Ireland has not for the first time led to emotional and psychological hurt – the focus as well as the fallout of our research here (Scheper-Hughes 2000).

In the second article in the collection, Kirk Simpson takes us to the unionist borderlands between the Republic and Northern Ireland to explore the feelings and perceptions of unionists in a post-conflict time. Village to village, town to countryside, Simpson maps out the victimhood of unionist narratives. He shows, very well, how important the background of the interviewer can be to the interviewed as they challenge and question him repeatedly as to his position in the debate he is exploring. These are the practices of victims, suspicious and untrusting and still caught in ‘the static vocabulary and grammar of traumatic experience’.

We move south in the third article in Interviewing Ireland. This is an heuristic geographical pass down the land with Beata Sokolowska’s examination of longitudinal research into Polish immigrant teenagers in Ireland. Like Roche, she favours the long-term approach to working with the young – working with the young and not on the young, as she phrases it. Living in the Republic, the immigrant youths face very different hardships as they grow up. Sokolowska attends to their acculturation strategies: just how does a young migrant negotiate language difference, social class changes, the complexities of separation and reunification with parents and the rest of the family? Sokolowska suggests that these vulnerable persons need sensitive and ethical treatment, linking with Roche, and showing, along with Simpson, that the researcher needs to carefully gain the trust of the researched. This can often be a painstaking process: literally, in each of these three papers in this volume, a pains-taking process with the vulnerable.

Citing Holstein and Gubrium, Nick McCaffery notes the recent shift from interviewing specialists to interviewing the ordinary public, in the fourth article in this collection. This is a shift in data gathering and subject construction from the side of the researcher as well as a shift in orientation in terms of data gathering targets in the interviewees. McCaffery is aware that in this interview society, there are certain expectations and performances at play during the interview, even with the very young. McCaffery is less interested in the accuracy of the data collected and in challenging the interviewee than in how the data is incorporated into the informants’ lives. In the case of a history of the Troubles as articulated by youths in Northern Ireland, that history is emblazoned on the walls and in the celebrations and commemorations all around them, like nowhere else in the UK or the south of Ireland. This target group thus has a distinctive (visual) context to it. McCaffery adopts the large scale 1000 person study with data gathered by focus group and questionnaire rather than long-term field immersion advocated earlier by Roche. Like Roche, though, he warns of difficulties in such high volume mass interviewing, one being how the focus group can be led or dominated very easily by particular members in the groups such that the researcher needs to be acutely aware of group dynamics taking place within the room. History and the past as it is made in the present: this is an interview study of identity self-construction and projection in the young, seen to be derived from negative stereotyping of the Other.

In the fifth and penultimate article in this Special Issue of the Irish Journal of Anthropology, Martina Byrne reflexively details the peer interview: the difficulties and complexities of interviewing professional social class peers – communications consultants in this case. Through her former employment, Byrne knew many of her informants around Dublin. As such, she could not just pretend or hide behind the veneer, or researcher objectivity; nor could she just ‘up recorder and leave the field’, Dublin being a relatively small location such that one might meet with informants in different circumstances during the same day as is often the case in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Byrne proactively excluded just as much as she sought out her respondents: her trainees, her family and close friends became ‘exclusion zones’ for her research – some not without resentment at missing the opportunity to be taken seriously and given an authoritative role on the interview
stage. Along with the other contributors, she shows us that it is difficult to be an anonymous, dispassionate or unethical interviewer when Interviewing Ireland. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

The final article in this edition takes a different perspective on interviewing in Ireland. Here, Katy Radford discusses a research project with the elderly inhabitants of the fishing villages down the Ards Peninsula of Northern Ireland. Aged, isolated and segregated, this project featured the establishment of a radio station for the rural retired. The radio and its elemental reminiscence at its heart was seen to provide information, entertainment, participation, community development and social inclusion to the over 55s. Participants were trained in how to interview on the radio as part of their broadcast production. This served as a catalyst for change in those involved. They developed, not only the art of listening and hearing (cf. Rubin and Rubin 2005), but also the art of speaking. Robin, for example, grew in confidence through the process and developed a capricious radio personality, challenging his interviewees and playing his ‘age card’ to his advantage. Often, these new interviewers interviewed in the private homes of their subjects, and then their recorded conversations were broadcast into the homes of many others in the evenings, with follow-up phone-in ‘shows’ the following mornings. These reported interviews had an extra active life to them. They were doubly active: the media mediating the connections across previously separated lives and communities; Interviewing Ireland indeed.

References


Abstract: Drawing upon over ten years of field experience in Northern Ireland and using supporting medical experience and literature, this article probes the current trend of anthropological ‘one-off’ interviewing with children and young people in Northern Ireland. Using and critiquing one of my own research projects, I question whether single interviews with young people in conflict-ridden environments may contribute to our subjects’ psychological morbidities. With reflective trends in medicine in mind, I discuss novel feedback mechanisms that may help to ‘check-up’ on our subjects and to measure the impact of interviewing on our young research participants.

Key words: Conflict; violence; Northern Ireland; young people; children; psychiatry; medical anthropology.

Introduction

I dunno, she walked in [to the interview room], like, and started askin’, just askin’ this and askin’ that. I didn’t even…hadn’t met her, like. Like, I was told [by a youth leader] to talk to her. I thought: ‘Fuck, like. Fuck, this one has a lot of, nerve.’

/…/ She was pushing me, ahmmm, askin’ questions, rushin’ me like. I felt wile used, so I did. Like, she wanted in and out. (…) No ‘thanks’, ‘what about ye’, nothin’ like that.

Mary, Aged 19, 2005.
A discussion regarding being interviewed by a visiting PhD candidate.

Although limited in time and space, the art of conducting a time-efficient yet pertinent interview is a crucial skill for those practicing in all qualitative disciplines. Derived from the old French *entrevoir* – ‘to see’ (now interpreted in modern French as ‘to glimpse’), an *entre* – *vue* provides a brief ‘glimpse’ into the heart and soul of our subject. Such a glimpse can lead to discoveries in qualitative data that can be both explicit and specific explanations of the subjective worlds of our research participants. However, a glimpse is just that: a glimpse is fleeting and limited in interpretation beyond the scope of the interview itself. Whilst such approaches can lead to valuable discoveries, a solitary interview with no back-grounding nor history of qualitative research in the context can also lead participants – and particularly children – to feel ‘rushed’, ‘used’, or perhaps even bewildered and injured from such brief contact.

Children and young people are naturally heralded as the primary reason for maintaining peace in Northern Ireland and government initiatives continue to focus on improvements for the upcoming generations (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People 2004). Inevitably researchers seek to track, qualify and quantify this ‘improvement’ and ‘change’. Although gauging change in a coming-from-conflict environment experiencing continued levels of ‘low’ levels of violence and trauma (Roche 2011) is important, the consequence of these endeavors is that young people face numerous interviews with eager (often inexperienced) researchers asking a barrage of provocative questions. These questions are not just about their daily activities or opinions, but more often than not, circulate around issues of violence in conflict. Consequently, subjects reveal basic facts about life in Troubles-worn housing areas across Northern Ireland including aspects of paramilitary influences, family bereavements from the Troubles, and continuing sectarian hatred. In a climate that experiences not only research fatigue, but also maintains a ‘culture of silence’ despite on-going peace initiatives (Knox 2002, Roche 2011, 2007, 2003, Smyth 1998), briefly probing very personal traumas could negatively impact our subjects.

This article aims to initiate a much needed discussion about the effects of interview techniques with children in areas of conflict as well as to draw attention to the current trend of anthropological ‘one-off’ interviewing with children in Northern Ireland. By critically examining one of my own research projects (Roche 2008), I seek to question whether losing the hallmark of our discipline – lengthy qualitative fieldwork – is leading to a loss of responsibility to field participants in conflict environments. Moreover, I seek to question whether one-off interviews with children and young people in conflict-ridden environs may lead to further stress and anxiety for our subjects. Drawing on over ten years of field experience within the Northern Irish urban context and using supporting medical literature, I explore whether conducting brief sessions with children in areas of conflict and violence may ‘do more harm than good’ for our subjects, and suggest some feedback mechanisms that may help to

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measure the impact of interviewing on our subjects. In light of this discussion I underscore current trends of ever-increasing and often hollow research quotas, seeking to bring our attention back to the needs of the young people with whom we work.

**Confessions**
The focus of this article reflects personal inquiry made and monitored on a journey – both midway in my anthropological profession and at the beginning of a new educational endeavor. For over ten years I have worked with young people aged predominantly 11 to 25 from both Catholic and Protestant ethnonationalist enclaves across Northern Ireland’s two largest cities – Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Throughout this period, I have seen approaches to working with young people change. Years ‘in the field’ working with and living in communities as was encouraged for my initial field work in the late 1990s (Roche 2003) and hallmarking by Burton (1978) or Sluka (1989) for example, is giving way to shortened field experiences and interview-focused approaches. As funding bodies encourage interview quotas reaching into the hundreds, I too find myself grappling with how to best effectively work with as many young people as possible on an imposed budget while simultaneously wondering how to not fatigue and stress the young people with whom I work.

The second aspect to this title reflects my newer journey as a final-year medical student immersed in clinical techniques regarding rapid histories and physicals, also with hundreds of patients. In medical circles it is accepted that a bedside history should take no more than 10 minutes. With this brief amount of information, we are expected to make a decision – at least an initial differential diagnosis – and then to proceed to aid the patient in recovery and to ‘do no harm’. An anthropologist merely frocked in a white coat, I find myself taking longer to learn about a patient than my other colleagues, relaying ‘more anthropological’ information about patients that inevitably helps with the universal health of that person. Taking more time with patients most often leads to solutions for the patient that tap into emotional, social and kinship networks and a better prognosis outside of the illness itself: a patient improves when they are told that a cherished cat is safely placed with a brother, or that a beloved cat abandoned at home. In my anthropological life, although I believe in the time-honoured tradition of fieldwork, I appreciate circumstances that may require shorter periods of qualitative work. However, as I consider the concept of an ‘ethnographic interview’ (Burgess 1993, Briggs 2007), I am left to wonder if interviews can act sufficiently as ‘give and take’ conversations, even if left unstructured (Burgess 1993:101) and replace sufficient time in the field? Have ‘times changed’ that much that ‘time in the field’ is unnecessary?

Hockey (2002) importantly investigates such questions within the context of anthropology in Britain, and comes to the conclusion that interviews within this context indeed are ‘culturally appropriate’ and anthropology as a discipline needs to acknowledge the ‘parallels between interviewing and ‘real life’’ (Hockey 2002: 209-211). This approach has merit, particularly when subjects are only available in specific locations and within Westernised contexts, as Hockey posits.

So, too, with research with people in conflict zones. On most occasions research in areas of conflict presents itself as ‘catch as catch can’ and researchers often are not provided with the luxury of lengthy time in the field. In Northern Ireland, particularly post-Agreement, one of the most frequently used approaches to converse with research participants in the qualitative arena is the focus group or one-to-one, one-off structured interview. In the past decade, this approach has been used consistently in the Northern Irish environment, with both adults and children alike (cf. for example, Hall 2002, Hansson 2000, Hargie, Dickson and O’Donnell 2006, Jarman 2005, Jarman and O’Halloran 2001, Smyth 2004). And, despite my inner wrangling regarding a ‘one-off’ approach, I too have used this method (Roche 2008).

When interviewing children and young people this approach has its advantages. It is a point of fact that children are in a place in time when you meet them – they are nine years old, they are fourteen years old, they are eighteen years old. These differences, though slight in number, naturally present quite dramatic differences in opinion, lifestyle and psychology, particularly when considering children. Whilst a child of eight clung to my hand and relayed to me very palpable feelings of fear while standing in front of a large bonfire during the season of the Orange Order parades in 2007, a child of ten victoriously reported to me about vaulting the flames two years later. Therefore, to capture a moment in time, a glimpse as it were, when so many aspects change so quickly in a young person’s life – a brief and privileged look on that moment is not without its merits.

However, despite using these techniques myself after lengthy time in the field, I do find that such brief interviews do little to explain the motivations behind many of the violent actions of young people. Time-invested approaches working among young people...
at-risk, particularly within the Northern Irish context such as Bell (1990), Burton (1978), Roche (2003) or Sluka (1989), I believe better illustrate the meanings behind violent actions when the words of young people are symbiotically integrated with the violent actions the young people perform. Such lengthy ethnographies are able to demonstrate not only what young people say, but when they are saying it, how they are saying it, and with what and whom they are saying it, to name only a few scenarios.

Concessions
As social anthropologists, our hallmark is continued and extensive ethnographic research with a chosen population – participant observation (Bernard 2006, Beattie 1982). This lengthy and nuanced approach prides itself as something beyond a ‘one-off’ interview technique. However, as both Hockey (2002) and I note, oftentimes constraints coming from multiple arenas – the environment, the funders, the university – compel many scholars to limit their time and attempt to focus specifically on certain aspects we wish to explore.

Here, I explore the topic of interview research with an example that illustrates well both the merits and possible disadvantages for both researcher and subject. Far from pointing the academic finger, I use my own interview research as a ‘guinea pig’ for this discussion in an attempt to first tease out the importance of these one-off approaches in a conflict environment and second, to highlight how we, as anthropologists, need to be critical of our own methods despite the pressures of the academy.

My project, the Facts, Fears and Feelings Project funded by the European Union (EU) Peace II Initiatives, the Community Relations Council of Northern Ireland, and Queen’s University Belfast (Roche 2008), serves as this example. The Facts, Fears and Feelings Project (FFF) was a two-year qualitative research project using both structured and unstructured interview techniques querying the subjective experiences of sectarianism in the everyday lives of young people aged 16-35. The project hoped to tap into both the obvious and tacit facets of segregation and sectarianism facing young people living in economically and socially deprived enclaves. Our results were substantial with 130 young people included in the final sample, and 111 formally interviewed.

Important to note, FFF was a ‘sister project’ of a previous policy project, the Toward Reconciliation and Inclusion Project, or TRIPPROJECT, a predominantly statistical project funded by EU Peace Initiatives from 2003-2005 (Roche 2005). In this way, FFF hoped to be the qualitative ‘balance’ to its original quantitative sister. Prior to these projects, I had spent over two years on lengthy fieldwork conducting participant observation in enclosed areas of Derry/Londonderry, exploring aspects of violence among young people (Roche 2005). In sum, I had experienced varieties in length of research, styles of research, and both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

While I felt that long-term fieldwork with young people was best as witnessing, living and hearing what young people do adds contextual meaning to our work that interviews alone can not achieve. As any lecturer in academia knows, such ‘ethnographic time’ is becoming almost impossible to achieve in the professional arena. The crunch of the academy workload, the timelines agreed with funding bodies, the need to fulfill even larger project criteria, the emphasis on even more numbers of subjects interviewed in even less time, and the budgetary constraints on all this research, continues to hold sway. For FFF, although I originally argued for a lengthy field research project with funders, I was told this was ‘idealistic’ and impracticable due to ‘time constraints’ on the funding.

Finally abandoning expectations of lengthy field research for the FFF project, a concession was made. My compromise on a lengthier, ethnographic approach was a qualitative project with structured interview questions to begin, and then to progress onto more open-ended conversation if time allowed. For this project, to gain some consistency in questioning, I asked all participants introductory questions in a particular order – a structured interview technique – so that responses could be loosely quantitatively compared and contrasted on a number of themes. In terms of ‘value for money’, I was told by funders and senior professors alike, this technique would also maximize time.

Additionally, I added aspects of academic mentoring into the project, where I worked with six graduate students on interviewing techniques. At the time, I felt this approach was two-fold; not only could students learn in a supervised environment, they could also help me to maximize the time spent with the young people.

Significant results...
In terms of meeting research expectations and outcomes, the project was particularly successful. Lauded by the funders for the completion of 111 interviews within the required 18 month period, information that could be explored and tallied was voluminous. Equally, the seriousness of the topic covered was not disadvantaged. Although I initially had doubts as to whether such an interview approach would yield sufficient information, following Hockey (2002: 210) I had to acknowledge this approach as a ‘culturally appropriate form’ for this setting, albeit (and importantly so) informed from my previous research. Although responses were far briefer than I had hoped for in an interview forum, we were able to discuss many of the young people’s concerns and highlight many themes that worried them with regard to sectarianism and living in Northern Ireland. I briefly outline these themes here to highlight the gravity of topics that we were covering in such a brief period.
While no two young people are the same, the themes on which young people discussed their lives revealed parallels that were loosely categorized into four sections (cf. Roche 2008). The first of the four broad topics included addressing the specific question of What is Sectarianism in Northern Ireland? This section explored personal meanings and interpretations of sectarianism, tied up in specific instances pertaining specifically to their Northern Irish context.

**Bounded Contentment** was the title ascribed to a theme that discussed the limited exposure young people had between communities despite the post-conflict state. Just under two thirds of the young people involved in the study were isolated or ‘coooned’ (Roche 2008: 69-106) on a regular basis from the other community to such an extent that they expressed being ‘unaffected’ or ‘untouched’ by sectarianism. This segregation was complicated by a genuine fear of travelling into, and often of, the other community.

The third theme, **Family and Friends Matter(s)** touched upon young people’s immediate and most influential circles of personal contact. Family members, particularly parents and grandparents, were illustrated as particularly influential in forming young people’s views on the other community. And cross-community friendships were limited. Only one in four young people were able to maintain any lasting friendships across the sectarian divide. Young people discussed aspects of group youth violence, and discussed this in terms of camaraderie and friendship building, with just under a third of participants being caught up in such activities at some point (Ibid: 108-155).

**Community Pressures** explored influences of community members on young people post-ceasefire. Young people discussed larger, community pressure overall as the most restrictive agent on their affairs. Several young people discussed pressure to quit participation in sports and other cultural activities due to fears of reprisals from community members. Significantly, it was demonstrated that the traditional concept of paramilitary influences as community guardians remains an important factor in young people’s decision-making. Over eight out of ten participants discussed continuing paramilitary influences in their areas and the related pressures that stem from their continued presence (Ibid: 156-193).

As the reader can witness, the main themes that came from the research were no childish matter. Continued and pervasive paramilitarism, group youth violence, parental prejudices and histories, and very limited cross-community contact all feature heavily in the contemporary context. Results of the project were prolific and yielded extensive interview-based results that continue to aid policy workers across Northern Ireland.

...but lingering questions remain...
Considering the quantity of results, one could ask: why am I concerned? Although the results from such research are both enlightening and helpful for programs of future change, I often think about the consequences of such limited questioning techniques and the costs of such rapid-fire questioning for the young people themselves. When on lengthy fieldwork, time was taken to get to know the young people before I interviewed them. In fact, I had spent one year with young people before any attempt for a formal tape-recorded conversation was made. Many were able to tell me their personal stories in the context of a long-established rapport. In sum, I knew where they were ‘coming from’ and had a deeper sensitivity to aspects of each personal life I was involving in my research (Roche 2003).

In one-off interviewing, the context was hurried. A set pace for questioning and a set order for questioning restricted breezy chat, and the opportunity for elaboration by the young people. Because we had just met, many young people replied with limited and one-word responses – an issue I had not previously encountered as I had had sufficient time to get to know them, and they me.

The incorporation of graduate students in the ‘interview room’ added to this sterile approach. Although perhaps closer in age to the young people, on the whole, the graduate students approached the task for what it was: interviewing. Rapport was not easily established with inexperienced interviewers. Several graduate students found the extra burden of work in addition to their graduate study arduous and withdrew from interviewing. This created even more inconsistencies in the project. The format of set questioning, although efficient, felt stifling.

**Interviewing young people on traumatic topics**
The parameters of how to appropriately interview young people and children remains predominantly the domain of those within the law, counselling and social work (cf. for example Wilson and Powell 2001); or psychology and medicine with particular concerns (cf. for example Morrison and Anders 1999). Whilst some researchers in the social sciences discuss the best techniques with which to illicit information from young people and children (cf. Bianchi and Robinson 1997, Quinn 1992) and many discuss how young people cope with violent or traumatic events particularly in conflict situations (cf. for example Cairns 1996, Robben and Suárez-Orozco 2000, Scheppe-Hughes and Sargent 1998), few talk about the aftermath of the interview experience itself. Those that do focus on the outcomes of interviewing children and young people come from a social work or medical stance, and generally discuss the repercussions of interviewing on the topic of loss and bereavement (cf. for example Hill 1999, McCarthy and Jessop 2005, Weiss 1993, 1994).

Where young people are concerned, sharing of bereavement experiences has led scholars to reveal how best to handle interviews on the topic; because such discussions are inevitably upsetting to children.
and young people and may lead to the fashioning of symptoms of depression that may have not been present before (Harrington and Harrison 1999, McCarthy and Jessop 2005).

Such a topic of inquiry has much to add to this discussion. Considering the many traumatic events that young people endure in the Northern Irish context, it is inevitable that a researcher will knowingly probe or unknowingly stumble upon a traumatic event. Not unlike the private domain of bereavement, those raised within conflict-ridden environments maintain a ‘culture of silence’ regarding any event that is violent or traumatic in their lives. This has been particularly noted within the Northern Irish context among young people (Knox 2002, Roche 2011, 2007, 2003, Smyth 1998). Traumatic events and violations are ‘just not talked about’ in such contexts, whether for personal ‘hardness’, or for fear of legal or extra-legal repercussions (Knox 2002, Roche 2011, 2007, 2003). It therefore remains a question as to whether opening controversial and jarring experiences in a ‘rapid-fire time’ can damage our subjects.

Deep controversies are raised by the debate about whether it is ‘good’ to talk about traumatic or jarring experiences. Psychiatric scholars have critically discussed the idea that it is always beneficial to talk about traumatic experiences, particularly close to the event (Rose, Bisson, Churchill and Wessley 2009). Exploring how psychologically normal people react to adversity, and what, if any, responses are appropriate, such research has shown that the conventional response following disasters and trauma – to offer people one-off counselling services as a ‘debriefing’ – is not only ineffective, but possibly increases the risk of psychological morbidities (ibid). Most recent research within the field of health psychology concurs (Williams 2010). Whilst such research has highlighted that telling stories about a person’s traumatic circumstances helps their recovery time, it also shows that if a person is not provided significant time to explain their personal story, their truncated telling can have a negative impact on their well-being (Williams 2010).

Trust in counselling measures, and particularly the effectiveness of personal networks and friendship networks when revealing both immediate and hidden traumatic events, is proven to be the most effective for those involved in the post-traumatic debriefing. Hill (1999) emphasizes that many young people are distrustful of adults who are considered specialist professionals and who, in fact, are strangers to them. Among the implications for all professionals that effective direct work requires the opportunity to establish trust over time (ibid: 135). Hill goes on to state that when working with young people in a variety of circumstances, young people can be so uncomfortable with speaking with what they consider a stranger that it can be helpful to work in conjunction with those already within the child’s or young person’s circle. Furthermore, one must work with those in whom the young person already has confidence. In these contexts, young people are not only more likely to be open about speaking with the professional, but, will feel more secure about revealing important facts and stresses about themselves (ibid).

In light of such research it is notable how often we, as anthropologists or other qualitative specialists, are compelled to query a variety of young people in an extraordinarily short amount of time. We expect young people to ‘take us at our word’ in a period of sometimes days … more often, hours. Tapping into what we already know about utilising gatekeepers that the young people know and trust, we are allowed to gain the confidence of our young research participants, often through the relationship we may have with their youth club leader, their teacher, their parent or other trusted advisor.

In the conflict setting in Northern Ireland, scores of research and policy documents, very often executed and authored by anthropologists, are testimony to the fact that young people are continuously questioned about facets of the conflict that they may, or may not understand. While telling trauma stories has been shown to help young people make sense of events that they may find stressful, without the appropriate time to allow young people to unfold their personal stories, the beneficial effects of ‘talking’ may lead to a rekindling of events and a subsequent confusion.

**Time, trust, lessons, changes**

Throughout this commentary, two issues are most prominent: trust and time. In the context of fieldwork, particularly fieldwork within conflict zones, these are some of the most important facets of the practice of participant observation and come as no surprise. Far from being ‘tricks of the trade’, these core components of our profession are our hallmark. Yet, in the midst of a glimpse we may be losing some of what makes us great. As ever increasing demands for publication require research and publication within the scope of the project, when large grants seek a *minimum* quota regarding the interview of 100 participants – quantity over anthropological quality begins to win out.

I believe that my instinct to query techniques that I myself have used is important. When other disciplines, such as psychiatry and psychology discuss the delivery of therapeutic packages and the implications that discussing traumatic events may entail, social anthropologists rarely consider the consequences of our presence, our discussions, our witnessing, our interviewing, after we have come and gone. In both my active ‘lives’ as anthropologist and doctor, I recognise that medical *and* anthropological inquiry would be nothing if we could not speak with, and work with, the other person face-to-face. This is the core of why these disciplines have such a happy marriage. Whilst on the surface it may seem that medicine accentuates exact discovery processes for the purpose of cure, and anthropology emphasises lengthily and subtly revealing
processes of culture, both disciplines feature time and trust for learning. While in medicine this may not be evident on first glance, it should not be forgotten that we revisit our patients, often day after day, and later in check-ups and clinics. Although initially a swift process of discovery, the ultimate course is one of re-visititation and protracted, accumulated knowledge. Because of this lengthy process we hope we gain the trust of our patients. This insight into another field which uses initially rapid assessment techniques has helped me to think about how we can reconcile some of the changes we now grapple with in anthropology.

With this in mind, in addition to attempting to bring anthropological investigation back to its roots of long-standing participant observation and open-ended question techniques, perhaps we should be thinking about a type of feedback from our participants. We know that some research among subjects has caused tremendous trauma. One such example is openly discussed by Scheper-Hughes regarding her early work in Ireland (2001[1977]). Scheper-Hughes created offence in the community in which she worked by amalgamating some of the people she worked with for field personas in her monograph. Scheper-Hughes was subsequently admonished by, and isolated from, her emotionally and psychologically hurt subjects when she returned after the publication of her monograph.

Despite this documented occasion, we know very little about what research participants think or feel about the questions we are asking. We expect and have feedback from students on our classes, should we not think about some form of feedback on our interviewing techniques? Similarly, and perhaps borrowing from our psychiatric and medical colleagues, ‘checking-up’ and ‘checking-in’ with our subjects after they have privileged us with their stories only builds further trust between us and greater knowledge about their circumstances.

Such feedback is far more accomplishable that we think. For example, I conducted feedback sessions with young people after surveys were distributed in our quantitative project (Roche 2005). The focus of these sessions was to assess the efficacy of the survey itself. However, such a technique could also be employed to ‘check-up’ with young people after interview. Young people could be asked if they felt appropriate questions were asked, and how they felt about being asked questions on chosen topics. Alternatively, given young people’s frequent reluctance to talk to adults, peer group feedback on topics covered within the interview process could be a useful mechanism for young people to reveal feelings about being interviewed on difficult subject areas.

To consider the implications of asking questions in a one-off setting, particularly in an environment where unspoken traumas may be stirred, is an important topic to consider in more depth. Our ‘glimpse’ to expedite a survey process may not be doing justice to the depth of the story within. Thinking about other research exploring this matter, easy adjustments can be made. Funding expectations can be adjusted to include lengthier timelines and settings, consistent interaction with known researchers can build trust among young people, and the empowerment of young people to help in the process of thinking about questions in a peer setting can help. Whilst I am not advocating the end of the one-off interview, what I am noting is that due respect needs to be taken when interviewing, and particularly interviewing children and young people in arenas of violence where cultures of fear and silence have evolved over decades. If indeed we have a responsibility to those young people who give us their time, a firm grounding of trust needs to be established among the young people themselves and those who work with them both before research begins and further, after it finishes.

References


Interviewing Unionists in Northern Ireland: Some Methodological Reflections

Kirk Simpson*

Abstract: In this article, I argue that in order to help understand the unionist community in Northern Ireland, anthropological researchers can use interview research to illuminate various 'hidden' discourses that have been previously unknown. There is an absence of nuanced and informed understandings of the current and historical political and cultural context and 'condition' of the unionist people in Northern Ireland. I will discuss the heuristic value of the interviews, and how it can function to assist those researchers who are interested in unionism to provide a balanced account of a group who often feel subjugated, disconnected and marginalised in the context of a post-conflict society.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; unionists; conflict; interview research; storytelling and narrative.

With notable exceptions (for example, Donnan 2005, 2008, 2010, Donnan and Simpson 2007, Dawson 2007, Simpson 2009a, Patterson 2010), there has been something of a gap in the academic literature in terms of a sophisticated understanding of the current and historical political and cultural context and 'condition' of the unionist community in Northern Ireland. Often negatively and erroneously essentialised as intransigent and homogenous, it is argued in this article that unionists are heterogeneous and complex – geographically diverse, welcoming, and generous people whose ostensible reluctance to engage in political debate about the past is the product of the anxiety and fear engendered by over three decades of violence, and the ways in which they feel their victimhood has been elided. That their narratives of the conflict have often struggled to find room within the predominant historical discourse has served to isolate and alienate many unionist people. In this article, it is argued that in order to understand the unionist community in Northern Ireland, anthropological researchers can use interview research to illuminate various 'hidden' discourses that have been hitherto unknown. Having been embedded for a number of years within a community of people that are slow to trust and share information, in the context of a post-violence society, I will discuss the heuristic value of the interview, and how it can function to assist those researchers who are interested in unionism to provide a balanced account of a group who often feel subjugated, disconnected and marginalised.

Unionist People

The rich heritage and history of the unionist tradition is often lost amongst the erroneous assumption that unionists in Northern Ireland are simply inflexible conservatives, unjustly 'holding the line' against the inevitable and inexorable romantic charge of Irish reunification. This portrait is often painted by a largely unsympathetic British, Irish and international media, and by their political opponents who seek to control the tempo and nature of post-conflict transition (Simpson 2009a; Edwards and McGrattan 2010). 'Bigots in bowler' hats (Parkinson 2001) is an easy reference point for those who do not seek to understand a complex community, and political capital can be gained by those who seek to besmirch the reputation of unionists and their credibility by trying to link all unionists to some notional (and facile) idea of 'Orangeism' (considered, credible and nuanced understandings of the Orange Order and its relationship with unionism are offered by Dudley-Edwards 1999, Bryan 2000, Patterson and Kaufmann 2007, and Kaufmann 2007).

Attempts to derisively lampoon unionism (note here that 'unionism' is used to describe the unionist community in Northern Ireland, rather than 'Unionists', which is taken to mean the Unionist political parties) as mere archaic superstition, or as the angry political thrashing of sectarian bullies, intent on reasserting some lost notion of historical supremacy, should be rejected so that there can be informed debate about the past (Simpson 2009b). Disregarding the fact that such assumptions are often based on unsubstantiated myth rather than proper ethnographic and interview research, it is in any case a simplistic caricature, entirely misrepresentative of over one million unionists, and often predicated on confusion or misunderstanding of what unionism is, and who unionists – as people and individuals – actually are. Regrettably, this confusion can contribute to the creation and perpetuation of a discourse about the conflict in Northern Ireland that disallows or inhibits room for unionist storytelling, most pertinently about the violent past that many unionist people endured as a result of a sustained campaign of conflict by Irish Republican (and to a lesser extent, Loyalist) paramilitaries, in both metropolitan and rural contexts; but also about the political present, that they feel is excluding or even demonising their culture and their identity. As one respondent, 'Bobby', a 51 year old man from Belfast told me:

We as a community have had to accept a lot, a lot of violence against us, and then a lot of

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political concessions that have hurt us, you know? But we’ve done it, because we want peace. But then, you know, no-one then wants to listen to us, to our side – it’s like it’s been decided we were to blame and that’s it, that we are sectarian or that we don’t want to get on with Catholic people. That’s just nonsense, just because we don’t accept what republicans say about the past, they say we’re bigoted and out of touch with things. I mean, they [republicans] talk about the shared past, but what they mean is ‘let’s make everything our version of the past’, because they know the more they say it, the more your older sort of unionist, like the traditional ones, will back off and not try to tell their stories. What we should be doing is saying ‘okay, if you want things to be shared, let’s share them, let’s share the past and let us say what we need to say’. A lot of innocent, ordinary people, they have to cope with what was done to them by paramilitaries, but it’s like no-one cares about them. That’s not right as far as I’m concerned. I think that as unionists, we should be more prepared to get the truth of what happened, but we need to tell our stories, not have them ignored, and be pushed around. But, who wants to listen to us? From our perspective, a lot of people think no-one is interested, and because of that there’s a lot of people now won’t engage with the past. Why should we be we ashamed? We, unionist people, were victims too.

Against this backdrop, it becomes more and more difficult for researchers to gain access to unionists, who by cultural temperament (though this is a generalisation) are not naturally forthcoming about things that they would consider to be deeply private (like trauma, or grief, for example), or particularly confident talking about their constructions of identity and sense of political self in a context that forces them to carry a burden of historical guilt that they did not warrant and do not deserve (cf. Caruth 1995, 1996, Cubitt 2007).

For decades, many unionists did not speak about the wrongs that were perpetrated against them, preferring to remain calm in the face of aggressive provocation and paramilitary intimidation (Donnan 2010). The assassinations of people who were or had been part-time members of the security forces (often while the victims were off duty (Patterson 2010)), and the bombings by the Provisional IRA (PIRA) of ‘unionist’ towns or military targets, which in some cases included civilian casualties, the destruction of local businesses, and significant damage to Protestant churches in those towns (Taylor 1998, Harnden 1999), did not prompt ordinary unionists to urge retaliation against the nationalist and republican communities, or foster hatred of Catholics. The paramilitary activity of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), directed in the main against the Catholic nationalist population, was not endorsed by the majority of the unionist community. Instead, unionists trusted in the rule of law, and in Unionist politicians who – mandated by the people – formally rejected the legitimacy of Loyalist paramilitaries and publicly denounced their activities as illegal and criminal. Yet some unionists are aware that the conflation between unionist and Loyalist was one that was often made, and that this contributed to a feeling in the nationalist community that there was either tacit or active support for the Loyalist groups among unionists. ‘Nigel’, 46, from county Tyrone, was one of many respondents who rejected Loyalist violence explicitly and who was concerned that his nationalist neighbours would contemplate the idea that he or any of his family or friends would have lent support to Loyalists.

Alright, it’s maybe not the same down here as in Belfast, but there were bad fellas, Loyalists, about this area and they did appalling things. There’s no logic, support, or any justification whatsoever for what Loyalist terrorists did, I don’t care if it’s in Belfast or anywhere else. You can ask any unionist that, they’ll tell you the same thing. Yes, the unionist people were dismayed by the attacks on them, at Enniskillen, in south Armagh, the town centres getting blown up, ordinary Protestants shot, the bomb on the Shankill Road. But do you think that any decent unionist person, with friends and neighbours who are Catholic and nationalist people, would want someone to set themselves up as some kind of revenge outfit, going out and shooting innocent Catholics? That’s despicable, totally despicable, immoral, and of course it would concern me and lots of other unionists that any nationalist person would think that we in the unionist community ever supported or even tolerated that sort of thing. But we have good relationships with our Catholic neighbours and I would like to think they know we never supported that. I think our politicians, the people we elected, always rejected Loyalists and that shows, to me anyway, that unionist people did not support those paramilitary groups in any way.

Methodological Reflections
For many unionist people, to talk about personal difficulty was to contribute to admittance of political and religious defeat, and as has been noted in other ethnographic work, was not typically encouraged (Donnan 2005). In the new Northern Ireland, some unionists have broken this wall of silence, and begun to narrate their version of events (Simpson 2008). They have done this in many ways, but the potential of the research interview in helping facilitate this heuristic
process should not be understated. As unionists begin to retell their stories, a more complete picture of a community has begun to emerge. The unionist people, as noted, are slow to trust. Many possess a stoic and Calvinist belief in silence. The connection between unionism and Protestantism in Northern Ireland is a very definite one, but it should be noted that is important not to assume that all unionists are Protestants, and vice versa. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise the inherent value of many variations of the Protestant faith (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and others) within the unionist tradition, and the ways in which that faith influences unionists’ worldview, and their perceptions of the conflict (Donnan and Simpson 2007). Some unions have had the bitter experience of being, or having relatives, physically attacked; others have had ‘their’ towns damaged by bombs and suffered economically and culturally; many more have felt that their reputation and feelings have been vandalised by poor journalism and political sloganising. Yet unionist people are regionally diverse. Emotionally they are hyper individuated yet bound by restrictive cultural conditioning which implores them not to show weakness (Donnan 2005). They are only occasionally very politically united, usually in times of crisis.

Becoming ‘embedded’ ethnographically, seeking to understand how unionist people and victims had been ‘othered’ to such an extent that theirs had somehow become a counter-hegemonic position, but also whilst making it apparent that I would not vouch for the veracity of narrative accounts nor seek to win a political argument, was not easy. It took time, and endeavour. For victims, or people who feel they have been victimised, who have been objectified or even vilified, that can be extremely problematic. Trust was not earned through an expedient or instrumental commitment to framing partisan positions, but rather in satiating the needs of those who simply wanted to be heard, and who believed that their experiences would speak for themselves, if only people outside the unionist community – and to an extent even people within the unionist community – were provided with the opportunity to listen. Acknowledging my own subjectivity, the need to uncover the stories of the forgotten is something that is undeniably crucial in Northern Ireland. Being from Northern Ireland allowed me to quickly appreciate the need to understand some of the social grooves of the people with whom I spent time. Acquiring the capacity to appreciate these ‘grooves’ is crucial in appreciating the feelings and perceptions of unionists, especially because regional differences – from county to county, from town to countryside, and from village to farm – inform the unionist worldview in many different ways, and also can determine the ways in which people respond in interview contexts. For many respondents, especially at the beginning of the research, I represented a metropolitan ‘liberal’ outsider, unable to understand the political imperatives and history of rural areas. Many often told me in interviews that as ‘someone from outside’ I would not understand. Spending time in different areas and building up relationships with respondents was thus crucial. The interviews that proved most valuable often took place not in a formalised interview setting, but as part of conversations with respondents or group of respondents. The relationships had to be cultivated, and they had to be, at least to some extent, reciprocal. I had to accept that because of my status as someone from Northern Ireland, I would be repeatedly challenged and questioned. Some respondents asked me about my schooling, my religious affiliation, or my support for sporting teams – all cultural indicators of belonging, a mechanism for them to try to establish some kind of rapport and to feel that they were getting something back from the interview process. If my background lent me any advantage, though, it was that I was acutely aware of the importance of constant reflexivity, of not loading the accounts with my own assumptions, and to recognise that respondents often tell us less about the past than what they think they know about the past (Augé 2004). A critical framework helped me in many ways – to anchor the work in a commitment to allowing unionist people, especially those who were victims of violence, to rediscover language and to allow what had become subaltern narratives to emerge, slowly, from the political wilderness (cf. Phelps 2004).

Many unionist people believed that their rights as victims of the conflict had been dismissed, and that they had been traduced as mechanics of an oppressive state. Within an apparently disjointed, disconnected, disempowered, disappointed and disordered community, however, unionists were sharing stories, with one another, and in small communities. They believed, though, that such narratives lacked the power to puncture the impervious barriers of dealing with the past debate as it had been constructed. Unionists felt this debate demanded that those who spoke of the conflict acknowledged what unionists believed to be an unfair yet implicit or explicit moral equivalence between victims and perpetrators of paramilitary political violence.

In choosing not to trade a singular, easily palatable and emotionally diluted version of their past, which cohered with the story that they felt was being fashioned about Northern Ireland, for some form of recognition, unionists often told me that they felt ridiculed as intransigent fantasists, bent on ensuring their victimhood took centre stage and social priority. As ‘Rachel’, 56, told me:

Any unionist now who says they want the history of the Troubles scrutinised, that they won’t accept this moral equivalence – you know, that someone in the paramilitaries was the same as some ordinary person or police or Army man killed – it’s like they are just made out to be mad or something. The media goes on like it’s the most outrageous thing in the world for us to
reject that idea, that innocent people were the same as paramilitaries, and that we can’t have what they [republicans] call a moral hierarchy. But no-one in the unionist community, from an 18 year old to an 80 year old, is going accept that there was any kind of equivalence between people who went out and shot people and blew them up and innocent victims. Why would we? Even the main unionist parties have all rejected the idea. But there’s this whole new story about the peace and if you speak out against that, to say ‘hold on here, this isn’t right’ you would be isolated and look like an extremist, you know? The unionist people want peace, just, or at least the truth, and a public apology, and for it to be recorded in the history books, so our young people learn about what really happened, but now to say that you would be told ‘oh, the unionists just want this moral hierarchy, they’re out of date, they don’t want peace, they only care about the victims in their community’. I find that ridiculous but that’s what politics in Northern Ireland is now.

The argument that unionists are moral fantansis detached from political reality does not accommodate the fact that one of the foundation stones of unionist thought is morality. As noted, while it is important not to conflate unionism and Protestantism in every case, for many unionists, especially those with strong Protestant religious views, the Old Testament has particular, special resonance. Whatever the political circumstance, many unionists told me they would not sacrifice what they regarded as righteousness for the sake of expediency, but they were prepared to make compromises to contribute to peace. They argued that their position was quite easily discernible for those who cared enough to try and discover it. It was emphatically, a collection – a simple and undeniable. It was emphatically, a narrative fabric that is in some way representative of both the individual and collective experience (cf. Hastrup 2003). Unionists, in my experience, will accept that. For them it is a phenomenon to simply be able to recount their story with someone whom they trust and within the confines of projects that do not seek to unduly castigate them or relativise their suffering.

Unionists often expressed in interviews and conversations that they felt that their opinions and desires were dismissed, and that they were derided by political opponents as intoxicated by the irate rhetoric of disaffected, peripheral and liminal evangelical Protestants; or as the unwitting proxies of proselytising unionist fundamentalists who have been isolated by the outworkings of the peace process (cf. Bruce 2007). While it is the case that many unionists with whom I spoke were moralistic and demand accountability in relation to the past, it is foolish to frame a methodology for understanding such a complex community based on the erroneous assumption that they want to claw back some mythical notion of a unionist political utopia. Rather, they seek a greater introspection of the history of violence than has been the case thus far, and concomitantly, a greater administration of what they regard as moral justice for those victims whom they feel have been forgotten (cf. Borneman 1997, Ricoeur 2001). This is centred on a straightforward philosophy of meaning – unionists feel that they should not be ‘gagged’, denied the chance to remember and mourn their community’s past in a society that claims to be balanced (Lapham 2005). In this way, unionists might be regarded as moral and political idealists, but many were increasingly pragmatic in thinking about ways to narrate their stories in ways that were consonant with the new political landscape. This is because they were cognisant of the fact that the erosion of unionist history would lead to a mere caricature of post-conflict justice, and that it would leave younger generations with many unanswered questions (Ricoeur 2004, Burleigh 2007, 2008).

**Unionist Narratives and Interview Research**

Learning to interpret the subtleties of unionist culture throughout the six counties of Northern Ireland, and using interview research, is not easily achieved. As already noted, effort must be expended in order to win the trust of unionist respondents before they agree to participate in interview research. This can be done by attending social events, demonstrating a willingness to immerse oneself in their worldview, going to church events (a key part of the unionist tradition, particularly in rural areas), visiting them in their houses and speaking with them, and listening to the testimony of those who have been consigned to the periphery for, in many cases, 30 years. This does not have to be done at the expense of lionising unionist narratives, or vouching for the veracity of all of their stories. Interview research can still be conducted that is critical in its texture – that is, seeking to identify anthropological patterns that weave a narrative fabric that is in some way representative of both the individual and collective experience (cf. Hastrup 2003). Unionists, in my experience, will accept that. For them it is a phenomenon to simply be able to recount their story with someone whom they trust and within the confines of projects that do not seek to unduly castigate them or relativise their suffering.

Storytelling, interviews and the difficulty of the past

For some unionists, describing the past was extremely difficult. Storytelling and victimhood were not social and cultural phenomena with which they were particularly familiar, and there was – certainly during the conflict – a feeling that talking about their feelings was both emotionally weak and politically dangerous. Unionists – especially in more mixed rural areas – told me that they were never sure who could be trusted, and in such a context, their reluctance to enter into lengthy discourse about friends or family who had been victimised by paramilitaries was understandable. They feared reprisals, but were also aware that to complain about their predicament publicly was to give encouragement to those whom unionists believed took
delight in destroying the morale of their community. When the conflict stopped, and unionists began to feel more secure about narrating their suffering, and engaging in processes of remembering and storytelling, it was often older unionists who emerged as those who were keen to signify their unionist ‘authenticity’ (and by implication, historical authority) (cf. Das et al 2001, Jackson 2002, Douglas and Vogler 2003). This did not exclude younger unionists from ‘belonging’ – rather, it was a mechanism designed to indicate to them that in order to acquire acceptance, they had to embrace the notion that they could be ‘tutored’ about the past by those who claimed to hold its absolute ‘truths’ in their grasp. This ‘narrative transmission’ was a method of psychological and political reproduction (Edkins 2003), in which some young unionists were invited to assume possession of particularist narrative scripts that contained an established ‘lexicon of terror’, and to subsequently use these scripts as a political commodity in the battle for history, despite the concurrent belief among unionists that their voices will never be heard by republicans or the British Government (Donnan 2005, Simpson and Donnan 2007, Simpson 2008). Once these scripts – and the static vocabulary and grammar of traumatic experience – have been learned, they can then be passed on and repeatedly articulated whenever the question of the past arises or is problematised (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996, Volf 2007). Unionists’ priority in utilising this sometimes truncated linguistic format was arguably to psychologically and politically shield themselves from the possibility of being re-victimised in the re-telling (Bar-On 1999, West 2003); and to avoid the emotional difficulty of attempting to witness, acknowledge and master the legacy and the effects of the conflict (Felman and Laub 1992).

**Methodology and Moral Autonomy**

Whilst it is true that many unionists did not experience the conflict directly, it would be specious to conclude that that all of them are somehow simply ‘easily led’ ciphers for unnamed, more senior members of their community who are (wrongly) presumed to have a desire to deconstruct the peace process because of a refusal to deal with or acknowledge the rights and entitlements of Irish republicans. Although there are those in the unionist community who have been influenced, to varying amounts, by the process of narrative transmission that has been described, in many cases unionist people feel that they have been denied the opportunity to find out what happened during the conflict by what they believe is the predominance of a muscular republican ideological discourse. Methodologically, it was also instructive that many families, relatives and friends who belong to an older generation sought to shield their children from any narratives of the past for fear that they would not only unduly upset the next generation, but that they would also re-open their own unhealed emotional and psychological sores (cf. Huyssen 1995, Feldman 2004).

**Conclusion**

Though it might seem unusual in a post-conflict situation that has taken fifteen years of play and counter-play to make its path to the point it has reached now, it is interesting that many unionists’ attitudes to dealing with the past are based on questions that are founded not upon the baggage of political agendas, but on the idealised notion of a fundamental and age-old moral equation: what (they believe) is right, and what (they believe) is wrong. It is interesting also that other unionists, although they are aware of this moral equation, are beginning to rethink ways in which they might engage with the past, and with their political opponents, so that they can narrate their experiences and stories in a way that ensures they can be heard and recognised. The unionist people are increasingly aware, for example, that any successful reconciliation with the past is contingent not only on the British government, but also – to some extent at least – on the Irish government (and the Irish people). For many unionists, the strength of their historical distrust of the Irish state and, at times, their open antipathy towards it (because of the Irish Republic’s constitutional claim to Northern Ireland) means that engaging with the Irish Government is a momentous step. As historical and traditional rivalries and suspicions fade, there is important recognition among some unionists that the Irish state has helped to secure peace in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the dropping of the constitutional claim and the political reassurances and concessions given by the Irish Government regarding the principle of consent since 1998 have satisfied many unionists that the Irish Republic is no longer an immediate threat to the Union. However, many unionists do believe that the Irish Government – as a key partner with the British Government in the peace process – must ensure that it upholds the right of the unionist people in Northern Ireland to narrate their stories about the conflict and the emotional and psychological impact that the conflict had on their community, whatever the political consequences might be.

For ethnographers, therefore, recognising that unionists are searching for ways to be heard, it is crucial to try to understand unionist people and culture within this changing political context. Far from the anecdotal and popular assumption that unionist civilians are merely politically reactionaries, they are attempting to deal with the past in the present. It is they – the people who will be asked to support the institutions created by the British Government’s master plan for peace in Northern Ireland in the longer term, but many still have anxieties about the imposition of a version of history from which they feel somewhat excluded, and a refusal by the British state – to which they pledge allegiance and of which they are proud citizens – to confront paramilitaries and force them to engage in a process of truth recovery that requires them to apologise for their actions (cf. Tavuchis 1991). Irrespective of macro level political deals, therefore, many within the
unionist community value what they regard as truth and accountability as crucial to the process of post-conflict state building. Many have thought through how this might play out in procedural or institutional terms, and none want any kind of return to conflict or instability, but the majority do also want some sort of moral and political barometer that ensures history is not fabricated and manipulated in such a way that victims and their stories are elided. The implications for the British Government’s legacy in Northern Ireland of a potentially unsettled and discontented unionist community should not be ignored by ethnographers, because unionists are reconfiguring, in many ways, how Northern Ireland deals with the legacy of its troubled and violent past, and only further interview research with them is capable of evaluating how they react to the political process.

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Abstract: In general, the existing conceptualisation on research with children focuses on their vulnerability and incompetence and treats them as objects of the research (Alderson and Morrow 2004). This article focuses on one core imperative: 'Not everything that is Legal is Ethical' (Saldana 2003) discussing methodological and ethical issues while interviewing underage participants arising from the LASPIT research context.

Keywords: Children; interview; ethical issues; consent form; reflexivity; acculturation.

Introduction

It was 28 February 2008. I was only 14... when my Mum went to Ireland. I was crying after my Mum...it was so bad that I still cannot forget it, even if I would love to...I only heard her voice [over phone]...I slept on her pillow... my Mum was using perfume and I felt her scent… until it evaporated...

(Adam age 16, 1st wave, March 2010)

International attention is increasingly focused on ethical issues that involve children's participation in broadly defined research, especially nowadays where there has been an increase in demand for children's voices to be heard. Therefore, there is a growing interest in ethical guidelines. This contemporary ethical consideration in research has developed from debates (Beauchamp 1994, Denzin 2000, Mayall 1994), going back to the time of Aristotle who also shared our universal concerns in terms of ethical approach (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 2.2). Ethical issues in social and anthropological research have many dimensions. Morrow and Richards (1996) scrutinise existing ethical guidelines via their usefulness and applicability while conducting research with children, while Guillemin and Gillam (2004) focus on 'procedural ethics' usually entailed in ethical committee discretion and 'ethics in practice' associated with the issues that may arise while conducting social research. While 'procedural ethics' are quite straightforward, depending on the researcher's skills and knowledge of the ethical committee, 'ethics in practice' can cause ethical dilemmas in terms of confidentiality, the researcher's approach and ethical obligations (Guillemin and Gillam 2004:263). Admittedly, how can one be sure that a potential underage interviewee does not feel that he/she is being 'used'? Allard (2007) argues that 'all that is needed to ensure that young people are being empowered rather than exploited [...] is a genuine desire to listen to what young people have to say' (Allard 2007:3) but is this enough to ensure ethical conduct compliance?

‘Not everything that is Legal is Ethical’

Drawing primarily from the qualitative data obtained during the LASPIT study with thirty-three Polish immigrant teenagers, and echoing Saldana’s (2003) assertion that 'Not everything that is Legal is Ethical', I argue that children as 'the social actors of research, in their own rights' (Alderson and Morrow 2004) have a right to say 'no' not only to particular research question but to the overall research process.

Legally, informed consent forms give us – the researchers – a green light to ‘go ahead’ but from an ethical point of view the research subjects – children – as underage social actors should be also asked for their permission to participate with the clearly defined option to say 'no'. If this option is chosen, in my view, a child's decision overrides the parental decision expressed on the informed consent form: for instance, Lidia – a Polish newcomer aged fourteen goes to the heart of the ethical discourse:

Lidia: I was sick – from the stress and despair. I could explain to you – but I don't have to do it – Do I?

Interviewer: You're absolutely right. You don't have to tell me about this.

Lidia: OK [hesitation] I will tell you. I had anorexia. You know I was so depressed because of it all, that I started rejecting myself...

(Lidia age 14 1st wave, 15 November 2009)

How this ethical issue is handled is entirely up to the researcher who should be at all times egalitarian, and should introduce the concept and the aims of the research to each underage participant, clearly informing each interviewee about his/her participatory rights. Sadly, despite the fact that there is a growing interest in involving the voice of the child or adolescent in both research and policy matters concerning them, some research

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organisations and researchers still lag behind the recognition that those under the age of eighteen can have the same rights as those over eighteen. 

(Saldana 2003:23).

So, how can scholars ensure that the issue of children’s rights is addressed in their research?

Research with underage participants

It is commonly argued that research with underage participants is more demanding in terms of approaching the subject and in terms of the relationship with the young research informants. Ethical involvement concerns the nature of developing the relationship with young respondents particularly within a ‘qualitative approach’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2000), but also the potential effect on children after the researcher has left the field of study. Therefore, for the purpose of the LASPIT study the approach of working with children, not on children, has been taken. The shift in stress from research ‘on’ to research ‘with’ has implications for the ethical conduct of research since it emphasises that children are competent and knowledgeable informants (Alderson 1995, Brzezińska and Toepfliz 2007, Seale 2004). In general, the existing conceptualisation in social research with children focuses on their vulnerability and incompetency and treats them as objects of the research. Alderson and Morrow (2004) argue that we should move away from epistemological assumptions based on a specific formulation of the category ‘child’ and treat children as the social actors of research in their own rights if we are to attempt to analyse children’s experiences in social research. However, despite attempts made to explore the best way to approach and interview children and to ensure non-harmful research practice, it may be difficult to find a balance between ensuring that the rights of individuals are respected, while the potential contribution serving the greater good is achieved (Seale, 2004:117).

An interview and the LASPIT study

Problematising acculturation of young Polish entrants in light of migration in the Irish context opens an interesting debate not only for acculturation issues but also for ethical issues, since it involves research with children. The LASPIT study explores how young Polish entrants adjust to their new social context and various issues that were not discussed with anyone else emerged; outlining that children possess different but equally valid competencies and should be seen as the best informants about their own lives (Ardener 1975, Montgomery 2009). Consequently, it is imperative to respect the individuality of the underage respondent and to provide a feeling of safety and acceptance, ensuring that no-harm is done. We – the researchers – have to remember that each child is different, each child has a unique set of experiences; for that reason, the best approach should be based on an interactive way that fully respects the interviewed young individuals in terms of their rights and dignity. Therefore, a qualitative interview was specifically chosen as a research method because it encourages and enables the ‘extensions of ordinary conversations where respondents are partners in the research project rather than subjects to be tested or examined’ (Rubin and Rubin 2005:12). The qualitative interview also allows the researcher to achieve the richness and depth of understanding of the

research questions.

In light of the gathered data, her decision was not unique. Throughout the LASPIT study, a recurrence of narratives from Polish respondents in relation to various issues that were not discussed with anyone else emerged; outlining that children possess different but equally valid competencies and should be seen as the best informants about their own lives (Ardener 1975, Montgomery 2009). Consequently, it is imperative to respect the individuality of the underage respondent and to provide a feeling of safety and acceptance, ensuring that no-harm is done. We – the researchers – have to remember that each child is different, each child has a unique set of experiences; for that reason, the best approach should be based on an interactive way that fully respects the interviewed young individuals in terms of their rights and dignity. Therefore, a qualitative interview was specifically chosen as a research method because it encourages and enables the ‘extensions of ordinary conversations where respondents are partners in the research project rather than subjects to be tested or examined’ (Rubin and Rubin 2005:12). The qualitative interview also allows the researcher to achieve the richness and depth of understanding of the

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issues explored without breaking the codes of ethical conduct. Moreover each interview is based on the informed consent forms obtained from parents, and on the volunteer forms signed by underage teenagers confirming that ‘depending on the context and the complexity of the judgement, children of most ages are capable of making decisions concerning what they want to do’ (Thompson 1992: 60). This means that

the child’s competency to consent to research participation should not be regarded as an inflexible limitation deriving from the child’s age, but rather as an interaction of the child and the context. Children from a surprisingly early age can understand basic elements of the research process, and their role within if this information is presented in an age-appropriate manner

(Thompson, 1992:60).

Therefore, both parents and children were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. In addition to the informed consent forms, all names were changed to pseudonyms to protect respondents’ identities and guarantee their anonymity. However, what happens if after taking so much time and effort in preparation, we come across the situation when having been equipped with an informed consent form approved and signed by the child’s guardians but having informed the underage participants of his/her own rights we suddenly learn that our prospective interviewee does not want to participate in the research?

Handling power disparities
In terms of children’s rights, one of the major ethical challenges is ‘the disparities in power and status between adults and children’ (Alderson and Morrow 2004). It is very difficult to pin down to what extent we can talk about power disparities between the interviewee and the interviewer, especially when one of them is underage. However, the psychological dimension of that imbalance may have profound implications for the respondents e.g., ‘muted voices’ (Ardener 1975). It is unquestionable that the transfer of power diminishes according to the distance, and the imbalance caused by the polarisation between the interviewer and the interviewee can be equalised by positioning children as real partners who are permitted to say ‘no’ because they have been informed that they have a right to do so.

Insider/outsider dichotomy
Being a mother of two Polish acculturating teenagers gives me a privileged position. My own set of migratory experiences incorporating the acculturating encounters of my twin children, positions me as an insider, effectively enabling me to get a more in-depth understanding of the issues discussed. Naples (1997) argues that ‘insiders have greater linguistic competence than outsiders, can blend in more easily, and are less likely to affect social settings’ (Naples 1997:14). Therefore, whenever discrimination or acculturation issues emerge, I am not ashamed of showing empathy. Moreover, I noticed that my own reflexivity approach increases the openness and trust between my informants and me – the researcher and the interviewee. However, for some scholars, reflexivity as a method might carry some epistemological concerns in terms of objectivity.

Reflexivity Approach
The process of reflexivity captures an array of strategies (Naples 1997:7). Reflexivity as a method in social research is embedded in cultural references that encompass the plurality of cultural domains. Fook (1999) positions reflexivity ‘as an ability to locate yourself in the picture’. However, reflectivity ‘...the process in which you are able to reflect upon the ways your own assumptions and actions influence a situation...’ is also present. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) propose to look at reflexivity from a new angle. They argue that the notion of reflexivity as an ethical tool is very fresh and has not been presented yet, hence reflexivity is defined as ‘a helpful conceptual tool for understanding both the nature of ethics in qualitative research and how ethical practice in research can be achieved’ (Guillemin and Gillam 2004: 263). A reflexivity approach de-stigmatises the nature of the accessed sample and separates it from non-ethical issues, since interviewed individuals are not the only ones engaged in the process. Hence, what is ethical and what is non-ethical is the articulation of the researcher’s attitude toward the ethical complexities. The researcher is the one who unfolds ethical consciousness through the relationship with one’s own reflexivity and choice. This approach to ethical issues allows for some distance to be taken, and an analysis of the standpoint of all social actors involved in the process. Therefore, contemporary researchers are encouraged to ‘use self-reflection [...] as a tool to deepen analysis’ (Naples 1997:21). Overall, reflexivity is about how the researcher is drawn into the processes of qualitative inquiry. It changes the approach toward the whole research, automatically positioning the researcher as a morally reflexive being, who interprets a social world through the lenses of self-reflection that a priori means no-harm, and therefore accounts for the relevance of the ethical issues. Personal reflexivity – or as other scholars say – moral reflexivity is derived from our emotions which come directly from the realisation that we – the researchers – are also part of the study and the researched field. Therefore, a systematic reflexivity approach is the constant analysis of one’s own emotions particularly when ‘...discrepancies between the reality of children’s lives and the universal ideals...’ (Montgomery 2009:8) emerge. Sadly, the researcher’s standpoint as a participant in the research has not been acknowledged properly yet. Therefore, there is a need
for a reorientation in current research towards that; recognising the position of the researcher within the qualitative approach (Kirkman 1997, Naples 1997, Rudmin 2003, 2008, 2010). The shifting nature of the inner/outsider perspective enables the researcher to examine gathered data from the internal and the external perspective. For instance, Polish teenagers hardly spoke about their relationships with parents and peers at the beginning. However, when I explained that my own daughters had a ‘tough time’ during their transition period and that they were very upset about their new school environment, particularly because of low English language proficiency and an inability to express themselves; it usually opened an interesting conversation, during which the interviewees presented their own, sometimes similar set of experiences or contrary to my inner knowledge, and to my surprise presented a diverse ‘area of expertise’ (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Being an insider, the person of the same origin who not only speaks the same language but who also happens to be an immigrant mother significantly improved the appreciation and acknowledgement of descriptive portraits of ‘respondents’ world’ (ibid). One can argue that the inner perspective is more subjective because it includes the researcher’s own experiences, and her projection of acculturation derived from her own daily experience with her two acculturating daughters. However, this dual comparative framework incorporating the inner/outsider perspective provides invaluable insights into the teenagers’ world allowing for ‘deeper recognition of the power dynamics that infuse ethnographic encounters’ (Naples 1997: 8).

Conversational Partnership

Homan (1991) underlines that ‘ethics is the science of morality: those who engage in it determine values for the regulation of human behaviour’ (Homan 1991:1). Every researcher has his/her own responsibility to ensure no-harm is done while conducting research. My own experience – derived from the observable behaviour displayed in day-to-day interactions with my two children – forced me to search for the best approach while interviewing underage respondents. Knowing that the chosen research topic will be investigated thoroughly over the period of three years, focusing on adjustment of young Polish individuals in almost all spheres of their new life in Ireland, the approach of treating potential respondents as conversational partners (Rubin and Rubin 2009) with their own rights was chosen without hesitation. Whenever the interviews took place on school premises, the researcher was fully aware of the clause in loco parentis and extra precaution was taken to ensure that the place and time of the interviews were suitable for young informants. The aim of the research was explained clearly and unambiguously. Any questions from the underage informants were answered before proceeding with the interview. One of the key success indicators was the employment of the golden rule outlined by Rubin and Rubin (2005:79) that ‘...the researcher is obligated to behave in a courteous and ethical way giving underage participants ‘time’ and ‘space’ to speak.’ Some of the topics discussed during the interviews had a notion of distress, especially bullying and marginalisation were perceived as very personal encounters; therefore applicability of the non-confrontational style was of utmost importance. Moreover, the openness about my daughters’ encounters and empathy ‘paid off’ – resulting in rich narratives – enabling the interviewees to receive ‘the time, thoughtfulness and openness’, building mutual trust, ‘making the interview rewarding, leaving the interviewees better off’ (Rubin and Rubin 2005:34).

The study found that almost every young respondent felt ‘injured’ physically or psychologically, and that the transition period proved to be nerve-racking with the constellation of changes at the intersection of language and socio-cultural contexts. Many Polish interviewees experienced ‘ambiguous loss’ (Boss 1999), ‘negative social mirroring’ (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez Orozco 2001) and re-acculturation setback. Currently a large percentage of my respondents encounter parental job losses and a worsening of standards of living due to the dramatic change in the Irish economic climate. This social disarray recognised by immigrants has posed substantial challenges.

Studying children is a social activity, founded on a relationship between researcher and researched, predominantly when we acknowledge that children are valid sources of data. However it should not be forgotten that there is no universal child and that the concept of the child is one that must be defined [...] in its own context (Mongomery 2009). Hence, it is of utmost importance to take account of the child’s agency not only in the composition of the research study but also during the direct approach to interviewing.

Concluding thoughts

The concept of a child’s vulnerability with which I began this article exemplifies the ethical dilemmas present in contemporary social research. The interview takes only a small amount of time but it may have profound consequences on the underage respondent when the researcher has left the field of study. Hence, we – the researchers – should be concerned about our participants’ well-being – about the ethos of focusing on healthy relationship while identifying issues of importance to children (Barron et al 2008). Taking these ethical considerations into account, it is desirable to ensure that an imbalance of the power during interviews is minimised. Do not treat interviewing children as ipso facto an ethical piece of research work but be fully aware that an ethical quandary may arise at any stage of the research process. In terms of methodology, a child’s standpoint should be considered not only via the approach and point from which youngsters are studied but also via ethical aspects which involve respecting children’s competences and fulfilment of all
our responsibilities as adults to children (Alderson and Morrow 2004). In summary, I hope that the article in which I highlighted the inappropriateness of using legal tools—namely the informed consent form approved and signed by the child’s guardian to ‘engage’ underage participants in social research—will help scholars of children’s studies better understand challenges and dilemmas derived from my experiences. Arguably, ethical conduct especially within qualitative inquiry is a set of practices that might be interpreted differently by individual academics, but from my personal point of view, if we are interested in hearing children’s voices—our job is not to exploit them but to empower them, to make them part of our research and to let them benefit from it. Subsequently their and our participatory experience will serve underage individuals and social advancement because this is an appropriate avenue through which children’s encounters should be explored.

References
Cliché or Reality? Challenging stereotypes and standard responses amongst young people in Northern Ireland

Nick McCaffery*

Abstract: This article explores the ways that young people in Northern Ireland can often resort to using clichéd responses in an interview context. Drawing upon fieldwork conducted 'at home', I discuss how interviewees not only used stereotypes to define and describe the 2 main ethno-political groups in Northern Ireland; but also how some respondents drew upon a rhetoric of peace and reconciliation that seemed to appear as acquiescence to the interviewer. Analysis of these standard responses raises ethical questions regarding the validity and authenticity of interviewee responses. How is the anthropologist to manage these 'professional conversations', when they suspect that they are being lied to at worst, 'fobbed off' at best? Or should we consider the ethnographic interview to be a rare context in which young people are given the opportunity to explore these stereotypes and clichés?

Keywords: Northern Ireland; young people; conflict; authenticity; acquiescence; rhetorics.

Introduction

In October 2009 the Belfast based Institute for Conflict Research (ICR) was commissioned by the Community Relations Council of Northern Ireland (CRC) to undertake research into the ways in which young people in Northern Ireland learn about the past and to explore what they knew of both recent and earlier historical events. The research project, entitled 'The Impact of Division and Conflict in the Past on Young People', which ran between November 2009 and April 2010, involved surveying the views of 958 young people who were accessed through a range of schools, colleges, universities and youth organisations, and focus group discussions with 238 young people in twelve locations across Northern Ireland.

The research investigated how young people learned about the past, and where their understandings of history came from. From the outset it became clear that there was a common distinction between two interpretations of the word 'history'. First there was 'history' as an academic subject that dealt with a range of Northern Ireland's events, people and places, and which seemed to be more abstract, detached and generally less pertinent to contemporary lives (e.g. the Flight of the Earls, or Plantation era, the United Irishmen 1798 rebellion). Secondly, there was an idea of 'history' that could be seen as directly relevant to contemporary individuals, this was the past in which the 'other' committed acts of violence against one's own community. This is the sort of history that, at least for some young people, continues to resonate and has a direct connection to contemporary life. This supports much existing evidence that certain connections between history and identity can be seen to be articulated in contemporary lives (e.g. Buckley and Kenney 1995, Liu and Hilton 2005, Jarman 1998). As the CRC report states:

In some senses it is perhaps more difficult to 'escape' history in Northern Ireland than in other parts of Ireland and the rest of the UK (Jarman 1998). Historical and cultural representations of varying competing narratives in the form of political symbols, flags, commemorative and cultural events are a common feature of the physical and social geography of many of Northern Ireland's, cities, towns and villages.

(Bell et al. 2010: 13)

For some, the Troubles have not finished and on-going segregation and sectarianism were visible examples of the legacy of the past for some – a few young people who lived in particular locations and in particular communities.

However, in many of the interviews and focus groups conducted, this researcher was acutely aware of the tendency for so many young people to resort to the use of cliché and stereotype. This stereotyping was manifest in two distinct ways – both negative and positive. Either there was reference made to 'the other side' in negative terms, or there was a tendency for respondents to over emphasise the positive (and idealised) aspects of peace and reconciliation in Northern Irish society. At first glance this researcher was left with the impression that these were not authentic responses; that they were merely examples of acquiescence, deference to the interviewer, or possibly a distinct lack of connection to the research topic.

But these apparently inauthentic responses were not so easy to dismiss, as they recurrent so often. My own assumptions about authenticity needed to be challenged, and indeed – who was I to authenticate this interview data in this context anyway? Just because I assumed that some responses to questions about history in Northern Ireland were 'inauthentic', I had to assume that there was something 'out there' that did reflect an authentic Northern Irish identity – the scope of which is clearly outside the boundaries of this particular article!

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My experience of interviewing small groups of participants for this research seemed to support the idea that young people especially experience themselves intersubjectively in the presence of other selves – even in an interview context. In some cases this intersubjectivity related to peers from their own ethno-political background, in other cases it reflected their position vis-à-vis ‘the other’. In general though, the use of rhetoric and cliché used in this process of experiencing themselves is worth unpicking a little.

This article therefore investigates some of the responses gathered throughout the research process and frames them in reference to the thesis of an ‘interview society’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2002.). I argue that a familiarity with the idea of being interviewed has resulted in respondents using the interview as a context in which to develop ideas about identity and history. Rather than assume cases of acquiescence, deference, or even a tendency to exaggerate responses in order to shock the interviewer, this article considers that the responses support the idea of the interview as a place to construct ideas of reality, as well as to reflect upon these ideas. Indeed, the ethnographic interview may be one of the few contexts available where these kinds of issues can be explored. These young people may have been using stereotypes and clichés that appeared to be inauthentic, and oftentimes offensive, but they were not necessarily stating them as fact; they may have been merely saying them out loud to see how they sounded. Consider the following statement:

Like, over here, like, if a Protestant got a Catholic they wouldn’t even think that it’s another human, they would just beat them to death so they would.

This was a statement recorded in an interview with a group of 5 teenage males from an urban Catholic area in Northern Ireland. There was general consensus among them that this was an accurate representation of local attitudes. Clearly though this is not the ‘Truth’. If it were an accurate reflection of contemporary Northern Irish society, then there would be simply no time for any of the population to be doing anything other than beating on people, or getting beaten by people. The ‘truth’ is that this is not true, this is hyperbole. So why is this kind of rhetoric present in the minds and mouths of young people in Northern Ireland today? Why is this generation continuing to resort to this kind of stereotyping about ‘the other’?

Although this is clearly an extreme attitude to adopt, our research seems to suggest that there is still a need for many young people in Northern Ireland to identify with, and through, the violence present in some sections of society; for some young people interviewed the Troubles are not over. After conducting an interview with a mixed group of participants from both communities, the facilitator approached me to say that she thought it was a shame that another member was too young to be involved in the research process (aged only 11), as he ‘had some stories that would make your eyes water’. The implication I assumed from this statement was that I was merely looking for colourful accounts of individual engagements with violence and conflict, rather than investigating the ways in which the past had any impact on young people’s lives today. If I had only included the accounts of this younger participant, then our research would have been much more interesting to read!

It is a possibility that some interviewees made assumptions about my own background throughout this research, due to my strong southern English accent, and therefore responded more colourfully than they would have to an interviewer with a northern Irish accent. To some extent this may have been the case. However, I was not the only researcher in the team to notice the way that young people tended to resort so easily to stereotyping and cliché. Our research uncovered that derogatory statements about the actions and attitudes of the ‘other side’ were common. Examples of this ranged from simple name-calling and teasing, to attacks on the validity and authenticity of alternative opinions regarding historical events. In a focus group conducted by my colleague with a mixed group of college students who had already completed our questionnaire, one participant seemed to dominate the discussion by presenting his own personal account of Northern Irish history. This made several other participants quite uncomfortable. Here were the facts as he saw them; this was not just his interpretation of the past, but it was his authentic account of the past. The interview began quite gently by his questioning the authority of history teachers whose only real experience of history was from books, in contrast to the interviewee’s own experience of living in a community that felt a direct connection to the past. However, as the focus group progressed this participant began making more forceful comments regarding the high number of Protestant deaths over Catholic deaths at the Battle of the Boyne, and later questioning the ‘truth’ of media coverage of Bloody Sunday. It made for a very difficult discussion as the majority of the group then chose to remain quiet throughout the interview. Subsequently, we had to rely largely upon the individual questionnaire results in order to gain any meaningful data from this particular event; other than the assertion that history still seems to rely on narratives and analysis from either one side or another.

But whilst the research team was faced with a large amount of negative stereotyping, or one-sided accounts of history, there were also a few cases where overtly positive ideals were encountered in interview contexts. In these cases, I was often struck by my own sense of pessimism and distrust, as I initially tended to dismiss this kind of rhetoric as equally inauthentic as the negative stereotyping. The following is an extract from a conversation that arose between participants in a mixed youth group:
considered better equipped to deal with my questions.

When I conducted my doctoral fieldwork, I was often directed to local ‘cultural specialists’ who were amongst the Hopi Indians of Arizona, I was often expected. When I conducted my doctoral fieldwork, certainty in our interviewees’ answers are only to be interviewing ‘ordinary individuals’, then the lack of recent years from selecting ‘specialist informants’ to ethnographic interviewing has shifted focus in our research.

processes amongst young people became the focus of with group identities. Exploring these individual ways that may either support or challenge affiliation relate to these collective processes to varying degrees in processes of creating and sustaining identity (see also Andrews 2009, Jarman et al 2009, Nic Craith 2002). However, the collective identity (see also Andrews 2009, Jarman et al 2009, Nic Craith 2002). However, the elements in the process of creating and sustaining a contemporary political or ideological stances is common in Northern Ireland; and that the remembrance and were encouraged by ICR’s stance to include more young people in this research, rather than rely solely on the ‘specialist informants’ such as youth leaders, teachers, and those involved in developing curricula in Northern Ireland. However, by working with these ‘ordinary’ (i.e. non-professional) individuals, and especially so when working with younger elements of society, we are faced with a situation where many of our interviewee’s responses might need to be analysed beyond their face value.

Because the respondent’s subjectivity and related experience are continually being assembled and modified, the ‘truth’ value of interview responses cannot be judged simply in terms of whether those responses match what lies in an ostensibly objective vessel of answers. Rather, the value of interview data lays both in the meanings and how the meanings are constructed. (Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 16)

As such, when the interviewer is faced with constant reference to any member of the ‘other side’ as a potential murderer (see above), we clearly cannot take that as face value, but need to account for the context in which this kind of cliché exists. Similarly, when we are faced with a focus group that has been intentionally constructed to include a fair quota of ‘either side’, including one participant who identifies as “half and half”, we need to explore the wider context before we can truly place any value on the raw data collected. It is perhaps worth looking at this particular group interview experience in a little more detail.

There was something about the way that this focus group was managed that set me on edge, and I felt slightly uncomfortable from the start. The context was a youth group in a centre occupied by a charitable organisation supporting victims of violence and their families. The five participants had been selected for me by the facilitator prior to my arrival, and the young people had clearly been chosen to represent an equal balance from ‘both sides’. The young participants seemed to be relaxed and comfortable in this setting, and were happy to take time out from socialising with their friends in order to help the author in this research. As with all our interviews, I began by introducing the subject matter, and explaining that this was not a test to see how much they knew about history, but merely an opportunity for them to tell me what they knew, where they got this information from, and whether they thought it was important to talk about the past, even when that history was contested, or controversial. In short, I made the environment as relaxed and informal as possible. This scene-setting reflects Eder and Fingerson’s advice to create a comfortable environment when interviewing young people, and

My immediate reaction to this conversation was pessimistic. I believed that these comments were not in fact an accurate representation of the way in which these young people lived their lives, but it was an optimistic ideal that this is the way life should be. This was not how life was, but how they thought they were supposed to want life to be. This appeared to be the morally positive response that was expected of them by the social researcher, and I took it to be a clear cut example of acquiescence. Of course we should respect each other’s ‘ethnic things’ that’s how you become a good person, but in reality, do you do this in practice? I assumed, perhaps a little unfairly, that this response seemed a little too clinical and positive to be truly indicative of the mind of a teenager. And although I was unconvinced of the authenticity of this morally positive reaction for some time, I was not in a practical position to clarify this response.

This research supported earlier work that shows how the use of history to support or oppose contemporary political or ideological stances is common in Northern Ireland; and that the remembrance and commemoration of historical events are important elements in the process of creating and sustaining a collective identity (see also Andrews et al 2009, Jarman 1987, Leonard 2006, Nic Craith 2002). However, the individual processes of creating and sustaining identity relate to these collective processes to varying degrees in ways that may either support or challenge affiliation with group identities. Exploring these individual processes amongst young people became the focus of our research.

If, as Gubrium and Holstein (2002: 5) argue, ethnographic interviewing has shifted focus in recent years from selecting ‘specialist informants’ to interviewing ‘ordinary individuals’, then the lack of certainty in our interviewees’ answers are only to be expected. When I conducted my doctoral fieldwork amongst the Hopi Indians of Arizona, I was often directed to local ‘cultural specialists’ who were considered better equipped to deal with my questions. This was largely counter-active as I had hoped to gather as much evidence from as many ‘ordinary individuals’ as I could. I considered the responses of local specialists to be somehow too pre-formulated, too clinical (see McCaffery 2012). This was on my mind when I became involved in the ICR research, and I was encouraged by ICR’s stance to include more young people in this research, rather than rely solely on the ‘specialist informants’ such as youth leaders, teachers, and those involved in developing curricula in Northern Ireland. However, by working with these ‘ordinary’ (i.e. non-professional) individuals, and especially so when working with younger elements of society, we are faced with a situation where many of our interviewee’s responses might need to be analysed beyond their face value.

And ‘Female 1’ later on

I think both sides just, they need to let go of what happened and just take it, just take it that it did happen and there’s nothing we can do about it. Leave it up to Parliament.

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Female 1 ‘you should respect other people’s … things’

Female 2 ‘ethical … things’

Female 1 ‘exactly’

Male 1 ‘didn’t respect us when they took over our country’

Female 1 ‘well that’s a history thing, that’s in the past now, we can build on that’

And ‘Female 1’ later on

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to avoid the association with classroom tests that leads to the provision of answers that are expected of them, rather than 'stating what they actually think or feel' (2002: 184).

The interview began pretty much as usual with a certain amount of silence as every young person in the room began staring their memory to remember what was the last thing they learned in history at school. Once this initial discomfort was over, a slightly stilted conversation ensued about the ways that their own communities celebrated or remembered the past; such as parading or painting murals, lighting bonfires etc. This was followed by a more intensive series of statements about the participants' personal experiences of violence. It was the case with which this kind of 'opening up' to a stranger about clearly troubling personal experiences that concerned me. I was searching for individual connections to metanarratives of historical symbolism, but instead I was being given personal accounts of seemingly mindless violence. Although the interviewees were happy to talk about these topics, I had initially failed to connect this to the topic at hand. And I was more than a little concerned that this focus group had become more of a counselling session and less of an ethnographic interview. Was the case with which these young people shared such intimacies connected to their familiarity with the process of being interviewed about this topic? Were these young people all too aware of what they thought was expected of them; and were therefore merely providing the researcher with the standard accounts of personal experiences of violence? Had they become so accustomed to talking about the past, that the whole group turned on 'interview mode' and began relating to me what they had apparently already discussed in previous interviews with other facilitators and/or researchers?

These varying responses from our interviewees leaves us with a puzzling mixture of extremely personal accounts of violence and conflict being witnessed or perpetrated upon young people, collections of negative stereotypes and insults about the other side, and a handful of responses that seemed to over-emphasise the ideals of a peaceful and tolerant contemporary society. The hard part of the job for the research team in general was to collate these responses into a report that connected them to an idea of learning about the past. For me personally, the hard part was assigning any of these responses to any connected to an idea of learning about the past. For me personally, the hard part was assigning any of these responses to any

context? Was the interview with several Hopi men what they thought it meant to be a good Hopi; what were the ideals of a Hopi person? The responses were almost always the same – 'I don't know, I haven't finished living my life yet'. How could they possibly know what it meant to live life until they had gotten to the end of it? Of course, there were a few personality traits that were encouraged at Hopi – humility, generosity, reciprocity, etc. – but generally speaking Hopis tended to be fairly tight-lipped when it came to defining in sum the ideal Hopi person. And the tendency for humility often resulted in several Hopis telling me that they could never define themselves as a good Hopi, it was up to them to act correctly so that other Hopis could describe them as a good person. For Hopis the ethnographic interview was not the best place to reflect upon these issues, as there were other more appropriate local contexts for this kind of self-identification. In direct contrast, whilst the interviews with young people in Northern Ireland were designed to garner information regarding history and the past, what seemed to be occurring was an insight into a process of self-identification, and identity construction. These responses were not simply indicative of their relationship to history; they were connected to larger ideas being formulated about who they were and how they fitted into society.

For example, when we were faced with rather negative and stereotypical definitions of the other side, these were often framed in relation to a positive image of the respondent's own community; we are not like you because you are not the same as us. An illustration of this was when the topic of films and dramatizations of historical events or persons was being discussed it would not be uncommon for some films to be branded as 'propaganda' for one side or another; rather than as valid accounts of a particular historical topic. More broadly, some of the interview data suggested that the two main ethno-political communities in Northern Ireland were seen to validate certain histories that they associated with, and either ignore or denigrate other histories; the most obvious examples being the Protestant/Loyalist association with the 12th of July, and the Catholic/Nationalist connections to the Easter Rising of 1916. The way that interviewees would dismiss the history associated with the other side suggests that they considered it as less valid, and reflects Connerton's theory that different societies (as well as generations) develop their own interpretations of the past through their own commemorations of the past (Connerton 1989, cf. Coser 1992).

On a practical level, this led to concerns about the make-up of focus group interviews. We noticed that mixed groups either tended to become dominated by one or two individuals who were keen to talk, or that the whole group felt uncomfortable about discussing 'their history' in front of people from outside 'their community'. However, single identity focus groups often produced a more comfortable environment for young people to elaborate upon aspects of their past.

But when the levels of knowledge about these events were often low – even the events associated with
in-group identification – it became difficult to believe that history was such a constitutive feature of identity. How can one lay claim to an identity rooted in historical meaning, when one doesn’t have even a basic grasp of the events associated with that history? We gathered a good deal of data that suggested that young people’s understanding of the past was often sketchy at best, and in many cases rather poor. Madeleine Leonard (2006) has explored similar phenomena regarding the authenticity of teenager’s accounts, and I am heartened by her approach; ‘I am less interested in the authenticity of these stories than on the social processes involved in the telling of these stories’ (Leonard 2006: 1119). The data collected here was not to be tested for accuracy by us as researchers, but served to illustrate how young people themselves incorporated their own ideas of the past into their own lives, how they were drawing upon aspects of the past to construct their own social realities, and where they were getting this data from?

Conclusion

Whilst interviewing a range of young people in Northern Ireland I was struck by the seemingly inauthentic responses that were collected. Amongst some young people the use of negative stereotypes about members of communities other than the interviewee’s own seemed to be representative of a lack of connection to the research topic. These seemed to be clichéd answers that did not reflect reality, but were instead the kind of standard response that was expected of them by their peers/community. Similarly, the use of rhetoric that stressed the morally positive aspects of a more peaceful Northern Ireland was initially dismissed by this researcher as acquiescence, and therefore inauthentic. In general, the lack of understanding about history also led this researcher to question the validity of the responses gathered – for if history is a constitutive element of identity, then surely there must be at least some accurate knowledge of this history?

However, the quest for authenticity in these responses has perhaps led this researcher down the wrong path. It was never our intention to test the levels of knowledge of the past amongst young people, but it is notable that an idea of the past still resonates amongst young people in relation to their identification with a particular community. To paraphrase one interviewee, young people know that 1916 and 1690 are important dates, but they don’t necessarily know why or what happened on those dates. What we needed to do as researchers was analyse why these young people still identify with something they admit to know little about, and why they know so little about a subject that should be better understood.

With regards to the use of negative stereotyping, the issue is a matter of in-group identification through denigrating members of other groups. Although perhaps a little uncomfortable to witness, it is not an uncommon feature of many communities (Barth 1969). Yes, there may have been cases where young people took the opportunity to slag off the ‘other side’ in a formal interview context, and yes there may also have been cases where this stereotyping was a way of avoiding the interview questions. But, the important factor here was not to be sidestepped by the ways in which these stereotypes were presented, but to account for the reasons that they are continuing to find salience amongst this generation.

Finally we come to the apparent case of deference or acquiescence. How does the interviewer deal with the feeling of being fed a lie? There was no tangible reason for this researcher to assume that this morally positive idealisation was not true, but the feeling was overwhelming. The interviewees seemed to be giving the interviewer responses that would make them appear to be ‘good’ people. Was it just my own pessimism that made this a problem? Yes, the responses may have been a little too idealised but is it fair to assume that all responses to an interviewer’s questions have to be entirely factually correct? It is equally possible that these responses, once stated out loud in a formal interview context, could lead to a change of behaviour and/or outlook amongst the interviewees, a social construction of their own identities. What if they are using these instances of being interviewed to develop their individual ideals?

On further analysis then, the researcher is considering the possibility that these types of response in interviews are more constitutive of identity than we had previously imagined. What if these responses were not exactly precise or immediately ‘authentic’, but were in fact ‘uncooked thoughts’, being processed by being spoken out loud in the company of others? And what if these interviews were not forums for presenting pre-formulated concepts of identity; but were in fact creative spaces wherein the interviewees could elaborate upon, or continue to define their responses to the subject matter? The lesson learned by this interviewer is that we should never immediately dismiss uncomfortable responses in an interview; be they cliché, stereotype, acquiescence, deference, or even outright lie. All interview data has value, it is just a matter of finding the right place to put it. Indeed, the ethnographic interview may be one of the only contexts where these kinds of issues can be explored. These young people may have been using stereotypes and clichés that appeared to be inauthentic, and oftentimes offensive, but they were not necessarily stating them as fact; they may have been merely saying them out loud to see how they sounded.

References


2 The three ICR researchers were myself, Ulf Hansson, and John Bell working with ICR director, Neil Jarman.

3 The five participants defined themselves as split between 2 Catholics, 2 Protestants and 1 'half and half'.

4 The position of any researcher to their interviewees is often difficult to assess, and I cannot state with certainty that any participants acted on their assumptions about my own cultural/social/religious background and/or familiarity with Northern Irish society. It was certainly never made explicit in any interview context.

5 As a university teacher, this is a phenomenon that I have also experienced; where students claim no need to read academic perspectives of Irish culture and society as they are actually living in Irish culture and society!

6 Of course, these specialists were also consulted; it is just that they were not relied upon solely.

7 In this case, a single-identity estate that had a considerably violent reputation.
‘People like us can’t say that’: Using peer interviews to collect data on a sensitive topic

Martina Byrne*

Abstract: Research textbooks tend to assume implicitly that the interviewee is not the interviewer’s peer but a member of different groups and a social inferior. Experience of interviewing peers highlights how the peer interview relationship is different to more usual, conversational and research circumstances. Following Holstein and Gubrium, who urge researchers to be reflexive about how their interviews are accomplished, this paper focuses on the how of interviewing my professional social class peers on a sensitive topic: our attitudes towards immigration and immigrants. The paper reflects my experiences of fieldwork carried out in Dublin in 2008 and 2009, problematising particular issues involved with peer research.

Keyword: Peer research; interviewing; immigration; professional class; attitudes; reflexivity; sensitive topics.

Introduction and context of the study

From the early 1990s through to the late 2000s, due largely but not entirely to employment opportunities accompanying exceptional economic growth rates, the Republic of Ireland experienced major and rapid changes in migration flows. In 1996 the country reached its migration ‘turning point’ and became the last European Union member state to become a country of net immigration (Ruhs, 2005). A decade later, in 2006, 10 per cent of the population was foreign-born (CSO, 2006).

My research, the first in-depth exploration of the contemporary attitudes of the Irish professional social class towards immigration and immigrants, took place within the context of these rapid socio-economic changes. The research method chosen was grounded theory (GT), which is conceived as a way of generating theory through, or grounded in, research data rather than testing ideas or hypotheses formulated in advance. The emphasis then is on what is meaningful to the researched rather than the researcher.

In a former life, I had been a corporate communications consultant, and it was in the nature of my work that I would have contact with a wide range of professionals in both the public and private sector. Access to suitable interviewees is generally regarded as a key advantage of undertaking peer research and so it proved. The resulting sample was gender balanced and included health, finance, engineering, IT, arts, communications, and business professionals. The age range was mid-30s to late 50s. All were educated within the Irish education system to third level and almost half to fourth level. Over thirty hours of transcripts were generated from eight individuals interviewed twice, both before and during the current recession, with a further twelve individuals interviewed during the recession. Following grounded theory principles, sampling for this study was aimed at, or towards, theory construction rather than being representative of the population of this social class (Charmaz 2006).

Qualitative methods of data collection are recommended for attitudinal studies (Mueller 1986, Schwartz and Jacobs 1979, Strauss and Corbin 2008). Furthermore, with sensitive topics such as race, ethnicity and class there is a tendency for interviewees to avoid the issue (Jackman, et al, 1984, 1993) so my methods needed to be designed in such a way as to encourage open and honest responses, and capture avoidance. Van Dijk’s work on discourse and racism, including elite discourse and racism, demonstrates that, even with sensitive subjects, informal in-depth interviews yield rich data for qualitative analysis (Van Dijk 1987, 1993).

With the interviewees’ agreement, I digitally recorded the interviews. This allowed verbal and non-verbal communication such as self-correction, hesitation and laughter to be included in the transcripts (Mueller 1986). Where careful self-presentation is required, for example not wishing to use ‘politically incorrect’ terms, spontaneous talk can run into production problems such as hesitations, corrections, and pauses (Van Dijk 1987) as this extract demonstrates:

‘...if you go down to the more rural towns and villages you wouldn’t see the mix of race and colour... it would be more...ethnic I suppose... oh no, that’s the same thing, what am I trying to say... [ ] you see black and white, and coloured as they call them in South Africa, as well... em...I don’t know what the politically correct term here is...

Following Fontana and Frey (2005), paralinguistic communication, including variations in volume such as whispering, were noted in the transcripts. Kinesic communications such as facial or bodily gestures which could not be captured on the recording were noted in contemporaneous field notes. These notes were also used to assist in the reflexive process in that I recorded my own experiences, ambivalences, and feelings after the interviews. Since, as interviewer, I saw myself as participating in the interview, I coded my questions, interjections, and non-verbal communication.

That I was of the same generation and social class and shared similar life experiences to the majority of

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interviewees (e.g. mono-cultural schooling, university and early career) equipped me with knowledge of my peers’ social class norms and discourse nuances which proved useful when coding transcripts (O’Neill et al. 2007). For example, my interviewees and I understood implicitly that the social class norm for ‘people like us’ was to express tolerant views on immigration. In terms of discourse nuances they knew, for example, that I would know what they meant when they referred to Polish immigrants as ‘yellow packs’. ‘Yellow packs’ was a colloquial derogatory term for low-skilled, low-paid employees in the early 1990s. The term first came into use in the 1980s when a supermarket chain used yellow packaging for their own-brand foodstuffs.

‘More than a stranger, less than a friend’: the dilemmas of peer interviewing
Platt defines peers as those who are one’s social equals, share the same background knowledge and sub-cultural understandings and are members of the same groups or communities (1981: 76). This highlights an issue rarely made explicit in methods literature: that in peer research a prior relationship of some kind exists and could normally be expected to exist after the research concludes. As the interviewer of my peers, I was not anonymous to my interviewees nor could I ‘leave the field’ when I got the data. This influenced decisions with regard to accessing interviewees, my behaviour as an interviewer, creating and meeting expectations of trust, and the setting of the interviews. Moreover, undertaking peer research positioned me, as suggested by Schwartz and Jacobs (1979), as ‘more than a stranger, less than a friend’ and reduced the amount of generic information offered, thus moving the interviews towards the personal for both parties. In the following four sections I look at the affect this had on the ‘how’ of my research.

My professional network: access and sampling
In addition to providing access to individuals from the target group, my prior relationship with my professional peers allowed, and in some cases necessitated, the proactive exclusion of some individuals. A straightforward reason for excluding some people was that I wanted to research a diverse range of individuals even felt their skills were being scrutinised. Finally, I avoided family members and social class peers amongst my closest friends because I did not want to risk issues arising in our personal relationship due to my turning them into subjects of a study of benefit to me. These ‘exclusion zones’, as I call them, caused an unexpected issue in that some of those excluded ‘dropped hints’ and even directly offered themselves for interview when they knew I was in the field. Taylor (2011), who writes informatively on researching amongst family and friends, also sensed resentment from some individuals who felt those who were interviewed were somehow either favoured or regarded by her as more authoritative.

That I had, and could expect in the future to have, some level of social relationship or contact with my interviewees, also influenced how initial contact was made. I chose to communicate my request for an interview by informal email. This mediated communication had the advantage of allowing clear communication of my research interests and minimised the likelihood of any discomfort or embarrassment if an individual chose to decline. I felt a phone call or a face-to-face request could have made rejection more difficult for both parties. I also wanted to be in a position to capture, in writing, how people phrased their non-participation. In the event, no one declined.

‘People like us’: Objectivity and subjectivity in the interview process
Another issue in peer research is that given our shared belonging to a peer group and the likelihood of contact post-research, I wanted to avoid the interview being an unpleasant experience. I was also keen not to appear incompetent in my new role of academic researcher, not least because this would be damaging for my reputation within the peer group. This was important to me because I had spent twenty years establishing my reputation in my former profession and it was an important part of my identity, perhaps even more so because at that time I was still trying to find my way in a very new world – that of the academic researcher. With one exception, all my interviewees were educated to university higher education level, and almost half to a postgraduate level. As such, they are well informed about the academic research process. One day, as I was setting up the digital recorder, an interviewee casually asked if I was using grounded theory (GT). My immediate reaction was concern that she would question me on GT and, if my knowledge was lacking by comparison, I would be ‘found out’ for what I was – an early stage PhD candidate ‘role playing’ as a competent sociological researcher rather than the communications consultant as she formerly knew me.

I also realised that while interviewing guidelines in the literature privileging an interviewer’s detachment and neutrality may work when interviewing strangers or those one expects never to meet again, such guidelines are largely impractical if there exists a prior relationship and the likelihood of interaction in the future. Reflecting on the first interviews I carried out, I realise I had difficulty presenting myself as a so-called ‘objective’ sociologist (Pidgeon, et al. 2004, Stanley, et al. 1993). My interviewees may also have noticed
some dissonance. For many, it was the first time we had met since I had left the corporate world for academia and they were expecting someone they knew to be outgoing, opinionated, and politically aware. Now, as a researcher, I was asking questions on our peer group’s attitudes to aspects of contemporary Irish life and, although following Van Dijk (1987) and endeavouring to keep the interviews as close as possible to informal conversations, I was neither commenting nor sharing opinions as I performed (in my own mind) the role of the ‘neutral and objective’ researcher. In time I became concerned that some interviewees could misinterpret this performance as my positioning myself as an academic who inhabited some ‘higher moral plane’. Alternatively, they might conclude that my identity had changed irrevocably i.e. that I had ‘gone left wing’ – a popular perception of academics and one people had joked about with me.

This was when I realised that, as a member of the peer group, I was indeed ‘more than a stranger, less than a friend’ (Schwartz et al. 1979: 66) and that this reduced the amount of generic information offered and moved the interviews towards the personal – for both the interviewee and me. Like Platt (1981), I began consciously to emphasise my group membership by telling stories and sharing experiences that revealed something of me, my attitudes, and even my ambivalences, on immigration. Indeed, when I was transcribing and coding my own contributions I was sometimes embarrassed at how much of the attitudes of my relations and myself I had revealed. However, as Oakley (1981) says of interviewing: there is no intimacy without reciprocity. Feminist sociologists such as Oakley (1981), Stanley (1996) and Stanley et al. (1993) argue that interviewing should allow interviewers to show their human side, answer questions and express feelings and that the ‘personhood of the researcher cannot be left out of the research process’ (Stanley et al. 1993: 161). As this approach helps to reduce any real or imagined hierarchical differences, Reinharz (1992) argues that methodologically it encourages a greater spectrum of responses and insights into the lives of respondents. However Fontana et al. (2005) point out that this openness must also be recognised as a technique, even a ruse, to obtain better and more comprehensive responses without sharing ones own opinions and evading direct questions. What seems, she says, more like a conversation is still really a ‘one-way pseudo-conversation’ (Fontana et al. 2005: 711).

If we proceed from the belief that neutrality is not possible (even assuming that it would be desirable) then taking a stance becomes unavoidable. An increasing number of social scientists have realised that they need to interact as persons with the interviewees.

(Fontana et al. 2005: 696)

As the fieldwork continued, the transcripts revealed increased use by interviewees of inclusive phrases such as: ‘people like us...’ and ‘you know we can’t...’. At first, I shied away from this lack of neutrality but I now make a point to use the inclusive ‘we’ (e.g. ‘we say this/that’) when presenting my findings and I try to avoid the pronoun ‘they’ as is usual in these situations.

I have also found, similar to Platt (1981), that a level of intimacy allowed more probing or challenging than might be accepted or expected in a less intimate or more unbalanced relationship. It should be remembered that my peer group are familiar with the norms of our so-called ‘interview society’ (Atkinson et al.: 1997). The interview is ubiquitous in our everyday lives from news programmes to speed dating and courts of law. From their own experiences of college research projects, through the recruitment process and throughout their professional lives, people in this social class are familiar with the performativity of interviewer/interviewee roles. In addition, like Kvale’s elite interviewees, mature professionals such as I interviewed tend to have secure status so it is both possible and acceptable to challenge their statements and this often leads to new insights (Kvale et al. 2009: 147).

The following extract from a transcript demonstrates how well informed some of my interviewees were as to the academic research process and how there existed concerns for them, not alone about individual anonymity, but also about how research outputs can be interpreted and misinterpreted by others.

Em...the only thing I’d have a concern about is how peoples’ opinions would be reflected – not in your work – but how it would be taken and used so that you’d have...somebody might decide...if, for example, you said the professional classes are...more conservative than we thought they might be, then somebody might use that – ‘the professional classes are institutional racists’ – which is not the case at all.

Peer interviewing has, in addition to its advantages, its own set of issues. One of these is encouraging people to speak openly even if/when what they are saying is contrary to social class norms which include tolerance of diversity and difference. A sense of the sensitivity surrounding the subject matter can be gleaned from the following example of a common response when we talked about whether the issue of immigration and immigrants was a topic of informal conversation at work or socially:

No! I don’t. Because I think people are afraid that they’ll come across as sounding racist or neo-Nazi or whatever if they say anything that might be viewed as non-PC. [ ]. D’you know what I mean? You don’t know how people are
Trust: protecting my peers or adhering to research ethics

Given the sensitivity of the topic it was vitally important to ensure interviewees trusted, and were confident in, my commitment to their anonymity. I provided assurances that alphanumeric codes rather than names would be used throughout the research process and a copy of the Sociological Association of Ireland Ethical Procedure Guidelines was offered to each person. In fact, most waved it away without a glance. It may be relevant that my former professions code of ethics included stipulations similar to journalists’ commitments never to reveal sources.

An unexpected finding in relation to building trust with interviewees was that, following a number of incidents where I interrupted to point out that they had just mentioned some identifying information and I would redact it when transcribing, the interviewees reacted very positively and became even more relaxed. On reflection, my motivation was more to do with protecting my peers’ identity than adherence to research ethics. For the peer interviewer, getting the required data is not always or only the abiding concern. Platt (1981) notes that the high level of empathy she felt with her interviewees (based on shared group membership) made guilt more salient than the potential shame if she failed to get the data.

Methods and ethics guidelines advise researchers to give a full account of the rationale and purpose of one’s study. With peers, Platt argues, this must be done in a way that is not intellectually condescending, although she appreciates that it is difficult to do so in a way that does not bias the interview. It can be ‘exceedingly embarrassing evidently to have hypotheses that reflect unfavourably on one’s respondents’ (Platt 1981: 87). As my study is informed by grounded theory (Charmaz 2006, Strauss 1987, Strauss et al. 2008) and the advancement of theory through data rather than by testing hypotheses, I did not have hypotheses to share and I did not explicitly inform my peers that I was interested in problematising the common sense acceptance that our peer group is more tolerant of immigrants than other Irish social classes (MacGreil 1978, 1996, O’Connell, 2005). However, I did explain my interest in the attitudes of our social class to immigration and immigrants.

Interview role-playing: Stage Design and Costume

Finch (1984) suggests that the place of an interview influences the dynamics between interviewer and interviewee and that it is best to interview wherever the interviewee feels most comfortable. I found the setting was also important for me as the interviewer. The ‘stage sets’ I choose for the interviews were places in keeping with the relationship I had had with my interviewees. Some meetings were held in their offices – places I had been many times. We also often met in hotels for coffee. Hotels seemed appropriate as settings because they were both private, in that we would not be interrupted, and yet public, which I think suggested that, both for the interviewee and myself, there was nothing to hide and that we were not about to discuss a sensitive subject. Yet our voices occasionally dropped to a whisper and interviewees glanced over their shoulders to see who was around before they said something that was ‘not-PC’ or broke the social class norm i.e. things ‘people like us can’t say’. I met for lunch those with whom I had a particularly warm or long professional relationship or, more rarely, dinner in restaurants near their place of work. The comfort I felt in those familiar settings was made clear when one interviewee suggested we meet at an exclusive private business club of which they were a member. I had not been there before. On this occasion I was much less relaxed and somewhat intimidated by the ‘set’ and felt that this affected the dynamic of the interview. I noticed that I was less comfortable interrupting or challenging this person’s (stridently positive) view of immigrant integration in Dublin. The ‘stage set’ in this case certainly had a detrimental influence on my role-playing the peer interviewer.

In terms of my ‘costume’, for the interviews I wore the corporate suits and accessories that are in keeping with a professional lifestyle and, therefore, the relationship I had with my interviewees. This ‘corporate’ costume also meant that I looked similar to every other professional in the places where we met and did not attract attention to my interviewee or myself.

Conclusion

I reflect on my experience of peer interviewing in the field as being both pleasurable and a source of anxiety. On the one hand, I enjoyed being in familiar places, doing familiar things, acting and even looking like ‘the old me’ even though I was very much committed to my new life in academia. However, I was also playing two ‘roles’ simultaneously which was a source of anxiety. I was ‘role playing’ the professional person they knew – ‘one of us’ – and I was role playing the academic researcher whose life and experiences, they knew, were now different to what we had shared. This meant that I was also no longer, or only, ‘one of us’.

Does that matter? Would members of this social class talk to a non-peer interviewer? I am sure they would. We all like to be helpful and to be asked...
our opinion. However, whether or not the data would be reliable i.e. whether they would speak openly – particularly those whose attitudes diverge from the perceived social class norm – is questionable. I would speculate that perhaps the non-peer researcher may be treated to the normative social class discourse of tolerance from those Balibar describes as ‘skilled in the wiles of the political language game’ (1991: 223).

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References
Grey Radio: Interviews, agency and advocacy

Katy Radford*

Abstract: The recorded interview is a standard implement in the broadcasting and anthropological toolkit. This article draws on empirical research gathered during the development of a community radio station that relied on older volunteer interviewers. The station was set up specifically to address the needs of older people in a rural area of Northern Ireland both through a service and an activity that would provide information, entertainment and a programme of participation, community development and social inclusion to those over fifty-five. This article considers the processes of participating in the radio interview from two perspectives: that of the interviewer and that of the interviewee. In so doing, it documents how the interview was used by the older, novice broadcasters as a catalyst for change – as agency used to define and assert a radio persona.

Key Words: Older people; ageing; Northern Ireland; community relations; radio; post conflict.

Introduction

It is just coming up to three pm and straight after the newsbreak here on Cuan FM it’ll be our daily Community Slot with me your host Robin Holliday talking today about housing in the area. What are our problems along the Peninsula? Are we good neighbours to each other? Could we be better ones? Do newcomers into the area make a good contribution or are they disrupting a way of life here? What sort of flags and murals make people feel welcome or excluded? Here to discuss these questions and others you may want to phone me about are Jennifer Hawthorne, Director of the Housing Executive’s Community Cohesion Unit, and someone who I believe is Eileen Patterson from the Housing Association Fold who have been looking after older people’s needs since 1976.

This article is an empirical reflection on the process and challenges facing a group of volunteers who wanted to set up a community radio station with an explicit ‘good relations’ component. By looking at how older people engaged in the process of both setting up the station and became broadcast interviewers and interviewees, it posits the suggestion that if we accept a concept of media ‘authority’, participation in on-air interviews is a means by which the disempowered, the marginalised and the isolated can acquire a sense of self legitimacy in the public sphere. Consequently the radio interview is an interface between reception and transmission where agency and advocacy can be claimed by both the interviewer and the interviewee.

Throughout 2010, the author was a participant observer in the development of a pilot community radio station, Cuan FM, that carried out a broadcast period along the Ards Peninsula during the first two weeks in August.¹ The pilot station was developed explicitly to address community division and social isolation along the Peninsula.² It was set up to see what, if any, are the benefits brought to individuals and society post conflict when those who have previously been segregated actively engage with one another and explore diversity and common ground. A specific factor in the radio’s purpose was the intention to bring older volunteer participants together from both sides of the nationalist/unionist (Catholic/Protestant) divide on the Peninsula to explore their individual and community needs and their local history and in so doing promote cross community and inter-generational dialogue and advance tolerance and respect through training, programme planning and collaborative working.

The eight little villages along the Peninsula are all either exclusively, or with a significant majority, either Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist or Catholic/Nationalist/Republican residents. Most have small harbours now principally home to pleasure boats, but with some reminders of how fishing was a central part of all the communities’ existence. Like the residents in the villages, the everyday practices and socialising of those in the more remote rural areas tend to take pace with a focus on the local rather than Peninsula-wide activities, thereby perpetuating in many a tendency to have limited engagement with those from the ‘other’ tradition. This not only compunds the social isolation of older people, particularly those living alone, but it might also be argued has led to an impoverishment in the readiness to communicate across the divide. The bulk of the residents have trans-generational connections with the area with many including ‘blow ins’ who augmented the area over the last decade seeking to retire to existing or new build holiday properties in the townlands’ which best represent their community background and family heritage in farming, agricultural and marine-focussed employment. Consequently, there has been little change in the religio-political demographics of the villages over the last 150 years.

Gauging Interest

An exploration of the aims and process of setting up the station is offered here by way of introduction to how the recruitment and engagement of the interviewers were grounded in community action-based initiatives.

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It considers how the broadcasters' chosen interview techniques epitomised different modes of media authority and in so doing empowered and defined their media personas. Cuan FM was the idea of two retired local men, one previously a teacher, the other a former police officer. Both were struck by the minimal interaction and communication between residents in villages along the peninsula which they felt was feeding into perceptions of and unease about community safety issues which, in turn, they regarded as a factor in the insularity of older people within rural and village life. Introducing a peninsula-wide media activity over the summer months was a way to address these problems, providing villagers with opportunities to build new (and refresh old) skills and participate in a set of community development activities across the Peninsula's population. In due course a group of 'critical' friends were drawn together into a partnership that was to be active in the pre-production and broadcast period and agreed to the development of a station where light entertainment and music programming would be balanced with factual material to educate, promote dialogue between and increase exposure to diverse local traditions, history and culture. Premised on a community development ethos, they began a process of consultation with local residents and a series of public meetings were convened up and down the Peninsula with older people's forums, residents associations, church groups and other community centred organisations. In due course some sixty volunteers were recruited from the eight villages that comprise the Peninsula and the surrounding rural areas that both separate and link them.

Over a six month period, the enthusiasm and commitment of the volunteers ebbed and flowed as they received training in interview techniques, oral history gathering, reminiscence recording, good governance and broadcast training as part of the pre-production process. With the guidance and support of professional broadcasters and the Reminiscence Network, the successful interview became something of a Holy Grail for many participants whose first (and subsequent) attempts evinced a lack of confidence in initiating discussion or prompting interviewees; some were also challenged by the art of listening and hearing – not an uncommon phenomena in interviewing irrespective of age (see for example Rubin and Rubin 2004, Back 2007, Kvale and Brinkman 2009). They compensated for this deficit with a considerable weighting towards reflexivity in their interviews. However, as the learning process developed, and in keeping with Blaxter et al. (2003: 171), the interviewers typically started to become sufficiently confident about the interactional 'rules' of the unstructured interviews that they began to model them on their own conversational norms. In due course, village interviewers were able to enter the production stage of the broadcasting experience with the capacity to elicit, record and edit appropriate information from their interviewees.

Interviews and Community Slots

It was agreed that two types of programming would be welcomed both heavily dependent on different interview techniques. The first were hour long shows entitled 'Community Slots', the second, reminiscence based programmes 'Memory Lane'.

The one hour 'Community Slots' were devised to provide information on matters of basic human necessities on a daily, mid afternoon basis. Each programme had a single theme including health, housing, community safety, welfare, personal finance, arts, leisure and local heritage amongst other areas. And the running order ensured that people were invited who were able to provide different perspectives on these issues including local and regional experts, political representatives, statutory service providers and non-governmental organisations. As interviewees were keen to use the community radio station as a medium through which to disseminate information about their services to older people within their homes there was usually an oversubscription of participants wanting to be interviewed. In general between four and six topics on the day's theme would be considered on each programme and between one and three organisations invited to send representatives to speak on these topics resulting in sometimes up to 15 individuals participating in a one hour programme. Some were local, others regional, and the interviewers were often arranged or rescheduled at the last minute. Consequently, the interviewers may have had limited time to prepare for the day's programme and have restricted or no previous knowledge of the organisation or the personnel representing them.

The programme had two presenters: Robin, a 79 year old widower and former pharmacist and Carol-Ann, a widow in her mid 60s whose days were divided between grandparental caring and responsibilities as a serial volunteer. Both presenters, whilst adept communicators, had no experience of radio interviewing and found themselves often pitted against those who had a remit to present a public-face of their campaign or body and were skilled in the use of sound-bites and staying 'on message'. To balance their lack of proficiency, both presenters drew on different aspects of their involvement through their media personas. Cuan FM was the idea of two retired local men, who eventually felt empowered and defined their media personas. The programme had two presenters: Robin, a 79 year old widower and former pharmacist and Carol-Ann, a widow in her mid 60s whose days were divided between grandparental caring and responsibilities as a serial volunteer. Both presenters, whilst adept communicators, had no experience of radio interviewing and found themselves often pitted against those who had a remit to present a public-face of their campaign or body and were skilled in the use of sound-bites and staying 'on message'. To balance their lack of proficiency, both presenters drew on different aspects of their involvement through their media personas. The programme had two presenters: Robin, a 79 year old widower and former pharmacist and Carol-Ann, a widow in her mid 60s whose days were divided between grandparental caring and responsibilities as a serial volunteer. Both presenters, whilst adept communicators, had no experience of radio interviewing and found themselves often pitted against those who had a remit to present a public-face of their campaign or body and were skilled in the use of sound-bites and staying 'on message'. To balance their lack of proficiency, both presenters drew on different aspects of their involvement through their media personas.
They thus become endowed with the 'authority' which representative. Irrespective of their knowledge base, elevating their status to that of a power community host as an insider, 'one of us', whilst simultaneously community radio station enabled the projection of the listenership. A focus on 'the self' in the context of a to forge a particular sense of neighbourliness with their engagement between presenter and audience. In this dialectic, the interviewers are positioned to forge a particular sense of neighbourliness with their listenership. A focus on 'the self' in the context of a community radio station enabled the projection of the host as an insider, ‘one of us’, whilst simultaneously elevating their status to that of a power community representative. Irrespective of their knowledge base, they thus become endowed with the 'authority' which comes with what Bourdieu (1991: 166) describes as the media’s ability to construct its own reality. A transformative process ensued with the mundane elevated into the exotic ‘other’, the ‘us’ to the ‘them’ at the same time as permitting public accolade to be an achievable goal. Furthermore, the medium of radio, unlike television, was able to permit the imagination of the audience to reimage so that the boundaries of age and able-bodiedness could be either owned or ignored by the audience to fit their own imagined celebrity ideal.

Unable or unwilling to shake a tendency in her everyday conversational and what might be considered a somewhat narcissistic style, the ruminations of Carol-Ann the interviewer when considering the cost of fuel, or the limitations of public transport locally were no longer the mundane musings of Carol-Ann the grandma whose thoughts might be dismissed as having limited value in the family setting. Rather, by participating in the process of broadcasting and her position as interviewer, her reflections acquired elevated status and she became Carol-Ann the powerful chat-show host questioning the professional rhetoric from a ‘down home’ and folksy perspective in both her own perception and that of her audience. And the result was a public persona transformation into ‘everywoman’ where she created a virtual bridge and alliance with the audience by personalising the impact of whatever cuts were being justified or services promoted by her interviewees.

Conversely, during the course of the first week of broadcasting, the ‘I’ became redundant in Robin’s interviews as his confidence in the process grew. He allowed the capricious side of his personality to come to the fore as he established an on-air presentational style that discarded the need to place himself within the narrative at any level, enjoying the challenge to the oratory and official ‘party’ lines of his interviewees. Unlike Carol-Ann, whose voice projected a quality of certainty evinced through its deep sonority and her ability to continue talking without faltering, Robin’s on and off air voice was less-assured, more hesitant with a higher tessitura.

Whilst Carol was physically a solid woman in her mid-sixties whose interviewees were met with a woman self-possessed in bold colours, prints and fabrics, Robin, at almost 80, presented a somewhat frailer appearance and dressed more conservatively. Interviewee responses to Robin were noticeably benevolently prejudiced and they tended to slow down their responses to him. His response was strategic and he used this unintentional ageism to a calculated advantage, asserting a position of authority within the interview process and in so doing subvert the rhetoric of the interviewee. By way of a formula (which he referred to as ‘going fishing’), his interviews were set up with a construct that encouraged the interviewee to consider that they had set the tone, pace and direction of the interview. He would begin each programme outlining the contents and introducing the guests in a rather mannered style, sometimes rustling papers and creating an easy ambience and, often feigning uncertainty as to the organisational or individual’s moniker, he would disarmingly suggest that the guest introduce themselves, seemingly handing over to them the direction of the interview. However, once the introductory conventionalities had been completed and the interviewee had set out their stall and key message, Robin would disarm them, reasserting his authority. His mode of undermining their position would be by way of a noticeably less gentle confrontation: ‘That’s all very well, but what would you say to someone who….’, ‘Well I can tell that’s something that would reassure people, but does that really tally with what you are actually offering….’. Both to back up his challenge and to sustain his alliance with the audience, Robin drew heavily on the experiences texted in by the listenership. By using a sense of place to ground and embed the questions in the locale (‘Now Angie Phillips from Clough would say that she had a very different experience when she arrived at the A&E’), he fashioned his bridge to the audience. In so doing, Robin did not aspire to become the ‘everywoman’ figure that Carol-Ann used to represent her authenticity as a now powerful member of the community, but rather his interview style asserted his power by the projection of a ‘defender of the people’ persona. Though drawing on distinctly different performance styles, both radio hosts proved to have found equally useful interview techniques by which to either subvert or endorse the rhetoric of the statutory service providers and to advocate for change for their peers whilst using the medium to assert a position of repute and, one might say, a media habitus.

Interviewees and Memory Lane

Each of the guests to the ‘Community Slots’ had particular messages to impart on behalf of services either available or lacking in the locale. As interview-led shows, each live programme was reliant on how skilfully the anchor-person was able to direct the multiple narratives and contributors and keep them
within a bounded thematic construct. Conversely, the ‘Memory Lane’ programmes firmly located the interview back within the gift of the subject, reminding us of Thompson’s suggestion (1978: 2) that oral history can change the focus of the history itself, giving back to those ‘who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.’ In this instance, however, the ownership was achieved as much through the skill of the editor as it was through that of the interviewer introducing the issues of authenticity, construction and revisionism that can prove vexing to fieldworker and journalist alike.

Following a series of training exercises over a three month period provided by professional broadcasters and the local charity Reminiscence Network Northern Ireland, ten volunteers over the age of 60 began recording the life-stories of their peers. The original aim of the training programme was to provide a background to researching life stories and family histories and ‘to skill up’ the volunteers in a range of interview techniques given the differing influence these might have on any finished programme. Miller (2000) outlines three distinctive methodological approaches to carrying out biographical research, namely approaches that are realist (based on grounded theory techniques), neo-positivist (defined by more structured interview processes) and narrative, which is a process of active construction emanating from the interplay between interviewer and interviewee. And it is this latter which was the intention of the training programme to elicit.

Nonetheless, the volunteer interviewers preferred to spend the bulk of their training-time familiarising and reassuring themselves with the technicalities of the equipment and the recording process and less on thinking about how their recordings might be constructed as coherent narratives. As a consequence of this, all of their interviews amounted to a series of prompts which punctuated lengthy and complex responses from the interviewees and the multi-layers of the narratives and recollections elicited often appeared as intractably intertwined.

Once started, the interviews provided an opportunity for colour to be restored to a series of sepia-toned memories of fishing villages, market towns, fairs and farming and the stories provided an equitable balance between images of pastoral idylls and bucolic poverty. Animated by the potent emotions they evoked, the interviewees frequently took in excess of three hours in the telling of their stories. With no succinct question and answer format, the interviewer was most often simply a recording vehicle and their contribution to the eliciting of the interview was rendered at best negligible as the long sometimes rambling responses of half-forgotten recollections were rebuilt and grafted onto others by the narrator. Ultimately a measured coherence and shaping came with the editors re-working of the recording. Modern technological media necessitated an editing out of the interviewer’s prompts to create a seamless coherence by the assembling and repositioning of a montage of quotations.

Interviews were conducted in homes (whether these were private residences or based within institutions) and were transmitted into homes throughout the night aimed at older people suffering from insomnia and other sleep disruption conditions and who had limited opportunities to engage outside their domestic environment. The peer interviewers covered a spectrum of emotions and subjects which resonated across the socio-political divide and the broadcasting of the programmes provided an opportunity for the interviewees in their 70s and 80s, to recall and share their childhood and young adulthood with others who were prompted to phone in to the early morning DJs to comment and draw comparisons from across the sectarian divide. Consequently the broadcast interviews provided a mediated and virtual connection between the life experiences of those who otherwise considered themselves to have had separate lives.

References


Notes:

1 The project was co-delivered by a partnership between a local community health development organisation core-funded by the South East Trust (the Peninsula Healthy Living Partnership based in Kircubbin, Co. Down, and an action-research programme Older People for Older People (www.oros.eu) working with older people in Scotland, Greenland, Finland and Sweden and managed in Northern Ireland by Queen’s University Belfast. Both organisations sought to explore ways in which older people in rural areas might become more active in supporting their peers and in so doing feed into a prominent policy debate with the age and health sectors fuelled by ageing demographics.
The Ards Peninsula is a long, thick cape to the North East of Ireland stretching 15 miles long and three miles wide, which acts as a breaker separating the Irish sea and Strangford Lough. Its eight villages comprise around 16,000 residents.

There are over 61,000 townlands denoting a pre-Norman system of geographical division still in common usage throughout Ireland.

The name Cuan is drawn from the ancient Irish for Strangford Lough and its uncontested choice as the name for the station marks a symbolic community relations bridge in an area where road signs indicating common use of Ulster Scots are commonplace but where the Irish language is rarely heard.

Participants included the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, Rural Development Council, Rural Community Network, Ards District Council, Age NI.

Reminiscence Network Northern Ireland is a charity promoting health and wellbeing through the provision of training, workshops and networking opportunities in relation to Reminiscence work.
The New Scramble for Africa addresses the complex dynamics that underlie and flow from the contemporary exploitation of Africa's natural resources and emerging markets. While an appetite for land, minerals and other sources of wealth prompted the carving up of the continent by colonial powers at the Berlin Conference in 1884-5, the current growing demand and competition for access to critical resources means that global powers have a renewed interest in Africa. This is reflected in increasing foreign direct investment in mineral and raw material extraction by both 'old' powers – Europe, Great Britain, America – and the emerging global giants of China and India. Carmody argues that the nature of this investment has implications for the future of development on the continent. He demonstrates that a key difference between this 'Scramble in Africa' in the context of globalization and the original Scramble for Africa is a political one that, while taking account of the independence of African states, is manifested in the manipulation of external and local power relations to gain or restrict access to resources. Consequently, rather than correcting prevailing underdevelopment on the continent or transforming the economic structures that have remained largely unchanged in the post-colonial period, this activity is reinforcing resource-based economies, ignoring the challenge of economic diversification, and shoring up the power of authoritarian states. Carmody argues convincingly that ‘the vast power inequalities between external and African actors and between the masses and political elites within Africa’ (p.189) are fundamental to this dynamic. His book makes it clear, via illuminating examples, that the persistent ‘paradox of plenty’ in Africa, whereby economic poverty afflicts the majority of the continent’s population despite the wealth of resources, will only be challenged by engaging with the ‘nature of and struggles over the African state’ (p.189).

The book contextualises the contemporary round of investment, deal-brokering and resource extraction in Africa within an overview of the long-term impacts of colonialism and post-colonial political and economic structures. While emphasising that Africans are not passive or powerless in their relationships with former colonial powers, Carmody demonstrates that the way in which resources and economic structures are currently exploited is at least in part ‘an outcome of the policies of economic liberalisation and globalisation promoted by Western governments and the institutions they largely control: the World Bank, the IMF and, to a lesser extent, the World Trade Organization’ (p.193) in the post-colonial period. The book argues that the exponential increase in China’s economic activity in Africa bears an interesting relationship with that era of liberalisation, insofar as China presents a welcome alternative to Western models of condition-bound investment and partnership for African states. Given the massive increase in the volume of trade between Africa and China – from less than US$5 billion in the mid-1990s to over US$100 billion in 2009 (p.10) – and in light of the security and governance implications of that blossoming relationship in the eyes of Western powers, Carmody does place a special focus in the book on exploring and explaining the dynamics of Chinese trade and market intervention in Africa. In doing so, he coins the apt term ‘flexigemony’ to describe China’s strategic engagement with African states, which although it is considerably more flexible, responsive and context-driven than current Western approaches to doing business with (often dubious) African regimes, it is in itself a new kind of hegemonic influence in African politics. Carmody does, however, balance this view with an exposition of the roles of other important actors, including Great Britain, the USA, India and Brazil, while also highlighting the impact of relationships between different African countries on the internal economies and security of their neighbours, enemies and allies. He achieves this by honing in on case studies that highlight the main actors and drivers in the global economy that has such an interest in African resources, including the increasing global and particularly Asian appetites not only for food, timber and precious metals, but also for carbon, nuclear and biopower fuel sources, and minerals vital to the development of technology and communications. In doing so, he provides facts relating to power struggles, the location and significance of specific minerals and natural resources, and the starkly unequal distribution of gains earned via different deals and relationships. The reader is thus introduced to, for example, the significance of coltan for understanding the complicated narrative of conflict in the DRC, the role of China in the conflict in Sudan, the environmental devastation connected to oil extraction in the Niger Delta, and key precursors to the emergence of Somali piracy.

A particular strength of the book is that it debunks certain prevailing myths. For example, it shows that China is not the greatest foreign trading partner in Africa: trade with the EU and America still is greater in terms of total volume and value; however, the growth of trade with China, and that country’s predicted expansion at home and overseas, is what makes it an important ‘new’ power to understand and watch closely. The book also devotes a whole chapter to challenging the argument that underdevelopment in
Africa is bound up with its natural geography, positing that the paradox of plenty ‘is actually a mode of governance for many resource-dependent economies’ (p.31) which results in huge gains for domestic elites as they broker economic deals with transnational corporations ‘and the global powers in whose territories many of them are headquartered’ (p.31). This framework enables Carmody to consistently highlight the clear links between resources, the control of access to those resources, power dynamics, and the impact of all of these on governance as he walks the reader through the different regions, case studies and specific resources examined in the book. His method is straightforward, and although the text is characterised by the language of political economy and peppered with abbreviations and acronyms, these are delivered with ease and clarified in terms accessible to a multidisciplinary audience. The main shortfall of the text is that, although it does present some qualitative interview material (specifically in relation to a Chinese Multi-facility Economic Zone established in Zambia, and highlights some interview material with Somali pirates), the reader rarely gets to hear African voices talking about their experiences of doing business and interacting with external and other African actors, or of working and living under the influences of those high-level relationships. That noted, in a single volume the book does capture in significant depth the complexity of a rapidly-changing landscape, addressing not only the economic but also human and environmental dimensions of the current uneven economic development in Africa.

The New Scramble for Africa presents an enormous amount of information, drawing on a wide range of sources in order to produce both the broad narrative of contemporary economic activity in Africa and an in-depth examination of select case studies. Carmody succeeds in organising this substantial set of data into coherent chapters that almost give the reader a sense of travelling not only across the whole continent, but in time, too, to understand the relationship of the past to the present, and how this connects with prospects for the future. The book is an important contribution to the present, and how this connects with prospects of travelling not only across the whole continent, but also a vital resource for scholars in politics, economics and sociology, as well as for the lay reader with an interest in African affairs.

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From the outset of the monograph, it is clear that Williams and Ó Laoire’s intention is to equally divide their book between Joe Heaney’s life and his works. This publication offers a very valuable and rare study of sean-nós singing. While the book does contain a degree of ethnographic writing, the style would be more successfully described as a critical biography. Heaney passed away in 1984, consequently much of the book is based on memory, recordings of songs, interviews and memorabilia. The information given is rendered particularly important by the authors’ claim that Heaney could be regarded as one of the most reputable traditional Gaelic singers in Ireland. He indeed was on a quest for recognition as an Irish song-man throughout his life. Heaney strived to extend his art outside of Ireland, an intention unusual for the time, and he could be credited as one of the main reasons why sean-nós is so widely recognised today.

Williams and Ó Laoire are persistent in their descriptions of the environment in which Heaney was born. It is through these descriptions that larger questions about song, identity and culture are addressed, providing the reader with a good understanding of Heaney’s identity and the context within which it was fostered. Heaney was born during the Irish war of independence, in the Gaeltacht region of Carna, Conamara, Co. Galway. His extended family included numerous storytellers and singers and the area featured a vibrant presence of traditional performers.

Chapters one and two of the monograph focus on sean-nós, the ‘old-style’ of traditional Irish singing. In this section we learn in depth about the theory and performative conventions of sean-nós singing as well as about the repertoire of sean-nós songs. Most importantly, the authors describe the development of Heaney’s own personal singing style, affected by the way in which the Irish and the English language shape the ornaments that he uses in his songs. Sean-nós singing is, moreover, linked strongly with the area as a landscape, historical and cultural environment. Songs about the famine were common in Heaney’s repertoire, while he was also known to sing laments on occasion, an interesting fact given the well-documented cross-cultural association of keening with female performativity. Heaney not only put sean-nós on the musical world map, but also raised issues of masculinity and gender in Irish traditional music. Ó Laoire and Williams explore these topics in Chapter three, which focuses on Masculinity in a Musical context.

Chapter four, the final chapter, is based on Heaney’s life in America. While in America, Heaney finally gained recognition and became a highly symbolic figure of Ireland. Interestingly, it was not until after his increased reputation in America, that the homeland began to appreciate his talents. In America, he was perceived as a native Irish speaker, a singer in both Irish and English, a storyteller of legends and tales of Ireland. This embodiment of ‘an old Ireland’ enforced by what was perceived as a ‘true’ and ‘raw’
attitude, ultimately became his identity. He incarnated a tradition of the past in a new environment, a fact that helped him evoke memories and nostalgia amongst the migrant community. Importantly, he could now earn a living exclusively from his art, which was—and still is—very significant for a sean-nós singer. His reception, however, was far from uniform. The authors describe the contradicting responses of the audience at Heaney’s performances. For some Irish-Americans, he was a living reminder of the ‘hard Ireland’ that they left behind, a feeling that was not necessarily pleasant. Simultaneously, he was not welcome elsewhere because he would repeatedly refuse to reaffirm stereotypical understandings of Irishness by singing songs such as Danny Boy. He was, therefore, rejected by many living on the East Coast of the United States. This discussion of Heaney’s reception fruitfully raises and explores a number of issues of ‘authenticity’, always at the centre of any study of Irish music.

While the work does explore some of Heaney’s iconic songs in depth, it could be argued that it focuses on Heaney as a man from Conamara who sings, rather than Heaney the singer and storyteller from Conamara. By entitling the book Bright Star of the West, the authors chose to glorify their protagonist. The recounting of his decision to leave for the US, advance his career, and elevate the visibility of this regional singing style, overshadows the personal aspect including the history of his wife and four children that stayed behind. The monograph, instead, details the individual choices that he made, and the impact that those choices had on his life and surroundings. The authors chose to look at the ways in which Heaney adapted his artistic identity and life to the new environment after his relocation to the US. This focus helps Bright Star of the West develop from a summary of Heaney’s life events into a critical analysis of the choices that he made and the way in which they affected his career trajectory and the history of the genre.

Ó Laoire comes from a similar area (Gaeltacht) and he is also a singer. From reading this analysis of Heaney’s life, one gets the impression that Ó Laoire productively uses his own knowledge of the style of singing, culture and background to draw on similarities, differences and reasonings with Heaney’s life. Heaney represented his tradition in quite a similar way that Ó Laoire continues to do today as a well-known sean-nós singer. Thus, the author’s experience presumably facilitated his empathy with Heaney and helped him understand the strategies of the protagonist’s professional life.

If ethnography is a balance between description and interpretation, this book leans well on the interpretive side of the scale. It successfully relies on the knowledge and background of the authors to pull together all the threads of information on Heaney’s life. It builds a good understanding of Heaney practising and progressing his art throughout his day-to-day life. While doing this, the authors manage to remain vibrantly present throughout the read, ultimately turning it into a lively and passionate biographical account.

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Guy Standing’s new book is a timely contribution to the theoretical scholarship of a wide array of social sciences, as it suggests the emergence of a new social class, the ‘precariat’. Focusing on the multiplying number of people working under precarious conditions worldwide, the monograph promotes the idea of ‘a new group in the world, a class-in-the-making’ (p. vii), drawing on social theory and economic science. The author is Professor of Economic Security at the University of Bath, and former Director of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). This is a polemic, opinionated book, where the author emphasizes the urgent need to ‘wake up to the global precariat’, because ‘there is a lot of anger out there and a lot of anxiety’ (p. vii).

To start with, one of the most interesting, novel contributions of this work comes from its terms of publication. It is circulated under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License. For those not familiar with this terminology, this book is free to be shared, copied and distributed, even remixed, as soon as there is attribution of authorship and publication and it is done for non-commercial purposes. This novel move in academic publishing by Bloomsbury Academic is timeous with the crisis in libraries’ funding for the procurement of journals and other works, as well as the proliferation of piracy and peer-to-peer sharing practices by consumers.

This book also breaks new ground in the Anglo-Saxon social sciences, by proposing formally the term ‘precariat’, to describe a new ‘class in-the-making’. Alongside only a handful of academics in the English-speaking academia (e.g. Vosko, 2010, Ross, 2009, Procoli, 2004), Standing is joining the continental debate on ‘precarity’. He suggests that a new social class can be identified within a more fragmented class structure of seven social groups: the elite, at the top; the ‘salariat’ next, in stable full-time employment, followed by the ‘proficiats’, self-employed, professionals, technicians, and so on. The old working class is next, which, the author suggests, is shrinking, but persisting in some parts of the world. The precariat is the next group, followed by the unemployed masses and, finally, by ‘a detached group of misfits living off the dregs of society’ (p.8).
The ‘precariat’ group is described in the first three chapters. In the first chapter, the author traces its Ancient Greek antecedents to the labourers group of ‘banausoi’. The concept of ‘precariat’ is defined through the lack of labour-related security, as well as by its working conditions. The author suggests that there is also a process of workers’ precariatisation, leading to effects on the ‘brain’ (information overload) and the ‘psyche’ of the precarious (anger, anomic, anxiety, alienation), which render the precariat a dangerous class. The second chapter serves a theoretical contextualisation, with the transformation of the economy in the globalisation era (1974-2008), culminating in the recent economic shock (2008-).

The third chapter responds ‘everybody, actually’ (p. 59) to the question of the social composition of the global precariat, without, however, offering any demographic figures. The author distinguishes between ‘grinners’, i.e. people who welcome precarious jobs, and ‘groaners’, those obliged to accept them in the absence of alternatives. The concept of ‘feminisation of labour’ (p. 60), which presents a challenge to traditional male (typically blue-collar) jobs and roles is elaborated. Moreover, the challenges for urban youth and the old-agers, leading them to the trap of precarity, are presented theoretically, as well as those faced by marginalized groups.

The next chapter deals specifically with migrants as an integral part of the global precariat. Standing suggests that the association of migrants with ‘denizens’, people who have a limited range of social rights, is contrasted with full-rights’ citizenship. While touching on the diverse forms of peoples’ mobility, the author attests that migrants are the ‘light infantry’ (p.113) of global capitalism, a ‘floating reserve’ (p.102) of labour, facing populist hostility and racism, in need of basic income security and a collective voice.

Chapter Five brings forth the changes in the notion of work, which, in turn, build pressure on the precariat. Work-related concepts such as time, the workplace, skills and leisure, have been transformed in the service economy, demanding more intense work in various places, imposed by the expectation of constant connection through electronic technologies. This shift has generated concepts like the ‘tertiary lifestyle’ (p.131), which highlights the negative effects on the whole life spectrum of the precarious, from leisure to reproduction.

The final two chapters contain the political argument of the rise of the precariat, the earlier highlighting the bleak reality, a ‘politics of inferno’, with the latter advancing the author’s proposal for a ‘politics of paradise’ (p.155). The bad news for the precariat lies in the neo-liberal state’s regime, using surveillance and psychotherapeutic methods in all realms of life to invade, control and discipline the ‘dangerous class’ into being ‘happy’, despite being demonised for its mis-happenings. This conduces to a dangerous lack of interest in participating in democratic institutions, or a horrific tendency towards populist neo-fascism. In the midst of the economic crisis affecting Europe, the last chapter outlines a proposal for a ‘21st Century Good Society’ by advancing in detail the ‘mildly utopian’ (p.155) idea of an unconditional Basic Income for all denizens in any society, complimented by work rights and a collective voice.

One of the values of the book is its easy-to-follow writing, avoiding the specialised jargon and the ‘dry’ neutrality often found in the academic style of argumentation. The many theoretical arguments of the book are invigorated by accessible examples and information drawn from sources worldwide, while avoiding the reader’s flooding with references. Is this a good thing, though? In certain passages, one feels that some more evidence and referencing is needed to back up the author’s polemic arguments and ethico-political positioning.

Indeed, this is its main shortcoming, especially for students and scholars of anthropology. The author’s perspective comes from atop, from the ivory tower of academic social theory, not from below, aided by and revealing the precariat’s voice and agency. Both in Ireland and in Greece, the financial shock has multiplied the number of the people falling into the ranks of the precariat, with social sciences and humanities students and young scholars exceptionally affected. In order to conclude empirically that the precariat is ‘a-class-in-the-making’, there is an eminent need for more evidence and systematic, participatory ethnographic work on the singularities, the localisations, the discourses, the transnational networks and the agencies of the precarious especially in those countries most affected.

In any case, The Precariat feels more effective as an introductory monograph, more suitable for a lay audience, advancing the author’s opinion and politics on Basic Income, but not as a major scholarly work for the social sciences; one which would empirically establish the precariat as a normative social grouping of people.

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References:
Submission of Material
Authors are encouraged to submit items for the IJA. Articles, which may be in English or Irish, should be original and should not be under consideration elsewhere. IJA is a peer-reviewed journal and articles submitted will be assessed for their suitability.

Articles for consideration should be sent to the Editor or Associate Editor as follows:
Fiona Larkan, Editor, Centre for Global Health, Trinity College Dublin, 7-9 Leinster Street South, Dublin 2 journals@anthropologyireland.ie

Fiona Magowan, Associate Editor, School of History and Anthropology, The Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, N. Ireland. f.magowan@qub.ac.uk

Books for review and completed reviews should be sent to the Reviews Editors:
Fiona Murphy, Department of Anthropology, Rowan House, NUI Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland
Ioannis Tsioulakis, c/o Carmel Daly, Department of Music, University College Cork, Ireland.

Other material (conference and research reports, news, advertisements, letters etc.) should be sent to:
News Editor, c/o Department of Anthropology, Rowan House, NUI Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland.

Presentation
Articles should be in the region of 4000 words and should include a title, a short abstract of no more than 100 words, and a list of key words. Included also should be the author’s name, contact details for publication, academic affiliation, and a short biographical note. Contributions should be submitted in electronic form, in PC format readable in Word. Receipt of a submission will be acknowledged.

The following points should be observed:

Notes should be endnotes and should be kept to a minimum.

Bibliographical references in the body of the text should be given in parentheses in standard author-date form: (Lee and Devore 1968: 236). A complete list of references cited, arranged alphabetically by author’s surname, should be typed at the end of the article and adhere to the following style:


Subheadings should be typed flush left.

Quotations. Single inverted commas should be used except for quotations within quotations, which should have double inverted commas. Quotations of more than about 60 words should be indented and typed without inverted commas.

Spellings. British English (not American English) spelling should be used in English articles except in quoted material, which should follow the original. Use -ize not -ise word endings.

Full style guidelines can be found on the website of the Anthropological Association of Ireland – www.anthropologyireland.org