

Reviews

Helena Tužinská: Questions of Description and Translation: Use of Data from Anthropology and Ethnology in the Conduct and Interpretation of Interviews with Immigrants

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Helena Tužinská is a social anthropologist with a focus on migration studies, social communication and applied anthropology. As a university teacher at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Comenius University in Bratislava, she is concentrating her teaching on research methods in anthropology. She has been present on the field of migration studies for a long time. She is putting her anthropological knowledge into practice and has carried out an ethnological research in several immigrant milieus in Slovakia. She cooperates with a non-governmental organization Human Rights League as a researcher, training facilitator and is also leading trainings on inter-cultural communication for asylum seekers and for Gabčíkovo asylum camp workers of the Migration office of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. This is briefly summarizing the professional scope of Helena Tužinská, which has also largely influenced the character of the publication. Book *Questions of Description and Translation* interlinks author's knowledge from methodology, anthropology and field experience. As the author states in the Preface: „This handbook has been written for all those, that in get in touch with immigrants and aim to understand them.” (Tužinská 2009: 7)

Migration as an issue has started to be discussed publicly and professionally even in Slovakia. Migration has intensified even on the territory of Slovakia as people of various cultures and nations started coming from all around the world for various reasons. Manual workers, high-qualified professionals, entrepreneurs, relatives of former migrants and refugees – they all migrate. Migration means the arrival of migrants from all corners of the world resulting in the diversification of the society. Existing research on the attitude to migration indicate a rather negative image of Slovakia with a very hostile, almost xenophobic perspective on migrants and expose a society, which is rather too conservative and intolerant of otherness. Attributes to immigrants are often negatively prejudiced.

Those asylum seekers that need to go through a decision-making procedure have a specific position. Asylum seekers are stressed, often have traumatic experience and have covered an arduous journey. Workers of the Migration Office of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic and interpreters basically determine the fate of the asylum seekers based on interviews with them. Misinterpreted answers, potential misunderstanding and

incomprehension of asylum seekers' statements largely influence the whole asylum procedure and thus also the future life of the immigrant. Hence, an interview is one of the key tools in the whole asylum procedure to acquire necessary information in order to judge the credibility of migrant's story and therefore the way the interview is conducted is very important. Based on long-term field research author provides a unique view on the method of semi-structured ethnographic interview. She describes the way to obtain an in-depth statement from the informant (asylum seeker) by asking questions in a due manner.

Nevertheless, book is not aimed only at those, who get in touch with asylum seekers. Everywhere, it is drawing attention to the importance of sensitive inter-cultural communication. At the same time, actual cases show how to put questions in order to get credible answers and thus point out the frequent mistakes researchers make in qualitative research. Book is suitable for students of sociology, ethnology, social anthropology as well as for teachers of methodology of social science. At the same time, book was written to move closer to readers not acquainted with social sciences. Individual chapters always comprise a short introduction into the issue and then give actual cases of interviews also supplemented by comments from author's research – examples of personal interviews, observations and interviews at the Migration Office of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic and the County Court in Bratislava. Besides, author draws attention to the most frequent questions and misunderstandings as well as answers to them. Thus, reader gets a clear image of how a question that has been put in an inappropriate way, own assumption, bias and misunderstanding may lead to discrediting the informant's statement.

Book is divided into eight chapters. Gradually, Helena Tužinská explains the method of ethnographic interview and its benefits based on works by J. P. Spradley (1979), H. R. Bernard (1995) and her own long-term field research. We often wrongly automatically tend to introduce our own assumptions, projections and expectations into the interview with an informant, who is coming from a different culture and different geographical area. Therefore, the question of credibility of asylum seeker's statement might be tainted already from the beginning by attributing a certain type of behaviour to him/her. It is important to be sensitive to the informant's language and careful about own thoughts and biases.

Author warns that „what we consider to be 'normal' or 'standard' is never valid in general“ (Tužinská 2009: 39) meaning that throughout the interview the interviewer (researcher, interpreter or Migration Office officer) should try to understand the „story“ of the informant as much as possible.

Part of the book is devoted to memory and recollection. Author draws upon the knowledge of cognitive science. She remarks that the same event can be portrayed in various ways. Interviews with asylum seekers illustrate the phenomenon of the so-called „false memories“ and the different perception of time and space that may lead to giving incorrect data and inconsistent answers.

In conclusion, author declares that the „aim of the text was to make useful knowledge from anthropology and ethnology available for those who conduct and interpret interviews with immigrants“. (Tužinská 2009: 73) I believe she was successful in fulfilling this goal. This book has become the first methodological publication ever written in Slovakia closely devoted to the method of an ethnographic in-depth interview. Apart from that, she has succeeded in drawing attention to often unconscious interference into the „story“ of the informant by the researcher (or interviewer), which often happens when he/she applies own meanings to respondent's statements on the basis of his/her own cultural context. Ethnography is teaching us to become observers – let ourselves be led by the informant and use questions to develop and stimulate answers. Properly selected open questions (unlike closed questions that are often used at the interviews with asylum seekers) bring more information, not just brief answers, but answers put into context that can explain a lot.

There is nothing to reproach the author for regarding the content; chapters were ordered in a good way. For reasons of clearer structuring, it might be convenient to follow the question (problem) and answer with a sort of short advice – a shortened and summed up answer.

My only critical comment concerns (from my point of view) insufficiently elaborated concept of culture and attitude to „otherness“. Apart from dealing with the method of in-depth interview author also focuses on intercultural communication and gradually develops the issue throughout the whole book. However, it would maybe be clearer to summarize – introduce the concept of culture (also for a non-academic reader).

LITERATURE

- BERNARD, H. R., 1995: *Research Methods in Anthropology. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. New York: Altamira Press.
SPRADLEY, J. P., 1979: *The Ethnographic Interview*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

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