Decolonizing knowledge production in and through interview research

Charles L. Briggs in conversation with Judith Eckert and Georgios Coussios[1]

Biographical Note

Charles L. Briggs is Professor of Anthropology and the Alan Dundes Distinguished Professor at the Department of Anthropology of the University of California, Berkeley. Additionally, he serves, amongst others, as Co-Director of the Berkeley Center for Social Medicine and Co-Director of the Center for the Critical Study of Latinx Health at the Latinx Research Center. His research interests include social/cultural anthropology, especially as relating to linguistic and medical anthropology, narrative, media and mediatization, folklore and performance, racialization, and violence. His first major contribution to qualitative interviewing *Learning how to ask. A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research* appeared in 1986. Since then, Briggs has continued to reflect on the linguistic, social and cultural dimensions of interviewing on the micro-level of interaction and the macro-level of discourses (Briggs 2001, 2007a, 2007b) and has highlighted the nexus of language, power, and knowledge production in modern societies in the book *Voices of modernity: language ideologies and the politics of inequality* (Bauman/Briggs 2003).

Research on interviewing: From micro to macro perspectives

Learning how to ask

Judith Eckert (JE): So, thank you, Charles, for taking the time to talk with us about interviewing today. Maybe we start at the very beginning. Your first and very remarkable contribution to interview research is your book *Learning how to ask*, which appeared in 1986. So, what ignited your initial interest in interviews as a method for qualitative research?

Charles Briggs (CB): Well, certainly it was quite accidental. I didn't start out intending to study methodology or interviewing. I grew up in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and I was very interested in the older, Spanish-dominant members who were primarily agriculturalists in the community. And I spent a lot of time with them. I was kind of a strange child who often gravitated towards old people who had bodies of wisdom that I thought were quite remarkable and, of course, also with whom I really learned Spanish. So, they also kept saying, you should go up north because there are communities where people are primarily agricultural and where they basically don't have to deal with the press of the urban environment and of whiteness, of English speakers every day. And I also had a family connection to a small community named Córdova up north. So, I just went there when I was 19 years old to

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spend a couple of weeks with a couple, George and Silvianita López, who I had met long before when I was a child. They were very well-known wood carvers, who made images of the saints and all sorts of things about birds and trees that were purchased primarily by tourists and also by museum collectors and very rich private collectors. So, I went and I spent two weeks with them in their house. And they became interested and they said, you know, we have wanted to tell our own story because people see us essentially through a racist lens as producing carvings that reflect what they see as our primitive religiosity and our closeness to nature. And really, we make these carvings to be able to deal with the fact that the US government and rich Anglo-Americans stole our lands, and therefore most of us have to work as maids and as janitors in Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory – that is where the atomic bomb was created –, rather than being able to stay in our own communities and work without domineering white bosses. And so, with this, we're able to have that income to stay here. So basically, what we're doing is we're producing small scale wooden models of the racist stereotypes of our customers. So, we would like a book written that would tell our side of this story, because there was a lot of more museum or also sort of popular literature about these wood carvers. And again, their works are in museums in Germany. They're really all over the world. So, of course I had a sort of crisis. I'm 19 years old. I'm just beginning my college studies. How could I possibly do this? But they had really charged me with a particular task. And so, I decided that I had to at least give it a try. I mean, now we would call this community-based or engaged research. Those terms weren't available then [at the beginning of the 1970s, JE and GC], but it was precisely a job that was assigned by the community and seemed to be of some interest to the community. So, then I went away for a while and tried to figure out what the heck I would do and then came back later and began to sort out how I would do research to write a book. And of course, what I immediately thought, looking at the research literature was that I would have to do interviews. So, I tried to read through some of the kind of cookbook-type research on interviewing in anthropology and the social sciences. Consequently, I came there with a cassette recorder that I borrowed from my parents, and bought a small microphone with a cable – nowadays tremendously obsolescent technologies – and with a list of 12 questions. I approached George and Silvianita López one evening and began the research starting off with the questions, which I figured would just somehow open up their knowledge and would enable the sort of material that would be crucial to this book to flow. The first question was asking Mr. López, "how did you begin carving?". I considered this to be entirely innocuous and simply an automatic way of opening the spigot. However, he looked up at the ceiling and said, "Uuh, pués, quién sabe!" ("Oh, well, who knows!"). Of course, I was flabbergasted. What had gone wrong here? So, I went down to question number two. His father had begun this carving industry, and I said, "well then, how did your father begin carving?". And you can now probably guess his response, which was, "oh, pués, quién sabe." So, I didn't go to question three. This was some type of a rupture. I realized something was entirely wrong. I went back to this small trailer down from their house where I was living that night, and I was thoroughly depressed because my career as a researcher, which had really not even begun, had already ended. The next morning, I went back and all I could do was sit in their kitchen while they were carving wood and sit there for a number of days and watch them carve somewhat despondently. And finally, Mr. López, you know, got sort of