

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jaber F. Gubrium and **James Holstein**, *Analyzing Narrative Reality*. London and Los Angeles: Sage, 2008, 272 pp. \$US 34.95 paper (978-1-4129-5219-4)

As a perennial issue in sociology, the relationship between agency and structure has generated much debate and schism. While this debate resonates with much less stridency in qualitative circles, there have nevertheless been several attempts at exploring this relationship, mostly in an effort to atone for what is considered by some as an Achilles' heel of sorts for the interpretive tradition — an unfettered endearment with meaning making. Thus, in the footsteps of synthetic theories from the likes of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Giddens, various methodologies have emerged over the past two decades to account for meaning making as structurally situated and contingent performance. Perhaps one of the more remarkable examples in this regard is Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography, a methodology that seeks to locate reflexive agency at the nexus of the social relations that coordinate everyday life.

Gubrium and Holstein's *Analyzing Narrative Reality* represents another effort to situate interpretive activity within its multiple social environments. They assemble elements of ethnography, ethnomethodology, and conversational analysis into a convenient and pragmatic package. Skittering past the ontological challenges posed by such a marriage, they focus on how their approach — which they call narrative ethnography — can be realized by taking into account the influences of audiences, circumstances, relationships, and institutions. As justification, they offer an oblique critique of conventional narrative analysis, singling out its failure to account for the social dynamics of storytelling. The authors argue against privileging narrative over context, as is done in conversational analysis, or the reverse, as occurs in ethnography. Rather, they occupy an epistemic middle-ground that allows them to account for narrative practice as both purposeful and constrained.

Their approach still incorporates a concern for the internal organization of narratives. They consider narrative as involving the performative processes of activation, linkage, composition, performance, collaboration, and control. However, Gubrium and Holstein rapidly move away from conversational analysis by drawing on the tenets of symbolic interactionism to explain how various social contexts exert influence on the

production and communication of stories. Their aim is to understand how each story evolves to incorporate the contingencies and circumstances of the story tellers. Narratives are thus dynamic and creative texts that reflect the unique concerns story tellers have about their audiences.

In presenting the methodological procedures needed to accomplish this task, Gubrium and Holstein survey the influences of a variety of contexts. Those range from the interactional contingencies of two individuals having a conversation to the more complex dynamics involved in the performance of narratives within institutional settings. They illustrate each scenario with generous examples from empirical material drawn primarily from the symbolic interactionist literature, as well as their own work in social gerontology. They derive much inspiration from Goffman, particularly his analysis of face-to-face interactions as theatrical performance.

Gubrium and Holstein offer the aspiring narrative ethnographer simple-to-follow advice on methodological procedures for gathering contextualized narrative data. Those procedures include a mix of standard ethnomethodological and ethnographic fare such as in-depth interviewing, ethnographic observation, and conversational and textual analysis. Perhaps the greatest strength of this book lies not in its premise that people perform stories with their audiences in mind — that is hardly original — but in the manner in which it clearly and painstakingly details the procedures a researcher can use to go about the task of documenting such performances. That kind of information is difficult to come by in the symbolic interactionist literature.

One concern is the primacy Gubrium and Holstein give agency when describing the way storytellers perform narratives. While we can consider the finer points of emplotment as individualistic acts of creativity, narrative performance ultimately reflects the much broader institutionalized discourses in which storytellers are embedded. Surprisingly little is said about how storytellers compose their narratives through the cultural lenses, social values, and institutional rules that characterize those discourses and the power relations they specify. More could have been said, for example, about the relationship between narratives and the political, or on narratives as gendered practice or as acts of resistance. Instead, we are left wondering whether narratives are, well, just the stories that people tell.

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