

The Informant's Perspective: *An Anthropologist on Mars*


Most field interviews in their final form look smooth and polished and don't reveal any fumbling, false starts, missed appointments, muddled communication, and malfunctioning equipment. Because fieldworking takes a long time, once interviewers and informants establish rapport, the early messiness and hesitations of the relationship fade into the background. When they experience troubles with interviewing, most researchers decide not to highlight them. But they talk and write about them a lot. Our favorite interviewer's story comes from the *Foxfire* collection (edited by Eliot "Wig" Wigginton and others). In this excerpt, a high school student named Paul Gillespie (working alongside his teacher, Wigginton) interviews an elderly informant named Aunt Arie at her house in the Appalachian Mountains.

[W]e walked in on her on Thanksgiving morning. She had her back to the door, and we startled her. There she was trying to carve the eyeballs out of a hog's head. I was almost sick to my stomach, so Wig helped operate on this hog's head while I turned my head and held the microphone of the tape recorder in the general vicinity of the action.

They struggled for at least fifteen minutes, maybe more, and then I witnessed one of the most amazing events of my life. Aunt Arie took an eyeball, went to the back door, and flung it out. When she threw it, the eyeball went up on the tin roof of an adjoining outbuilding, rolled off, snagged on the clothesline, and hung there bobbing like a yo-yo. I had Wig's Pentax, so I took a picture of it, and it appeared in a subsequent issue of the magazine. It was very funny, remarkable. (56)

Oliver Sacks is a doctor who specializes in disorders of the nervous system and uses some fieldworking strategies to understand the perspectives of his patients. Rather than examining them in a hospital setting, Sacks visits his patients in their own contexts to explore their lives "as they live in the real world." In fact, in the preface to his bestselling collection of interviews, *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*, he describes his fieldwork as "house calls at the far borders of human experience" (xx).

In one interview, he visits Temple Grandin, a woman with autism who, as a professor of animal science at Colorado State University, studies animal behavior. Sacks wanted to find out about autism from an insider's perspective. After researching autism from a medical point of view, he realized that he needed a person to give it voice, to create a portrait of the autistic person. Grandin told him that in her daily life, she feels like an outsider, like a researcher from another planet who is constantly studying the culture in which she lives to understand it. She provided Sacks with a critical understanding of her autistic worldview—as well as the title for his study—with the comment, "Much of the time I feel like an anthropologist on Mars."

In this essay from *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Sacks makes use of all the interviewing skills we've introduced in this chapter. He presents his information about Temple Grandin, offering details of her home, her own words, and her body language, and giving us especially her squeeze machine—the artifact which makes her so unique. Rather than relying on a question/answer interview format, Sacks holds an ordinary conversation with her as they drive together. By making her comfortable and by being interested in her life, Sacks allows Grandin to tell stories about her past relationship with her “enriched” research pigs—which provides him (and later us, his readers) with important insights about Grandin's personality as well as her neurological disorder. 

When he arrives at her house after the ride, he observes the artifacts there—buttons, badges, and the squeeze machine—which offer more information about her private and professional lives, about her worldview. Just as Paul Russ established rapport with his informant by talking about Jessie's dog, Sacks focuses on his informant's unusual apparatus for receiving affection and even tries it out to feel her perspective.

Although Sacks's polished final essay reveals none of the bones of the interview (as we offered with Cindie Marshall's notes on Teardrop), it's a good guess that Sacks took piles of fieldnotes and probably even recorded his conversation. The overall effect is that Sacks allows Grandin's words, her stories, and even her artifacts to guide his account of her story. Because of his careful research and detailed writing, this essay remains her story and not his.


Notice that each of the details he offers is like a puzzle piece, fitting one item at a time into this description.

An Anthropologist on Mars

Oliver Sacks

Early the next morning, a Saturday, Temple picked me up in her four-wheel-drive, a rugged vehicle she drives all over the West to visit farms, ranches, corrals, and meat plants. As we headed for her house, I quizzed her about the work she had done for her Ph.D.; her thesis on the effects of enriched and impoverished environments on the development of pigs' brains. She told me about the great differences that developed between the two groups—how sociable and delightful the “enriched” pigs became, how hyperexcitable and aggressive (and almost “autistic”) the “impoverished” ones were by contrast. (She wondered whether impoverishment of experience was not a contributing factor in human autism.) “I got to love my enriched pigs,” she said. “I was very attached. I was so attached I couldn't kill them.” The animals had to be sacrificed at the end of the experiment so their brains could be examined. She described how the pigs, at the end, trusting her, let her lead them on their last walk, and how she had calmed them, by stroking

them and talking to them, while they were killed. She was very distressed at their deaths—“I wept and wept.”

 She had just finished the story when we arrived at her home—a small two-story town house, some distance from the campus. Downstairs was comfortable, with the usual amenities—a sofa, armchairs, a television, pictures on the wall—but I had the sense that it was rarely used. There was an immense sepia print of her grandfather’s farm in Grandin, North Dakota, in 1880; her other grandfather, she told me, had invented the automatic pilot for planes. These two were the



Temple Grandin, Ph.D., a gifted animal scientist

(Courtesy of Temple Grandin)

progenitors, she feels, of her agricultural and engineering talents. Upstairs was her study, with her typewriter (but no word processor), absolutely bursting with manuscripts and books—books everywhere, spilling out of the study into every room in the house. (My own little house was once described as “a machine for working,” and I had a somewhat similar impression of Temple’s.) On one wall was a large cowhide with a huge collection of identity badges and caps, from the hundreds of conferences she has lectured at. I was amused to see, side by side, an I.D. from the American Meat Institute and one from the

American Psychiatric Association. Temple has published more than a hundred papers, divided between those on animal behavior and facilities management and those on autism. The intimate blending of the two was epitomized by the medley of badges side by side.

Finally, without diffidence or embarrassment (emotions unknown to her), Temple showed me her bedroom, an austere room with whitewashed walls and a single bed and, next to the bed, a very large, strange-looking object. “What is that?” I asked.

“That’s my squeeze machine,” Temple replied. “Some people call it my hug machine.”

The device had two heavy, slanting wooden sides, perhaps four by three feet each, pleasantly upholstered with a thick, soft padding. They were joined by hinges to a long, narrow bottom board to create a V-shaped, body-sized trough. There was a complex control box at one end, with heavy-duty tubes leading off to another device, in a closet. Temple showed me this as well. “It’s an industrial compressor,” she said, “the kind they use for filling tires.”

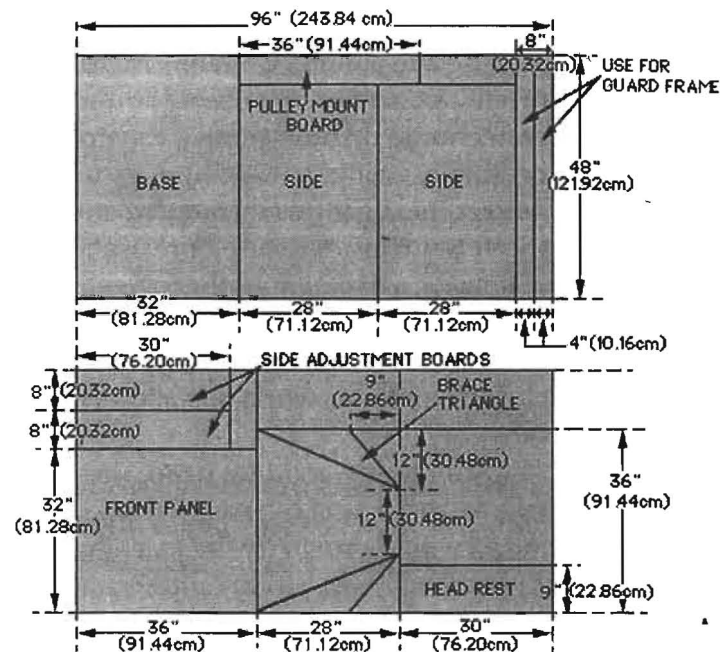
“And what does this do?”

"It exerts a firm but comfortable pressure on the body, from the shoulders to the knees," Temple said. "Either a steady pressure or a variable one or a pulsating one, as you wish," she added. "You crawl into it—I'll show you—and turn the compressor on, and you have all the controls in your hand, here, right in front of you."

When I asked her why one should seek to submit oneself to such pressure, she told me. When she was a little girl, she said, she had longed to be hugged but had at the same time been terrified of all contact. When she was hugged, especially by a favorite (but vast) aunt, she felt overwhelmed, overcome by sensation; she had a sense of peacefulness and pleasure, but also of terror and engulfment. She started to have daydreams—she was just five at the time—of a magic machine that could squeeze her powerfully but gently, in a huglike way, and in a way entirely commanded and controlled by her. Years later, as an adolescent, she had seen a picture of a squeeze chute designed to hold or restrain calves and realized that that was it: a little modification to make it suitable for human use, and it could be her magic machine. She had considered other devices—inflatable suits, which could exert an even pressure all over the body—but the squeeze chute, in its simplicity, was quite irresistible.

Being of a practical turn of mind, she soon made her fantasy come true. The early models were crude, with some snags and glitches, but she eventually evolved a totally comfortable, predictable system, capable of administering a "hug" with whatever parameters she desired. Her squeeze machine had worked exactly as she hoped, yielding the very sense of calmness and pleasure she had dreamed of since childhood. She could not have gone through the stormy days of college without her squeeze machine, she said. She could not turn to human beings for solace and comfort, but she could always turn to it. The machine, which she neither exhibited nor concealed but kept openly in her room at college, excited derision and suspicion and was seen by psychiatrists as a "regression" or "fixation"—something that needed to be psychoanalyzed and resolved. With her characteristic stubbornness, tenacity, single-mindedness, and bravery—along with a complete absence of inhibition or hesitation—Temple ignored all these comments and reactions and determined to find a scientific "validation" of her feelings.

PLYWOOD CUTTING DIAGRAM: MAKE ALL CUTS ON CENTER
USE TWO SHEETS OF 3/4" (19mm) AC PLYWOOD GRAIN WILL FACE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION



Schematic diagram of Temple Grandin's squeeze machine

(Courtesy of Temple Grandin)

Both before and after writing her doctoral thesis, she made a systematic investigation of the effects of deep pressure in autistic people, college students, and animals, and recently a paper of hers on this was published in the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology*. Today, her squeeze machine, variously modified, is receiving extensive clinical trials. She has also become the world's foremost designer of squeeze chutes for cattle and has published, in the meat-industry and veterinary literature, many articles on the theory and practice of humane restraint and gentle holding.

While telling me this, Temple knelt down, then eased herself, facedown and at full length, into the "V," turned on the compressor (it took a minute for the master cylinder to fill), and twisted the controls. The sides converged, claspng her firmly, and then, as she made a small adjustment, relaxed their grip slightly. It was the most bizarre thing I had ever seen, and yet, for all its oddness, it was moving and simple. Certainly there was no doubt of its effect. Temple's voice, often loud and hard, became softer and gentler as she lay in her machine. "I concentrate on how gently I can do it," she said, and then spoke of the necessity of "totally giving in to it.... I'm getting real relaxed now," she added quietly. "I guess others get this through relation with other people."

It is not just pleasure or relaxation that Temple gets from the machine but, she maintains, a feeling for others. As she lies in her machine, she says, her thoughts often turn to her mother, her favorite aunt, her teachers. She feels their love for her, and hers for them. She feels that the machine opens a door into an otherwise closed emotional world and allows her, almost teaches her, to feel empathy for others.

After twenty minutes or so, she emerged, visibly calmer, emotionally less rigid (she says that a cat can easily sense the difference in her at these times), and asked me if I would care to try the machine.

Indeed, I was curious and scrambled into it, feeling a little foolish and self-conscious—but less so than I might have been, because Temple herself was so wholly lacking in self-consciousness. She turned the compressor on again and filled the master cylinder, and I experimented gingerly with the controls. It was indeed a sweet, calming feeling—one that reminded me of my deep-diving days long ago, when I felt the pressure of the water on my diving suit as a whole-body embrace.

As you can tell from this essay on Temple Grandin, the process of asking and listening collaboratively allows us to gain the perspective of an "other." Examining our own assumptions and worldviews from the vantage points of others exposes us to our quirks and shortcomings and cultural biases. **In the process of understanding others, we come to more fully understand ourselves.**