

Small Talk: Annette Markham

*Annette Markham is well known for her important publication, *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space* (Alta Mira, 1998). Her forthcoming work is *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method* (co-edited with Nancy Baym).*

We got some insight about interviewing and identity issues from Annette in April 2007, when she guest lectured in a graduate course at UW-Milwaukee on Global Issues in Internet Research Ethics. This is an informal excerpt from our discussion.

QUESTION: You mentioned in your book that online interviewing can be frustrating because there is really no way to see the body language, mannerisms, or pick up on verbal cues from the person being interviewed. Do you think this is a significant drawback and/or detrimental to the information gathered in online interviewing as opposed to face to face interviewing or phone interviews?

This is an excellent question because it goes to the heart of interviewing in general, not just interviewing online. Although it might seem to be a straightforward question, it raises HUGE issues, methodologically and ethically speaking. First, the short answer: No. In this case (my book), there was no drawback or detriment.

But, let me specify that response a bit: I wasn't looking for information that would be embedded in the body. In fact, that would have detracted from the type of information I really wanted. I wanted to know them in their online identity. If they had to come offline, this would be a different sort of identity, yes? I'm not saying they're necessarily separate, as if there is some offline versus online identity. But in any context, we adopt or display different masks, consciously and unconsciously. Researchers need to consider this carefully. If I want to interview people about their night-time college life, I won't interview them when they're visiting their family for Christmas. I'd rather interview them at night, at college.

Having said that, let me expand on the issue somewhat: For me, there are some other important questions embedded in your question above:

- 1) We don't see embodied characteristics...so what DO we see in an online interview?

- 2) What do embodied characteristics provide us in the interview process?
- 3) What is privileged (or conversely, marginalized) when we rely on embodied ways of "knowing" others (as researchers)?

Most of the time, in face to face interviews, we researchers take a lot for granted; body posture, movements, eye contact, etc. We notice these things, but not always at the level of consciousness. Yet all this embodied 'stuff' influences the researcher, whether or not he or she pays attention to how or why.

If we notice posture, movement, mannerisms, etc., we'll use this information to help us interpret or categorize the participant. But what about those things we don't notice? What about those things we don't notice at the surface level but use at a subconscious level? In a physical interview, for example, we might sense a subtle body odor that makes us want to spend less (or more) time with the interview subject. Or someone's face might unconsciously remind us of a bully we knew in the 2nd grade, which might impact how we ask questions.

What if we use these nonverbal/paralinguistic signals as part of the interpretation but we're completely off-base? We are taught that the eyes are the window to the soul, that body language doesn't lie, that you can tell how someone is feeling by looking at them. This privileges our five senses as the most accurate way of knowing someone else. For the most part, we believe that we are capable of understanding what those nonverbal signals mean. I've been proven wrong so many times I now believe THIS might be the larger detriment to interviewing.

Basically, qualitative methods textbooks don't talk much about the nonverbal aspects of interviewing. Perhaps it's because it is assumed that we know how to handle this stuff. Wow, what a mistake!

There's even less discussion of paralinguistic aspects of online interviewing. Online interviews remove a lot of markers (socioeconomic markers) like race, gender, class. We don't see the clothing style, famous label sunglasses, any obvious racial characteristics, and gender. But we see other things that will "mark" the participant, like typing speed, grammar, precision, sense of humor (or lack thereof), type of personal web

space, deliberate verbal characteristics, etc. So the cues we use to help us make sense of who the person is? These markers still exist, but take different forms.

Is it important to have the embodied information? Yes and no. Yes, because it is a comfortable and familiar way for us to believe we "know" the other person. But in terms of qualitative research, what do these signals convey? How accurate are these signals in everyday life? Sometimes not very accurate at all, turns out. Examples: When a person walks into an expensive boutique, the employee who dismisses this person because she or he is not dressed in the 'right' clothes may be making a big, expensive mistake. People tend to attribute criminal intention more to African Americans than White Americans, a massive mistake based only on appearance. People tend to think homeless people are dangerous or stupid, another mistake in generalization.

So back to the issue of qualitative research. If we want to know more about social life, we use observation and interaction to learn more about people. The snap judgments we make based on nonverbals are suspect from the start because we don't have very reliable interpretive filters. We use generalizations and stereotypes and habit to interpret what these nonverbal signals mean. This can be accurate, but can just as easily be a big mistake.

I'll just add one more thing. Each research situation is unique and the method for getting data should be determined based on this situation. So, even though I preferred/needed online-only information, there are research situations that warrant a mixture of face to face and online interviewing. A scholar at London School of Economics, Shani Orgad, discusses this issue extensively in her work re: online breast cancer support groups.

QUESTION: We found the dialogue in chapter 2 of your book interesting when you changed your name to Bambi and altered your personality. You also talked about how this type of behaviour can give users a rewarding sense of control. Do you think this is a healthy perspective or could this have negative consequences related to real life social interactions?

Experimentation with other/alternate identities can be helpful. Here's an example: I know a person who was extremely uncomfortable and shy around men. Couldn't speak,

was scared to be around men, seemed to always be taken advantage of, and so on. On a fluke, she created a male avatar in an online community. She later told me that in a really short period of time she began to lose her fear of men. Online, she interacted with other male avatars, protected by a shell of masculinity (her avatar). She could experiment with conversation and interactions. She could observe them, be with them, without being in her own (female, scared) body. She translated this back to her embodied presence, started experimenting in face to face encounters.

If people feel locked in the body or identity they have, experimenting with identity online can be a form of survival, a means of escape, or it can be a trap. In small rural towns, young people often feel like identity is predetermined by parents, teachers, and friends. There's little opportunity to be something else. There's no anonymity. For some people, this can be comforting, because they know who they are, their identities are reflected in the mirrors of other people's perceptions (this is not my idea; this comes from the looking glass theory of identity). For other people, it can be a prison because they can never find what they perceive might be their true identity (not that I believe there's any such thing as a 'true' identity...but we like to believe there is).

Negative side to all this: One's comfort about one's identity does not come solely from the self. It comes from others. If people need to be online to feel good about themselves, this is probably a signal that something is not right in the physical world. And, after all, we live in the physical world, so we have to confront, be comfortable, and love what's in front of us in the mirror every day. Otherwise, what do we have? This problem is not restricted to online/offline identity management. Having said that, I will note here that the vast majority of people I talk with understand this issue and they're not blind to the idea that they have to live in the physical world. So the fears of the mid-90s (internet addiction, loss of social skills) appear to be overstated.

Your question here raises one other point: control. Whether online or offline, when it comes to communication and the "presentation of self" to others, we think we have more control than we actually do, anyway.

People spend a lot of time engaging in what we call image management: it's obvious when you see how people wear certain clothes to portray a certain image: for

work, parties, parents. We can see this happening in the classroom; students deliberately sit in the front row of class (or the back), they slouch or sit attentively. We see deliberate image management in everyday behaviours: We engage in flirting, pious, respectful, humble, etc., etc., types of communicative behaviours. We perform this image management stuff because we think our behaviours will have particular effects. And we tend to overestimate the extent to which other people get the exact message we intend to convey through these behaviours. Considering how much we also believe we are misunderstood, our control is an illusion. Thankfully, we have this illusion, really. It enables us to get through the day. Also, since everyone has this illusion, we end up with a shared belief that we understand each other.

Incidentally, it was hilarious and fun being Bambi. I could never have been a "Bambi" in physical life. Nobody would believe it. It felt like putting on a wig and changing my entire personality. I couldn't do that with ease in the physical world, but I achieved some of the effects by simply changing my name online. How bizarre is that? All because of a name.

....Of course, I was engaging all sorts of terrible stereotypes to experiment or worse, amuse myself, stereotypes that a real person named Bambi would probably not appreciate. And I was perpetuating stereotypes by interacting with others using this exaggerated 'Bambi' identity...there's some potentially significant damage done in the larger social picture there.... But that's a discussion about ethics for another day....