

# Individuals in Anthropology

**Jan Patrick Heiss**

University of Zürich

Institut für Sozialanthropologie und Empirische Kulturwissenschaft, Ethnologie, Andreasstr. 15,  
CH-8050 Zürich

**Albert Piette**

Department of Anthropology, Paris West University Nanterre

In 1570, John Dee, a Euclidean geometry specialist, mathematician, astronomer, geographer and a bit of a mystic, associated anthropology with the description of the number, size, shape, location and color of every element in the human body. During the Renaissance, anthropography was a cross-disciplinary project that was viewed as a kind of “cartography” intended to enable an increasingly complex understanding of human beings.<sup>1</sup> The term “anthropography” was primarily restricted to the study of people’s physical and anatomical characteristics. But what would an anthropographer do today? He would first observe a human being, an individual. His methodological point of departure would be the individual, the single human being, which anthropology encounters in the field, but loses sight of in the course of the research process.

Siegfried Ferdinand Nadel has put this idea of losing sight of the individual into words. In his classic “The Foundations of Social Anthropology“, Nadel writes “At every step of our inquiry, then, we observe individuals; yet step by step our analysis also leads us away from the individual to something else” (Nadel 1951:92). Social anthropologists encounter individuals – this is obvious – but they shift attention away from them to describe and analyze patterns of action, social relations, societies, cultures, structures, etc. The most notable example of an anthropology that does not accommodate the idea of the individual seems to be the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, which exclusively focuses on structures.

An approach that aims to shift attention away from the individual and “find” general patterns causes the individual to disappear. Carlo Ginzburg saw this as well. He comments on natural science at an earlier time, when Galileo Galilei channelled it into

---

<sup>1</sup> See Del Sapio Garbero M. (2010). In 1618, physician Jean Riolan published an “*Anthropographie*”, which he defined as an anatomical description of man: see Tilkin (2008).

an “anti-anthropocentric and anti-anthropomorphic direction which it would never again abandon” over and against those doctors who made their diagnoses “by sniffing at faeces and tasting urine” (Ginsburg 2013:98). These are the roots of the alternative that characterizes the history of the sciences: “either sacrifice knowledge of the individual element for generalizations [...] or attempt to develop, even if tentatively, a different paradigm, founded on scientific knowledge of the individual... but a body of knowledge yet to be defined” (2013:101).

One can thus safely ask the question: Does the anthropology of the individual not exist? Would it not be an interesting endeavour to make anthropology become a little bit more anthropo-graphic, to let it not only observe cultural patterns and social processes, but also individuals? In this special issue we would like to propose an approach that is focused on the individual, and point out that anthropology need not be just an economic anthropology or cultural anthropology or linguistic anthropology; it can – or even should – discuss and consider individuals. It should not shift its attention away from individuals but focus on them and study them. Then anthropology would be going back to what the term “anthropology” denotes, the *anthropos*.

But what does this imply? The contributors of this special issue try to imagine what an anthropology of the individual might be. However, before getting to their contributions, we will shed some light on how anthropology has dealt with individuals so far. We will show that the question of an anthropology of the individual has not been raised directly, although many authors allude to it. We will then come back to the articles. Each of the contributors deals with a different aspect of an anthropology of the individual. This allows us to develop a broad outline for the study of the individual in anthropology, one that constitutes a first step that is far from exhaustive. We would be happy if this special issue inspired other anthropologists in their own work.

## 1. The individual in anthropology so far

Whereas much of anthropology does not see much benefit in the concept of the individual (as we have mentioned in relation to Levi-Strauss), other anthropologists have proved receptive to this topic.

As mentioned above, Siegfried Ferdinand Nadel noticed the problem as early as 1951. He made a distinction between the individual and the person. The individual was the human being and the person was coterminous with the notion of the role as a set of rights and duties. Roles existed independently of individuals, and individuals would play different roles at different times. The individual who played a role did not, however, completely disappear “from the scene”. In any role-performance, he said, the actor’s individuality would be visible. In acting, individuals would have a certain leeway that would even allow them to break the rules (1951:93 f.). Temperament, interests, moods and the experience of solitude all belonged to the individual, not to the role and thus not to society, which Nadel defines as the sum total of persons (1951:95).

In our view, this distinction between the individual and the role or person is useful, albeit only as an analytical distinction. It serves to distinguish an aspect or component of behaviour that moulds action into uniformity. However, roles, norms, rights and duties are only effective insofar as they are followed or implemented by individuals.<sup>2</sup> They have their existence only as aspects of the behaviour of individuals, and there is thus no entity to which we could ascribe temperament and mood but not norms and rights. Unfortunately, Nadel's distinction introduces a gap between the role and society on the one hand and the individual on the other. Once this gap has been created, it becomes possible to disregard the individual, as it became common among many writers of the structural-functionalist school (which, however, we should point out, has been one of the highlights of anthropology).

To cite an empirical example, Paul Riesman (1977) describes the Jelgob'e-Fulb'e of Burkina Faso. He does not make his research question entirely clear, but it seems to be: "What does it mean to be a Jelgob'e?". He approaches his field-subjects in a way that comprises those aspects that Nadel so carefully differentiated between. Riesman describes the social practices that are representative of the group, and at the same time tries to identify the ramifications of these practices for the individual. To provide an example of his approach, we will briefly look at his analysis of the *pulaaku*-concept (1977:116–41). The *pulaaku*-concept comprises a variety of norms for behaviour in public. If a person's public actions violate these norms, he feels ashamed. At the same time, the person's shame motivates him to abide by the norms set out in the *pulaaku*-concept. Here Riesman links norms with "temperament, mood etc.", which Nadel saw as pertaining to the individual. However, in his study, Riesman sticks to the idea that he should only search for something general. Asking "What does it mean to be a Jelgob'e?" is a question that aims at identifying those aspects of individuals that pertain to the group at large. Whereas he gets closer to the lived reality of the individual than Nadel, he still understands his field-subjects as representatives of a certain type. An anthropology of the individual, however, would not start with this assumption. Instead it would try to be open to the idea that individuals might fall short of complying with the characteristics of their type, describing individuals "as they are" and deciding later if, and to what extent, they have the features that define a certain type.

Tim Ingold writes: "I am an anthropologist; not a social or cultural anthropologist; not a biological or archaeological anthropologist; just an anthropologist" (Ingold 2011: XI). But following this principle to the very end is not a simple matter. Because it appears that the focus of Ingold's work strays from the individual to the advantage of relations. We cannot endorse this idea of a relationist world. What is in such a world?

---

<sup>2</sup> Methodological individualism has, of course, seen this point as well. However, methodological individualism strives to explain the social by reference to certain traits of individuals, it does not strive to understand the individual "as such".

There are people, organism-persons in fact, but they are not delimited entities. They are “nexus composed of knotted lines whose slack extremities spread in every direction while mixing with other lines and other knots” (Ingold 2013:9). These humans do not live inside their bodies, but are in “continuous exchange of materials through layers of constantly extending and mutating skin” (ibid.: 10). There are not individuals on the one hand and an environment external to them on the other, but “an indivisible totality” (ibid.: 28) and an uninterrupted relational field. In such a painting, we should not search for singular, autonomous individuals. They are nothing else than processes and movement “generated within a relational field that cuts across the interface within its environment” (Ingold 1990:220). “Separate parts” are only useful for considering machines, not life. According to Ingold, to understand life, it is important to conceive of it not as separate fragments but as “the unfolding of a continuous and ever-evolving field of relations” (Ingold 2011:237). Thus the relationist painting abandons any ontology of the individual. “In organic life, every part unfolds his or her relations with every other person”. This recalls Marilyn Strathern’s work on Melanesian people, who she says “contain a generalized sociality within” (Ingold 1990:222). Being indissociable from relations, people are thus represented in their engagement and not their disengagement, an active engagement in an environment or an activity that enables them to engage in direct, perceptual relations with humans and nonhumans. According to Ingold, it is not a matter of choosing between an individual and the external reality, but rather of painting a fluid space where “there are no well-defined objects or entities. There are rather substances that flow, mix and mutate, sometimes congealing into more or less ephemeral forms” (Ingold 2013:86). Again, with Ingold, we have an anthropologist who shifts his attention away from individuals as entities that exist in the world and deserve to be studied as such. His individuals “dissolve” into relations, yet the task should be to consider both sides together. Individuals engage in relations, shape relations and are shaped by relations, but their existence cannot be reduced to or deduced from the set of relations they are part of.

Another approach to individuals needs to be mentioned. Individuals have mainly become a theme in anthropology within the study of life-histories. Important works have been written in this field (Shostak 1982, Smith 1954, van Onselen 1996). However, this approach needs to be qualified. Firstly, although these contributors conduct their studies with individuals, their object of study is not the individuals themselves; it is the life-history of individuals from the point of view of the individual they are working with. These are two different things that have to be kept apart. One’s life-history is a symbolic construct and an individual is an empirical reality. Secondly, there is a difference in methodology. The study of life-histories is carried out through biographical interviews. The researcher sits with the field-subject and asks him questions. This is a method appropriate to the subject; as we have seen, it is a symbolic construct to be constructed through a joint effort between the researcher and field-subject. However, the study of individuals involves a set of methods in which participant observation occupies a central place.

Thus three anthropologists – Nadel, Riesman, Ingold – and the study of life-histories somehow address the topic of the individual while at the same time circumventing it.

## 2. The theme

The articles of this special issue try to develop an anthropology of the individual. They discuss some of its dimensions and present arguments for further discussion. It seems to us that the topic could best be discussed under a number of aspects that relate to each other and feed into each other. The first task would, of course, be to consider the question of what we might understand by the term “individual”.

### *How should the individual be conceived?*

In his article “Relations, Individuals and Presence”, Albert Piette aims to clarify what an individual is and what constitutes the object of anthropological inquiry. He argues that anthropology focuses on relations, and he dubs this attitude “relationism”. He shows that relations are the main object of interest in the works of Goffman, Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu and Latour. Challenging these authors, he argues that they overlook the relata connected in and by relations: the individuals. These, in Piette’s view, exist independently of the relations they engage in. They have a being of their own that changes and is shaped in various ways throughout the day and from situation to situation. Their “volume of being”, he argues, deserves to be the object of anthropological study. Piette also examines the ramifications of this idea in the area of methodology.

Piette has been developing the idea of an existential anthropology over the last few years. His main idea, as he presents it in his article, is that the individual is engaged in relations, but the study of these relations does not exhaust what an individual is. He thus has tried to unravel all those components, aspects and features of individuals that have not been captured by an anthropology that focuses on interaction and is oblivious of what occurs in an individual independently of the action or interaction he is involved in. His main term to denote these is “the leftover”. According to him, individuals show an extraordinary flexibility or fluidity in the way they actually “are” in a given moment. One might say, so Piette argues, that a human being is a constantly changing micrototality, result of 20, 40, 50 years, in which one can pinpoint family socializations, professional choices that are themselves guided by these family socializations, as well as various moods, states of mind, acts, and gestures. A kind of stratified “monster” alongside other human and nonhuman monsters in a specific scene. It is said that society or association arises as soon as two individuals enter into relations, and it is therefore a matter of focusing the examination not on the constituted aggre-

gate as it might be observed by an observer, but focusing instead, on the one hand, on the modes of presence of the aforementioned individual engaging in relations, acting, withdrawing from the relations and entering into other relations and, on the other hand, the relations that this individual thus successively encounters, which he perceives more or less actively, more or less passively. According to Piette, doing the anthropology of an individual therefore means observing everything that happens to him, everything he does, and examining how he lives in the succession of moments, doing so without injecting the idea of substance. Concrete, real individuals with their various differences, their various singularities, including those manifested in sociocultural contexts that are more or less (even not at all) individualizing or singularizing. Each of them can be grasped thus composed of diverse layers of life experience. Especially given that when X uses one of these well-culturalized layers in a situation, he is at moment  $t$  more than this layer. Then what is he like and what does he feel?

Jan Patrick Heiss shares with Piette the aim of developing a theory of the individual. He argues from a perspective that strives to integrate diverse approaches into a unified idea of the individual. In his paper “Assessing Ernst Tugendhat’s philosophical anthropology as a theoretical template for an empirical anthropology of the individual”, Heiss makes the observation that anthropology does not have a theory of the individual to use as its point of departure. He therefore examines a theoretical approach from outside anthropology – Tugendhat’s philosophical anthropology – and tries to assess its utility for anthropology. Tugendhat’s approach enables him to give an explicit form to the implicit notions of the individual used by some anthropologists. At the same time, Tugendhat’s theory proves to be encompassing enough to show that these anthropologists underestimate the individual’s complexity, causing them to produce incomplete accounts of individuals. Tugendhat’s theory proves its utility in these respects. However, Heiss also compares Tugendhat’s approach with these anthropologists’ writings and with Piette (2009) and shows where Tugendhat’s theory needs to be further developed in order to better serve anthropology’s needs.

Taken together, both contributions tackle the question of how to conceive of the individual. They fill the notion of the individual with meaning and provide an overview of various phenomena that pertain to it. However, the study of the individual goes beyond the question what an individual is.

### *The individual and socio-cultural institutions*

Anthropology works with individuals, and in an attempt to generalize, it finds structures and patterns in society. However, when anthropology generalizes about society (relations of authority between generations, for instance), it makes statements that do not correspond to the behaviour of every single individual. Generalization is based on a sample and usually pertains only to some members of the sample, whereas other members are treated as too small in number to be relevant. Of course, anthropology

is also interested in variation. It conceives not only types, but also sub-types. Yet, the argument holds for sub-types as well.

At times, individuals behave according to these general traits and are indeed their carriers (when young people accept their elders' authority, for instance). Yet it is never possible to deduce an individual's living reality and his constituent traits from general knowledge of his society. We cannot collate marriage practices, family relations, religious doctrines and the history of a society and knit these together to form an accurate picture of the individual. There is a gap between our knowledge of society and our knowledge of its constituent individuals. Three of the contributions – those by Jabiot, Verne and Plancke – address this gap.

In her article “On individual variations regarding beliefs”, Isabelle Jabiot examines a common belief in djinns among Moroccans. It is shared by most Moroccans, and yet she shows that individual Moroccans do not have the same relationships to this commonly held belief. She demonstrates this with reference to two Moroccan city-dwellers. They ascribe different identities to the djinns, and when they are presented with an alternative interpretation of the identities of djinns, this strengthens their belief in the truth of their own perspective. Moreover, the validity of beliefs that are firmly embedded in their actions as tacit knowledge is suspended when these beliefs become a subject of discussion. Next, she argues that an actor's emotions in a specific situation can strengthen his belief. Finally, beliefs can become emblematic of one's cherished way of life and this can make the actor cling to a belief. Jabiot concludes that sharing a belief does not imply also sharing the relation to the belief. On the contrary, she shows that the relation that individuals have to their beliefs is specific to themselves and their present circumstances.

Jabiot's contribution also shows the process through which social institutions are reproduced in society in a more differentiated light. In contrast to an understanding of social and cultural reproduction which sees social and cultural institutions as reproduced through mere repetition and the continuous adherence of individuals to society's institutions, reproduction is presented as a complex process, with institutions embedded in an environment of shifting factors, some of them firmly tied to the individuals and their individual situations.

Markus Verne shares Jabiot's concerns. Like Jabiot, he discusses the relationship between individuals and the “givens” in their environment, but he focuses on another aspect of how individuals relate to society's institutions. Verne is interested in the process through which individuals change these social institutions. In his article “Music, Transcendence, and the Need for (existential) Anthropologies of the Individual”, Markus Verne studies heavy metal musicians from Madagascar who pursue the goal of transcending the standard of Malagasy heavy metal with determination over a long period of time. However, he understands their new music not as a product of the social and cultural conditions under which they come into existence, but as a product of the musicians' imagination, of their delving into fantastic scenarios that have existential meaning. Furthermore, he argues that moments of transcendence are central to our

everyday lives and culture, as well. He concludes that focussing on individuals gives us access to the *loci* where these processes occur.

Thus Verne takes a radical stance. As we said above, it would be impossible to deduce an individual's living reality and his constituent traits from general knowledge of his society. However, this leaves open the possibility that it is a mere lack of knowledge and that, if one acquired this knowledge, one would be able to deduce the individual and his constituent traits from the general. Individuals' different relationships with their beliefs could then be explained by reference to a certain psychological theory, for instance. Yet Verne thinks that there exists something like an individual creative autonomy that eludes process-based explanations like these and expresses itself in human imagination. In unforeseeable ways, Verne's musicians react to their society's music and to global templates and develop their own style.

The same creative act that spawns or shapes new forms is also the focus of Carine Plancke's contribution. In her article "Shaping Affective Drives: An Anthropological Close-Up of Singing Subjects", Plancke focuses on two individuals from Congo-Brazzaville who stand out in their rural communities as singers. As she closely concentrates on two individuals, her detailed analysis enables her to capture the dynamics of inventing songs in conjunction with the act of singing. The words that the singer produces are rooted in her deeply felt personal experience, which gives rise to the creative production of words that often draw on proverbial expressions. Then the act of singing consists of a circuit: the singers sing their words and their audience responds to them. This creates the impression of an echo, which feeds back onto the singer's creative impulse and makes her produce new words. However, singing is not only affect-driven; the singers also deliberately craft their songs.

Thus Carine Plancke shows how individuals produce new forms of culture – new songs that will be taken up by a community and become shared institutions. However, these shared songs are a product of individuals who possess a certain skill in producing new songs, drawing on their emotions, their intentions, the interaction dynamic, and on institutions like proverbs.

With Jabiôt, we see individuals sharing social and cultural institutions, but not sharing the same relationships to these institutions. Verne and Plancke show that the existence of shared institutions can only be understood and explained by reference to individuals who – in their given situation – come up with new forms of believing or acting.

These contributions by Jabiôt, Verne and Plancke offer a perspective on the study of individuals that makes it appear pivotal to the study of the reproduction and production of society. The argument for research on individuals runs like this: A society's traits have to be reproduced if they are to endure and they have to be altered if society changes. In processes of reproduction as well as in processes of change, individuals are of pivotal importance. They are the *locus* in which old practices are reproduced or new practices come into being. New practices typically come into being in the course of interaction, but it is the individual agent who invents, implements or proposes the



new practice – not the interaction as such. If we want to understand not just which features of a society are reproduced or changed, but also how they are reproduced or changed, we have to take a close look at individuals.

Yet the study of individuals also goes beyond this. Whereas a sociologically oriented anthropology only concerns itself with the social (i. e. the shared and general), an anthropology of the individual, as Jabiôt, Verne and Plancke show, is also open to those phenomena which are not shared but are particular or unique to individuals.

This is the point at which Trond Waage contributes to the discussion. Whereas Jabiôt, Verne and Plancke focus on individuals as such, Waage looks at the processes in which individuals interact and build social organisation. In his article “Mutual dependency – Young male migrants from the Central African Republic in Urban Cameroon”, he writes about migrants from a variety of places over West and Central Africa who gather at a water tap in Ngaoundéré (Northern Cameroon) and work as water carriers. Waage understands the group as put together by individuals who have their individual lives which they strive to live. Their interactions are intertwined with their life projects which oscillate between hope and frustration. At the same time, they continuously create and re-create the social organisation of their group. Waage tries to capture the processes in which their individual aspirations and the group’s order are intertwined through detailed micro-ethnological analyses. This enables him to show the liquidity of the group’s order. Correspondingly, Waage warns against a generalizing approach towards the migrants’ lives and the social organisation of their group.

In a way, Waage continues Jabiôt’s, Verne’s and Plancke’s line of thought. Whereas the three other contributors show that the relation between social institutions and individuals are complex and diverse, Waage feeds these ideas into the thematic field of group organisation and depicts the group’s order as liquid precisely because it is continuously worked upon by dynamic individuals.

### *Individuals as a folk category and object of attention*

So far, we have dealt with individuals as they “are”, as entities in the world that merit study. They are perceived, considered and described by ethnographic observers. However, individuals are also part of every actor’s environment. How actors perceive individuals, and the importance of these perceptions in the context of interpersonal relationships, is another question to be considered.

In their article “Individuals and humanity: Sharing the experience of serious illness”, Yannis Papadaniel, Nicole Brzak and Marc-Antoine Berthod tackle this question. They observe family members supporting relatives who are terminally ill and close to death. The process develops a dynamic of its own in which old friendships end, new friendships are formed, people juggle their work and their family, the perspectives of the living and those about to die begin to diverge and people experience loneliness. However, those who support their relatives sometimes encounter others

with whom they interact for a short time. Perhaps only a passing gesture or remark is exchanged, but they experience this interaction as particularly human. In these moments, the actors shed their social roles and engage with each other as individuals.

Papadaniel, Brzak and Berthod show that our mutual perceptions and identity ascriptions are fluid. Whereas we may perceive each other in terms of our roles and statuses, we can also act as individuals and perceive others as individuals, beyond the narrow limitations of institutionalized roles. However, when we act as individuals and perceive each other as individuals, we are not taking on a new role, but are “being ourselves”.

### *Methods*

“These insensible perceptions indicate also and constitute the same individual who is characterized by the traces or expressions which they conserve of preceding states of this individual, in making the connection with his present state” (Leibniz 2010:49). These propositions from Leibniz are very clearly the basic principle of an anthropology of individuals. In Leibniz’s work, understanding individual “substance” is key. It is a “me”, the mark of a singular point of view resulting from the accumulation of the “insensible” perceptions of the same individual, who is also capable of apperception, habit, memory and reflection. Corporeal and driven by a life principle, he acts and suffers. Leibniz’s philosophical work is of course well known for conceiving the system, harmony and its theological permeation. But the emphasis on human beings as products of various liaisons is tempered by a conception of human beings as unique products that are irreplaceable in the play of connections. “Leibniz makes us understand that an individual can only be correctly defined by his or her irreducible singularity”, notes Christiane Frémont (2003:162). It is also in the work of Leibniz that we find an elaboration of the variations between entities and their ever-changing continuity, the singularity and uniqueness that characterize them: “I remember that a distinguished princess, who is of a pre-eminently excellent mind, said one day while walking in her garden that she did not believe there were two leaves perfectly alike. A gentleman of distinction, who was walking with her, thought he would easily find some. But although he searched long, he was convinced by his eyes that he could always note the difference” (Leibniz 2010:240). Individual substances are thus incessantly in action, penetrated by diverse and subtle thoughts, impressions and perceptions of varying degrees of clarity, always spilling outside of the principal activity. “Nothing is accomplished all at once, and it is one of my great maxims, and one of the most verified, that nature makes no leaps: a maxim I called Law of Continuity” (Leibniz 2010:50).

In Leibniz’s writings we find an idea of the individual that connects both sides, the individual in his own existence and the individual in relation to others. He even goes so far as to contend that each individual has his unique form of existence different

from that of all others. And indeed, that is how humans understand themselves, as unique. This detour through the work of Leibniz (other philosophers could have been chosen) gives a good idea of the aims of an anthropology of individuals. From an empirical point of view, these requirements raise methodological questions as well.

We believe two aspects need to be highlighted. Firstly, a comprehensive notion of the individual must underpin the study of individuals. Research on individuals should not predefine specific components or traits of individuals as unimportant. It should remain open to the many aspects that make up individuals. As can be seen in the contributions to this special issue, this notion of the individual encompasses a wide array of points of observations. It comprises the principal desires that drive individuals and their most relevant actions and interactions; shared elements of knowledge; the set of relationships in which a person is embedded (see Heiss); acts of creativity (see Verne, Plancke); varying degrees of knowledge certainty (see Jabirot); shifting perceptions of others (see Papadaniel, Brzak, Berthod); casual gestures and shifting inner states (see Piette).

It follows from this notion of the individual that the complete array of anthropological methods is important to the anthropologist (cf. Elwert 2003). However, participant observation is the most important method for this notion, at least where it is feasible. More than many other areas of research, the study of individuals hinges on close observation of the field-subject. Many of the things that interest an ethnographer of individuals will not be accessible through an interview. Instead, the ethnographer of individuals uses all the “avenues” that are open to him in participant observation. He observes, listens, asks for more information in the context of the action; he might perform the acts that the field-subject carries out; he spends a lot of time with the field-subject so the field becomes accustomed to his presence, minimising his own impact on the situation; he engages in conversations and spends a lot of time with the field-subjects in order to develop empathy towards them and understand how they perceive and interpret the situation they are in. Thus he engages in what Spittler (2001), in an attempt to champion and radicalize participant observation, called “thick participation”.

Some years ago, Albert Piette coined the term phenomenography (*phénoménographie*) to designate the set of methods that is best suited to the study of individuals. Given the complexity of the notion of the individual, Piette stresses the importance of an observation method that records as many details of the field-subject’s behaviour as possible. Any detail might offer a clue to what is going on inside the individual: secondary gestures, hesitations, looking in a different direction, etc. He proposes that the researcher follow his field-subject from situation to situation, even from moment to moment. Piette also stresses the importance of photography and film in this context. The observation could also be completed by detailed analyses of specific moments. Film and other forms of digital self-observation could also help make it possible to pinpoint and compare the modes of presence of *each person* taking part in the situation. Photography and film enable us to escape from the narrow confines of the

fleeting moment and review the same data over and over again, to discover details that previously went unnoticed, thus getting a sense of the many things that go on in an individual's life at a specific moment in time. This would also make it possible to systematically compare the behaviour and mode of being of the same person in different situations. Over and above this, Piette suggests that the phenomenographer can also ask field-subjects to explain their states of mind at one moment or another; help them verbalize thoughts or feelings they may have forgotten; confront these individuals with films of their acts; ask them to write and keep "journals", requesting that they give particular attention to specific aspects of modes of presence.

What Spittler calls "thick participation" and what Piette calls "phenomenography" encompasses a variety of methods that are considered appropriate for the study of individuals in anthropology. However, the applicability of methods in the field is not just a function of the theme. It also depends on the field-subject's willingness to work with these methods, as well as their impact on the situations observed. The choice of methods therefore has to be adapted to each research-situation. The study of individuals implies a certain intensity of interaction between researcher and field-subject, and this could presumably have an impact on the observed situations. The ethnographer of individuals needs to be particularly aware of this issue and develop sensitive strategies that minimize his influence. He might find a solution to this problem in his own compatibility with the field-subject, in his field-subject's ability to adapt to his presence, in temporary withdrawal from the scene or in his own unimportance to the actions that take place in the situations observed.

### 3. Conclusion

We hope to have shown that anthropology has largely been oblivious of the individual as such. However, so it seems to us, it is worth an effort to explore this theme further. Within the purview of an anthropology of the individual, we need to reflect on how to conceive the individual, on the role of the individual in the production and reproduction of society, the nature of creativity, the mutual perception of individuals, on the methodology we need to observe and understand individuals and we also have to fathom where the contribution of an anthropology of the individual for other parts of anthropology may lie. What the contributors have provided here is just a beginning and we would like to invite others to engage with the topic and its various dimensions.

### References

- Del Sapio Garbero, Maria 2010: Introduction: Shakespeare's Rome and Renaissance 'Anthropographie'. In: M. Del Sapio Garbero, N. Isenberg and M. Pennachia (eds.), *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome*. Goettingen: V&R Unipress GmbH, pp. 13–20.

- Elwert, Georg 2003: Feldforschung – Orientierungswissen und kreuzperspektivische Analyse. *Sozial-anthropologische Arbeitspapiere* Nr. 96. Berlin: Hans Schiler.
- Frémont, Christiane 2003: *Singularités. Individus et relations dans le système de Leibniz*. Paris: Vrin.
- Ginsburg, Carlo 2013: *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ingold, Tim 1990: An Anthropologist at Biology. *Man* 25, 2:208–229.
- Ingold, Tim 2011: *Being Alive. Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim 2013: *Marcher avec les dragons*. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 2010: *New essays concerning human understanding*. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing.
- Nadel, Siegfried F. 1951: *The Foundations of Social Anthropology*. London: Routledge.
- Piette, Albert 2015: Existence, Minimality and Believing. In: M. D. Jackson and A. Piette (eds.), *What is Existential Anthropology?* Oxford – New York: Berghahn Books.
- Piette, Albert forthcoming: *Existence in the Details. Theory and Methodology in Existential Anthropology*. Berlin: Duncker and Humblot.
- Riesman, Paul 1977: *Freedom in Fulani social life. An introspective ethnography*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Shostak, Marjorie 1982: *Nisa: the life and words of a !Kung woman*. London: Allen Lane.
- Smith, Mary F. 1954: *Baba of Karo: a woman of the Muslim Hausa*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Spittler, Gerd 2001: Teilnehmende Beobachtung als Dichte Teilnahme. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 126:1–25.
- Tilkin, Françoise (ed.) 2008: *L'Encyclopédisme au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Liège: Bibliothèque de la faculté de Philosophie et Lettres.
- Van Onselen, Charles 1996: *The seed is mine: the life of Kas Maine, a South African sharecropper 1894–1985*. New York: Hill and Wang.

