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BOOK REVIEW

Working the difference: Science, spirit, and the spread of motivational interviewing

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Both E. Summerson Carr and her interlocutors, practitioners of the fast-spreading therapeutic intervention, Motivational Interviewing (MI), are attracted to the capaciousness of paradox. In *Working the Difference*, Carr's writing embraces this capaciousness, producing an ethnography that is both sweeping and meticulously fine-grained as it follows the remarkable dissemination of MI across fields of professional practice. Carr takes her reader from intimate MI training sessions at an underfunded social service agency, U-Haven, to the cluttered offices of MI researchers who voraciously produce scholarship on the intervention's effectiveness, to the social media pages of "MINTed" trainers in the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers, who travel the world spreading the MI gospel. In doing so, Carr investigates the scaling of cultural forms, asking why certain ideas, practices, and projects enjoy widespread dissemination, beyond the parochial locations of their birth. *Working the Difference* argues that this movement is made possible through the work of "actively managing *difference* in perspectives, affiliations, disciplinary ideals and identifications, and professional locations" to transform oppositions into generative paradox (pp. 22–23).

Carr's interlocutors delight in paradox, happily reframing various opposing ideals as productive puzzles to be embraced and worked through. As a "collaborative conversation style," MI is designed to get clients to "talk *themselves* into change" through careful attunement to client speech and the performance of well-timed reflections (pp. 30, 12). As such, it functions as both a behavioral intervention and a client-centered therapeutic method. MI practitioners cultivate a "disciplined naïveté," deploying a variety of rhetorical devices to "project uncertainty" (p. 33), thus avoiding the "expert trap" that would force clients to become passive recipients of expert knowledge (p. 31). In addition to embracing (in)expertise, MI reframes various other "either/or" configurations as capaciously "both/and": behaviorism and humanism, conscious performance and sincere presence, rationality and charismatic authority, and science and spirit. Moreover, in exploring these divergent ideals, *Working the Difference* argues that MI is a quintessentially *American* tradition, with each of the book's chapters organized around five distinctly American themes: American Democracy, American Rhetoric, American Spirit, American Science, and American Pragmatism.

"American Democracy" argues that MI's "signature (in)expertise" presents itself as a way to "defuse deep tensions in American governance" over how to direct self-governing subjects (p. 31). With professional interviewers disavowing their own expert position and recognizing the client interviewee as a knowledgeable subject, the MI therapeutic encounter

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becomes a model of participatory democracy "writ small" (p. 37). MI thereby revives the mid-twentieth-century debate between B.F. Skinner and Carl Rogers, forging a middle path between directive behaviorism and client-centered humanism.

"American Rhetoric" examines what happens when "helping professionals are retrained as rhetoricians" (p. 61). Readers of this journal may be especially interested in how Carr develops the concept of *reflexability*. Building on John Lucy and Michael Silverstein's work on reflexive language and metapragmatics, Carr illustrates how MI practitioners pragmatically, *reflexably* consider "evidence from the immediate past in the present to chart a knowable, if yet unknown, future" (p. 69). Carr describes how, just as MI expertise depends on inexpertise, MI practitioners' fluency entails disfluency, characterized by "long pauses, hedges, and stutters" (p. 76) that produce a "recognizable *practice poetics*" (p. 82). This chapter includes an interesting meditation on metalinguistic awareness and ethnographic practice as MI proponents object to Carr's analysis, denying any conscious attention to the poetics she describes. Carr considers the implications of poetics for the method's scalability—the ways poetics defy manualization and may necessitate an in vivo training industry—and questions the resulting stakes of (disavowing) metalinguistic awareness.

Chapter 3, "American Spirit," considers MI's grounding in American Protestant ideals and the ways its proponents' articulate the "spirit of MI" as transcending its technical elements. Carr argues that MINTed trainers defy Max Weber's thesis that spirit becomes mundane when directed toward capital accumulation in North America, as they continue to "describe their profit-generating work as thoroughly enchanted" (p. 100). Attending to MINTies' sense of their Weberian *vocation* to transmit the spirit of MI, often in quite lucrative ways, Carr proposes that MI accommodates both spirit and profit, as well as the "enchanted *and* rational, spiritual *and* technical, charismatic *and* bureaucratic" (p. 100).

"American Science" explores the "unholy alliance of scientific ideology and economic interests" that one MI founder credits for the "productization" of MI treatment methods (p. 132). Here, Carr examines the production of MI as an "evidenced-based practice" (EBP), which has been so essential to its dissemination. She suggests that it is based neither solely on the integrity of research trials nor the power of market forces but instead involves actors across state and federal bureaucracies, and is therefore "as neo-Keynesian as it is neoliberal" (p. 133). Embracing paradox yet again, MI proponents straddling the researcher–practitioner divide call on belief, faith, and humanism as much as science, rationalism, and positivism, taking up the EBP paradigm strategically as a legitimizing discourse to "empiricize humanistic values and methods" (p. 158).

In the final chapter, "American Pragmatism," Carr contends that MI inculcates principles elaborated by the American pragmatist philosophers William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and especially John Dewey, claiming that "to be trained in MI is to be trained in American pragmatism" (p. 166). Carr avoids tracing historical connections between the pragmatist forbears she cites and Progressive Era pragmatist social workers—or contemporary ones at U-Haven. Instead, Carr describes MI's pragmatism as a "vernacular" (p. 188). Carr examines MI training as "instruction in abduction" (p. 171), fostering a here-and-now focus on the immediate consequences of action, rather than abstractions, as well as a rigorously reflexive mode of knowledge production (p. 166). Here, Carr reveals the stakes of grounding therapeutic work in *interaction* instead of *interiority*. Despite the capaciousness of the method, "MI has no place for diagnosis" (p. 184).

While MI proponents celebrate the clinical and pragmatic possibilities of paradox, Carr does not hesitate to name that some distinctively American differences—notably profound inequities based in racial, ethnic, and linguistic difference—cannot be so easily reconciled. In fact, power differentials between the overwhelmingly white MI workforce and their racially minoritized clients may be intensified by the personal and financial enrichment the global MI training industry offers. Carr names the ways these differences are often erased

and ignored, with widely distributed training demonstration videos depicting interviewer–interviewee dyads "purged of racial, ethnic, or linguistic difference, as well as observable economic disparity" (p. 11). In the book's Conclusion, which might easily have been titled "American Inequity," to continue the theme, Carr affirms the pragmatic possibilities of paradox, but also questions its political and ethical limits, without a fully satisfying answer.

Those enrolled as therapeutic clients in the MI dyad are mostly absent from the text, sometimes taking on a ghostly presence, as in scenes when they are referred to postmortem by MI practitioner/trainees at U-Haven after a "rash of deaths" by overdose and illness (p. 168). Despite this absence, there is no dearth of in situ enactments of MI throughout the text: in the "role plays" and "real plays" central to MI training, and even in the MI-inflected ethnographic interviews Carr skillfully presents. Still, readers of Carr's earlier work, *Scripting Addiction* (Princeton University Press, 2011), may be struck by the absence of the careful attention to the linguistic practices of those enrolled as clients in the therapeutic dyad that made that ethnography so compelling. Far from an oversight, this absence may reflect the "invisibility" of MI to clients (p. 10); that is, that if the method is performed correctly, clients will not be aware of it. It may also reflect Carr's attention to MI as a *professionally* productive practice to "revitalize" practitioners (p. 6). However, this absence may also point to another paradox of Motivational Interviewing identified in passing by a trainee in Carr's footnotes: that MI's rigorous reflexivity may in fact estrange the interviewee from the interviewer, despite the method's commitment to client-centeredness, resulting in the client "slipping from view" (p. 231n36). This critique of MI practice resonates remarkably with those of the "reflexive turn" in anthropology, which, as Carr notes, emerged contemporaneously with MI.

In *Working the Difference*, Carr brings together a dazzling array of literatures to speak to audiences across multiple anthropological subfields—linguistic, medical, psychological, and sociocultural—as well as practitioner–researchers like her interlocutors. In speaking directly to this latter audience, the author makes a profound contribution to the anthropology of expertise and ethnographic endeavors to "study up." Throughout her fieldwork, Carr deftly confronted the daunting challenge of interviewing expert interviewers, recognizing when MI techniques were being used on her and, in turn, performing her own MI (in)expertise, making self-described "paltry" attempts to employ these techniques herself—in some cases bearing great fruit (p. 197). Despite the author's modest self-deprecation about her own Motivational Interviewing skill, Carr's skill as an ethnographic interviewer is on full display. As in her previous work, Carr demonstrates a keen methodological awareness of the interview context that makes her exceptionally well-suited to take on the formidable task of interviewing (in) experts. Yet Carr also makes a compelling case that *every* ethnographer ought to be as accountable to their interlocutors as those studying experts must be—whether or not they can expect those they write about to engage as assiduously with their final ethnographic products.

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