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The First Step: An Overview

A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.
—Lao-tzu

Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture. The description may be of a small tribal group in an exotic land or a classroom in middle-class suburbia. The task is much like the one taken on by an investigative reporter, who interviews relevant people, reviews records, weighs the credibility of one person's opinions against another's, looks for ties to special interests and organizations, and writes the story for a concerned public and for professional colleagues. A key difference between the investigative reporter and the ethnographer, however, is that whereas the journalist seeks out the unusual—the murder, the plane crash, or the bank robbery—the ethnographer writes about the routine, daily lives of people. The more predictable patterns of human thought and behavior are the focus of inquiry.

Ethnographers are noted for their ability to keep an open mind about the group or culture they are studying. This quality, however, does not imply any lack of rigor. The ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, not an empty head. Before asking the first question in the field, the ethnographer begins with a problem, a theory or model, a research design, specific data collection techniques, tools for analysis, and a specific writing style.

The ethnographer also begins with biases and preconceived notions about how people behave and what they think—as do researchers in every field. Indeed, the choice of what problem, geographic area, or people to study is in itself biased. Biases serve both positive and negative functions. When controlled, biases can focus and limit the research effort. When uncontrolled, they can undermine the quality of ethnographic research. To mitigate the negative effects of bias, the ethnographer must first make specific biases explicit. A series of additional quality controls, such as

triangulation, contextualization, and a nonjudgmental orientation, place a check on the negative influence of bias.

An open mind also allows the ethnographer to explore rich, untapped sources of data not mapped out in the research design. The ethnographic study allows multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data throughout the study. The ethnographer is interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider's, perspective. The ethnographer is both storyteller and scientist; the closer the reader of an ethnography comes to understanding the native's point of view, the better the story and the better the science.

This chapter presents an overview of the steps involved in ethnographic work. The following chapters elaborate these steps in detail. The process begins when the ethnographer selects a problem or topic and a theory or model to guide the study. The ethnographer simultaneously chooses whether to follow a basic or applied research approach to delineate and shape the effort. The research design then provides a basic set of instructions about what to do and where to go during the study. Fieldwork is the heart of the ethnographic research design. In the field, basic anthropological concepts, data collection methods and techniques, and analysis are the fundamental elements of "doing ethnography." Selection and use of various pieces of equipment—including the human instrument—facilitate the work. This process becomes product through analysis at various stages in ethnographic work—in field notes, memoranda, interim reports, and, most dramatically, the published report, article, or book.

The following chapters present these steps in a logical order, using concrete case examples throughout to illustrate each step. This step-by-step approach also highlights the utility of planning and organization in ethnographic work. The more organized the ethnographer, the easier is his or her task of making sense of the mountains of data collected in the field. Sifting through notepads filled with illegible scrawl, listening to hours of tape recordings, labeling and organizing piles of pictures and slides, and cross-referencing disks of data are much less threatening to the ethnographer who has taken an organized, carefully planned approach.

The reality, however, is that ethnographic work is not always orderly. It involves serendipity, creativity, being in the right place at the right or wrong time, much hard work, and old-fashioned luck. Thus, although this text proceeds within the confines of an orderly structure, I have made a concerted effort to ensure that it also conveys the unplanned, sometimes chaotic, and always intriguing character of ethnographic research.

Whereas in most research, analysis follows data collection, in ethnographic research analysis and data collection begin simultaneously. An ethnographer is a human instrument and must discriminate among different types of data and analyze the relative worth of one path over another at every turn in fieldwork, well before any formalized analysis takes place. Clearly, ethnographic research involves many different levels of analysis. Analysis is an ongoing responsibility and joy from the first moment an ethnographer envisions a new project to the final stages of writing and reporting the findings.

THE PROBLEM

Ethnographic research begins with the selection of a problem or topic of interest. The research problem that the ethnographer chooses guides the entire research endeavor. It typically dictates the shape of the research design, including the budget, the tools to conduct the research, and even the presentation of the research findings. How the ethnographer interprets and defines the problem usually reflects either a basic or an applied research orientation. The problem may also suggest the most appropriate research approach—ethnographic, survey, or experimental.

A researcher can address a problem—such as unequal minority representation in higher-paying and higher-status occupations in the United States—in many ways. For example, a survey approach would probably be more efficient than an ethnographic approach in determining the number of ethnic groups in specific occupations throughout the United States. A descriptive approach such as ethnography, however, would be most useful to study how unequal representation in specific occupations comes about, including how cultural values are transmitted to create institutional racism and what people think about this inequity. To determine the impact of programs to ameliorate economic differences between specific ethnic groups, a quasi-experimental design accompanied by a descriptive approach would be most appropriate. Research problem definition, therefore, is really a statement about what the ethnographer wants to know.

In essence, the problem or its definition is the driving force behind the research endeavor. The problem must precede the selection of a research method to avoid the trap of having a method in search of a problem—a situation that produces frustrating and imprecise results.

BASIC OR APPLIED ROLE

The researcher's role further refines the definition of the problem. A study of the incest taboo appears to be classic anthropological or psycho-

students are in the class" may be a perfectly accurate observation. Several questions arise, however: What constitutes hostility? How is an increase of hostility measured? How many is too many students in a class? On a simpler level, sentences beginning "Some of them believe" are commonplace. Being more specific—citing the specific sources and the exact nature of their "belief"—is not difficult and conveys more information and greater credibility and validity. Operationalism tests us and forces us to be honest with ourselves. Instead of leaving conclusions to strong impressions, the fieldworker should quantify or identify the source of ethnographic insights whenever possible. Specifying how one arrives at one's conclusions gives other researchers something concrete to use and something to prove or disprove. It is impossible to operationalize everything—the job of doing ethnography would never be done. Much can be done to increase recording and reporting accuracy, however.

Many concepts in ethnography help to explain what ethnography is all about and to guide an ethnographer in the pursuit of a study. This chapter has provided a discussion of some of the most important concepts in the profession, beginning with such global concepts as culture, a holistic orientation, and contextualization and gradually shifting to more narrow concepts—inter- and intracultural diversity, structure and function, symbol and ritual, and operationalism. Chapter 3 details the ethnographic methods and techniques that grow out of these concepts and allow the researcher to carry out the work of ethnography.

NOTES

1. Anthropologists typically focus on this cultural level, in contrast to sociologists, who generally focus on society. As fieldworkers, both anthropologists and sociologists require detailed information about the groups they study to generate their findings and insights. The lenses through which they view the data are different, however. Ethnographers come from an anthropological tradition and thus rely on the culture concept to guide their research. Note, however, that many sociologists today have cultural concerns, and many anthropologists focus on societal concerns. The research traditions of each discipline, however, shape the respective researchers' behaviors and thoughts. In addition, the culture concept—whether employed by a sociologist or by an anthropologist—is useful and, for better or worse, part of the conceptual baggage an ethnographer carries into the field.

2. Using an inductive approach, ethnographers describe the function of each part of a culture to understand better how the culture works as a whole. The concepts of structure and function are useful heuristic tools with which to understand and elaborate the basic elements of a culture.

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A Wilderness Guide: Methods and Techniques

To a person uninstructed in natural history, his country or seaside stroll is a walk through a gallery filled with wonderful works of art, nine-tenths of which have their faces turned to the wall.
—Thomas Huxley

The ethnographer is a human instrument. With a research problem, a theory of social interaction or behavior, and a variety of conceptual guidelines in mind, the ethnographer strides into a culture or social situation to explore its terrain and to collect and analyze data. Relying on all its senses, thoughts, and feelings, the human instrument is a most sensitive and perceptive data gathering tool. The information this tool gathers, however, can be subjective and misleading. Fieldworkers may lose their bearings in the maze of unfamiliar behaviors and situations. Ethnographic methods and techniques help to guide the ethnographer through the wilderness of personal observation and to identify and classify accurately the bewildering variety of events and actions that form a social situation. The ethnographer's hike through the social and cultural wilderness begins with fieldwork.

FIELDWORK

Fieldwork is the hallmark of research for both sociologists and anthropologists. The method is essentially the same for both types of researchers—working with people for long periods of time in their natural setting. The ethnographer conducts research in the native environment to see people and their behavior given all the real-world incentives and constraints. This naturalist approach avoids the artificial response typical of controlled or laboratory conditions. Understanding the world—or some small fragment

of it—requires studying it in all its wonder and complexity. The task is in many ways more difficult than laboratory study, but it can also be more rewarding.

The fieldworker uses a variety of methods and techniques to ensure the integrity of the data. These methods and techniques objectify and standardize the researcher's perceptions. Of course, the ethnographer must adapt each one of the methods and techniques discussed in this chapter to the local environment. Resource constraints and deadlines may also limit the length of time for data gathering in the field—exploring, cross-checking, and recording information.

SELECTION AND SAMPLING

The research questions shape the selection of a place and a people or program to study. For example, the probability of finding relevant data about the relationship between educational mechanisms, such as teacher expectations, and school success or failure is higher in a classroom than in a board of education meeting, although the latter setting has relevance as well. The ideal site for investigation of the research problem is not always accessible. In that event, the researcher accepts and notes the limitations of the study from the onset. Ideally, the focus of the investigation shifts to match the site under study. If either the match or the problem is not credible, the researcher may have to abandon the initial study and develop new research questions. In contract research, a contract modification might be necessary as well. This process may jeopardize the study's funding, but in some instances it is the only intellectually honest step to take.

The next step is to decide how to sample members of the target population. There are two approaches to this decision. First, choose who and what not to study. This process of elimination is like the admissions process at topflight universities and colleges. The decision is not who shall we admit but rather who must we reject—given all the people who qualify. An unwieldy number of informative people and useful events present themselves for study. The researcher must filter out those sources of information that will add little to the study. Second, select who and what to study—that is, the sources that will most help to understand life in a given community.

Most ethnographers use the big-net approach conducive to participant observation—mixing and mingling with everyone they can at first. As the study progresses, the focus narrows to specific portions of the population under study. The big-net approach ensures a wide-angle view of events before the microscopic study of specific interactions begins. This big picture helps refine an ethnographer's focus and aids the fieldworker in understanding the finer details that he or she will capture on film and in notes for further analysis.

Ethnographers typically use an informal strategy to begin fieldwork, such as starting wherever they can slip a foot in the door. The most common technique is judgmental sampling—that is, ethnographers rely on their judgment to select the most appropriate members of the subculture or unit based on the research question. This approach is quite natural, requiring the ethnographer to ask very simple, direct questions about what people do. Natural opportunities, convenience, and luck also play a part in the process if the ethnographer is savvy enough to make good use of them. Some experienced ethnographers use a rigorous randomized strategy to begin work—particularly when they already know a great deal about the culture or unit they are studying.

Using a highly structured randomized design without a basic understanding of the people under study may cause the researcher to narrow the focus prematurely, thus eliminating perhaps the very people or subjects relevant to the study. Such a misdirected study may yield high reliability but extremely low validity, undermining an entire research study. First the ethnographer must ask the right questions for a given research study. The best way to learn how to ask the right questions—beyond the literature search and proposal ideas—is to go into the field and find out what people do day to day. Goetz and LeCompte (1984, pp. 63-84) provide a useful discussion of sampling and selection in ethnographic research, focusing on criterion-based and probabilistic sampling.

ENTRY

An introduction by a member is the ethnographer's best ticket into the community. Walking into a community cold can have a chilling effect on ethnographic research. Community members may not be interested in the individual ethnographer or in the work. An intermediary or go-between can open doors otherwise locked to outsiders. The facilitator may be a chief, principal, director, teacher, tramp, or gang member and should have some credibility with the group—either as a member or as an acknowledged friend or associate. The closer the go-between's ties to the group the better. The trust the group places in the intermediary will approximate the trust it extends to the ethnographer at the beginning of the study. Ethnographers

thus benefit from a halo effect if they are introduced by the right person: Sight unseen, group members will give the researcher the benefit of the doubt. As long as ethnographers demonstrate that they deserve the group's trust, they will probably do well. A strong recommendation and introduction strengthen the fieldworker's capacity to work in a community and thus improve the quality of the data.

Unfortunately, the fieldworker cannot always find the best person to offer an introduction and must take whatever is available. In this case, the researcher must consider entering the community without assistance—simply by walking into a neighborhood store, attending church services, volunteering time in a school, or performing any other nonthreatening role in the community. In many instances, however, access is clearly impossible without some escort. Here, the fieldworker must accept a devil's bargain—a poor introduction, with all its constraints, is the only way to gain access to the community. This circumstance requires the ethnographer to begin in the hole, overcompensating to prove himself or herself worthy and to earn the community's trust and respect. This predicament forces the ethnographer to disassociate diplomatically from the intermediary once inside but act honorably and acknowledge the debt owed to that first contact.

Selecting an integral and powerful member of the community is useful, but establishing independence in the field is also important to avoid prematurely cutting off other lines of communication. For example, in a library study, a close link with the power brokers was instrumental in my gaining access to the organization but was almost lethal to data collection. My alliance with a power broker created the perception that I was a spy or another power broker sitting on the wrong side of the fence. In attempting to understand how the subordinate and disenfranchised group functioned in the bowels of the library, I found myself persona non grata. Tremendous effort was necessary for me to prove myself an impartial or at least nonjudgmental witness and shed the guilt I had acquired by association.

Once in the community, specific methods and techniques will guide the ethnographer in the process of data collection and analysis. The remainder of this chapter will discuss each of these techniques in turn.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation characterizes most ethnographic research and is crucial to effective fieldwork. Participant observation combines participation in the lives of the people under study with maintenance of a profes-

sional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data. Powdermaker's *Stranger and Friend* (1966) vividly depicts this delicate role.

Participant observation is immersion in a culture. Ideally, the ethnographer lives and works in the community for 6 months to 1 year or more learning the language and seeing patterns of behavior over time. Long-term residence helps the researcher internalize the basic beliefs, fears, hopes, and expectations of the people under study. The simple, ritualistic behaviors of going to the market or to the well for water teach how people use their time and space and how they determine what is precious, sacred, and profane.

The process may seem unsystematic; in the beginning, it is somewhat uncontrolled and haphazard. Even in the early stages of fieldwork, however, the ethnographer searches out experiences and events as they come to attention. Participant observation sets the stage for more refined techniques—including projective techniques and questionnaires—and becomes more refined itself as the fieldworker understands more and more about the culture. Ideas and behaviors that were only a blur on entering the community take on a sharper focus. Participant observation can also help clarify the results of more refined instruments by providing a baseline of meaning and a way to reenter the field to explore the context for those (often unexpected) results.

When I lived in Israel, I saw small and large patterns of behavior that repeated themselves almost endlessly. Passengers took the presence of bombs on the buses in stride; the soldiers and their ever-present Uzis (submachine guns) became part of the woodwork. The cycle of planting and harvesting on the kibbutz was marked by sweat and blood, strained muscles, and aching joints—and by seasonal holidays and festivals.

Every day had its pattern. Kibbutzniks and the other students and volunteers in my group woke up at 4:00 a.m. and walked down to the *hader ochel,* or dining room, for a small snack and then began work in the fields at 4:30 or 5:00 a.m. Every morning (except for the Saturday sabbath), we bundled up with our kibbutz army jackets to ward off the morning chill on the way to the fields. We stripped away the jackets after half an hour or so of work, when the sun began to heat the fresh morning air. We built up quite an appetite for breakfast by 8:00 or 9:00 a.m., but breakfast slipped by and we were back in the fields before we were rested. When we picked peaches, the heat and the itchy peach fuzz drove us crazy. Lunch and a shower were a saving grace. The break after lunch to read, socialize, or visit the children at the nursery was a pleasure to savor each day. With luck, another crisis task to work on would relieve the monotony of the morning's job—even

though such a distraction meant equally demanding manual labor. When dinnertime finally arrived, we trooped back to the hader ochel for an unvaried dinner: fish on Sundays, chicken on Fridays, and a mixture of the two in between. Even the raising of children followed a cycle on the kibbutz. Pregnant mothers who had grown up and worked together had their babies at approximately the same age, and they later congregated with their strollers around the day care facility.

In the old city of Jerusalem, other rituals took place—by the Wailing Wall and blocks away in the Arab shops. Hasidic Jews (*Lubavitch rebbes*) who wore long hair locks (*payahs*), broad black fur hats (*fadorahs*), and long black coats and worshiped by the Wailing Wall invited me to live and study with them for a short time to share their inner secrets and way of life. Similarly, Arab merchants who befriended me while I lived in Jerusalem often closed down their shops in the middle of a busy business day to have tea with me, bringing out all their silver-plated trappings, special glasses filled with tea leaves and 2 inches of undissolved sugar on the bottom, and ceremonial rugs. They enjoyed a sense of timelessness I will never forget.

All these patterns were recognizable over time, and detailed observations were possible only by living and working in these communities. I had to prepare the fields, plant the seeds, irrigate the soil, and pick the fruits in the kibbutz; study with the Hasidim; and bargain every day with the Arab merchants to understand and record these very different ways of life. Working with people, day in and day out, for long periods of time is what gives ethnographic research its validity and vitality.

Given time, people forget their "company" behavior and fall back into familiar patterns of behavior. Ethnographic research in one's own culture may not require as much time to reach this point as ethnographic work in a foreign culture: Language and customs are familiar, and the researcher is already an insider in many respects. Sometimes a familiar setting is too familiar, however, and the researcher takes events for granted, leaving important data unnoticed and unrecorded.

In applied settings, participant observation is often noncontinuous and spread out over an extended time. For example, in two ethnographic studies, one of dropouts and the other of gifted children, I visited the programs for only a few weeks every couple of months during a 3-year period. The visits were intensive and included classroom observation, nonstop informal interviews, occasional substitute teaching, interaction with community members, and the use of various other research techniques, including long-distance phone calls, dinner with students' families, and time spent hanging out in the hallways and parking lot with students cutting classes.

Participant observation requires close, long-term contact with the people under study. In the two cases discussed previously, the time period was 3 years. Often, contract research budgets or time schedules do not allow long periods of study—continuous or noncontinuous. In these situations, the researcher can apply ethnographic techniques to the study but cannot conduct an ethnography. Similarly, observation without participation in other people's lives may involve ethnographic methods but is not ethnography. Nonparticipant observation may take such forms as watching a school basketball game as part of data collection. Applying ethnographic techniques and nonparticipant observation are acceptable forms of research, but labeling the research method correctly is important.

The process may seem complicated, but a good ethnographer starts with the basics. Participant observation begins with the first question—even as simple a question as *Apho ha bait shemush?* (Where is the bathroom?). Finding the bathroom or kerosene for a heater can help the researcher understand a community's geography and resources. Slowly but surely, the questions become more refined as the researcher learns what questions to ask and how to ask them.

In any case, the acquisition of ethnographic knowledge and understanding is a cyclical process. It begins with a panoramic view of the community, closes in to a microscopic focus on details, and then pans out to the larger picture again—but this time with new insight into minute details. The focus narrows and broadens repeatedly as the fieldworker searches for breadth and depth of observation. Only by both penetrating the depth and skimming the surface can the ethnographer portray the cultural landscape in detail rich enough for others to comprehend and appreciate.

INTERVIEWING

The interview is the ethnographer's most important data gathering technique. Interviews explain and put into a larger context what the ethnographer sees and experiences. They require verbal interaction, and language is the commodity of discourse. Words and expressions have different values in various cultures. People exchange these verbal commodities to communicate. The ethnographer quickly learns to savor the informant's every word for its cultural or subcultural connotations as well as for its denotative meaning. General interview types include structured, semistructured, informal, and retrospective interviews. Although in prac-

tice these types overlap and blend, this chapter will artificially isolate interview types, strategies, and questions for purposes of description and discussion. Each interviewing approach has a role to play in soliciting information. The ethnographer, however, should be clear on the pros and cons of each interview type in data collection and analysis before employing these approaches in the field (for alternative approaches to classifying interviews, see Denzin, 1978; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Patton, 1980; for additional discussion about interviewing techniques, see Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Werner & Schoepfle, 1987a).

Formally structured and semistructured interviews are verbal approximations of a questionnaire with explicit research goals. These interviews generally serve comparative and representative purposes—comparing responses and putting them in the context of common group beliefs and themes. The fieldworker can use a structured interview at any time in the study. For example, a list of questions about the educational background of the teachers in a school under study is useful in securing comparative baseline data about the teachers' qualifications and experience. Asking those questions can also be a nonthreatening icebreaker. At the beginning stages of a study, however, structured interviews tend to shape responses to conform to the researcher's conception of how the world works. These interviews are therefore most useful at the middle and end stages of a study for the collection of data about a specific question or hypothesis. A structured or semistructured interview is most valuable when the fieldworker comprehends the fundamentals of a community from the "insider's" perspective. At this point, questions are more likely to conform to the native's perception of reality than to the researcher's.

Informal interviews are the most common in ethnographic work. They seem to be casual conversations, but whereas structured interviews have an explicit agenda, informal interviews have a specific but implicit research agenda. The researcher uses informal approaches to discover the categories of meaning in a culture. Informal interviews are useful throughout an ethnographic study in discovering what people think and how one person's perceptions compare with another's. Such comparisons help identify shared values in the community—values that inform behavior. Informal interviews are also useful in establishing and maintaining a healthy rapport.

Informal interviews seem to be the easiest to conduct. They do not involve any specific types or order of questions, and they can progress much as a conversation does, following the turns of the participant's or the questioner's interests. These interviews, however, are probably the most difficult to conduct appropriately and productively. Issues of ethics and

control emerge from every informal interview. How does the fieldworker establish and maintain a natural situation while attempting to learn about another person's life in a relatively systematic fashion? How can a completely open form, ripe for discovery, balance with an implicitly shaped structure designed to explore specific issues and concerns? Finally, when is the time to take advantage of a golden opportunity and when is it best not to pry further? Done well, informal interviewing feels like natural dialogue but answers the fieldworker's often unasked questions.

Informal interviews should be user-friendly. In other words, they should be transparent to the participant after a short period of time. An informal interview is different from a conversation, but it typically merges with one, forming a mixture of conversation and embedded questions. The questions typically emerge from the conversation. In some cases, they are serendipitous and result from comments by the participant. In most cases, the ethnographer has a series of questions to ask the participant and will wait for the most appropriate time to ask them during the conversation (if possible).

Informal interviews offer the most natural situations or formats for data collection and analysis. Unfortunately, some degree of contamination is always present. However skillful the interviewer, certain questions will impose an artificiality. An experienced interviewer, however, learns how to begin with nonthreatening questions deeply embedded in conversation before posing highly personal and potentially threatening questions and to develop a healthy rapport before introducing sensitive topics. Sensitivity to timing and to the participant's tone is critical in interviewing—informal or otherwise. The chance to ask a gang member about illegal activities might be lost if during the interview that individual receives a phone call from another gang member warning about an unidentified informer in the community. That moment, however, might be the best time to ask about informants and the pressures of community life. An ethnographer must learn to be attentive to a person's shifts in tone because these changes are important cues to attitudes and feelings. An elderly woman's shift from soft, eloquent speech to frightened, quivering whispers when she mentions the death of her spouse is a cue that the questioner should proceed delicately. She may want to discuss the topic as part of a cathartic experience or may feel pressured into divulging inner secrets. These situations are never easy. A sensitive and experienced ethnographer, however, will be able to differentiate between the two situations and to act appropriately. The researcher will make mistakes along the way. (See Fetterman, 1983, and Chapter 7 for a discussion of the ethical hazards ethnographers face in the field.)

The chance to exploit a vulnerable individual to secure invaluable data may be tempting. In fact, it may be a rare opportunity to explore an individual's innermost secrets. Beyond the obvious ethical considerations, however, the cost of exploiting an individual is too high, and the ethnographer must either wait for another opportunity to come along or create one. One benefit of spending long periods of time at a site is that other, more propitious opportunities usually come along. Oversensitivity, however, can paralyze an ethnographer, placing unnecessary obstacles in the way of data collection and analysis.

A multitude of significant nonthreatening questions can elicit the information the fieldworker seeks and create many golden moments in which to ask questions naturally as part of the general flow of conversation. Planning and executing properly placed questions, while maintaining a flexible format, is the essence of good ethnography, ensuring the quality of the data and maintaining the participant's right to privacy.

Retrospective interviews can be structured, semistructured, or informal. The ethnographer uses retrospective interviews to reconstruct the past, asking informants to recall personal historical information. This type of interview does not elicit the most accurate data. People forget or filter past events. In some cases, retrospective interviews are the only way to gather information about the past. In situations in which the ethnographer already has an accurate understanding of the historical facts, a retrospective interview provides useful information about the individual. The manner in which individuals shape the past highlights their values and reveals the configuration of their worldviews.

Ethnographers use interviews to help classify and organize an individual's perception of reality. All interviews share some generic kinds of questions. The most common types are survey or grand tour, detail or specific, and open-ended or closed-ended questions. Survey questions help identify significant topics to explore. Specific and detailed questions explore these topics in more detail. They determine similarities and differences in the ways people view the world. Open-ended and closed-ended questions help the ethnographer discover and confirm the participant's experiences and perceptions.

Survey or Grand Tour Question

A survey question—or what Spradley and McCurdy (1972) call a grand tour question—is designed to elicit a broad picture of the participant or native's world and to map the cultural terrain. Survey questions help define the boundaries of a study and plan wise use of resources. The participant's overview of the physical setting, universe of activities, and thoughts helps to focus and direct the investigation.

In a study about a university, a typical survey question would be the following: Could you show me around the university? In responding to this question, the individual would teach about the different academic and business departments, the hospital, the church or synagogue or both, the student union, the library, the fraternities, and so on. The quality of a grand tour question determines its usefulness. The narrower the survey question, the narrower the response and, in turn, the resulting overview of a culture. At the same time, the scope of the study determines the scope at which a survey question is useful. For example, if the study includes an entire university, then the previous tour question would be a good survey question. If the study comprises the whole of American culture, asking an individual to show the ethnographer around verges on the ridiculous; in limited settings, this approach can be highly misleading.

In my study of a university library, I asked one individual to show me around. I took a tour of familiar grounds: the reference desk, the electronic and hard-copy catalog files, special collections, and various graduate and undergraduate collections. I also saw the behind-the-scenes places: administrative offices, basement rooms of uncataloged books, cataloging rooms, rooms filled with computer hardware and software, and other unfamiliar locations. This information helped me to refine the scope of my study; at the same time, it provided a context within which to frame my investigation. This grand tour helped me understand how books and people flow through the library system. Parts of the library operated like a production line; others followed the model of a community of medieval scholars and illuminators. Once I had a good grasp of how much I did not know, I developed somewhat narrower survey questions. For example, I realized that I did not know what librarians did on a daily basis—so I asked.

Survey questions led to information that allowed me to construct a basic map of the place, develop a model of how it worked, and isolate preliminary topics that enabled me to use my time more efficiently and effectively. Such information also stimulated a barrage of specific, detailed questions, followed by more survey questions, and leading once more to detailed questions—until I had constructed a satisfactory conceptual framework.

Ethnographic research requires the fieldworker to move back and forth between survey and specific questions. Focusing in on one segment of a person's activities or worldview prematurely may drain all the ethnographer's resources before the investigation is half done. The fieldworker must

maintain a delicate balance of questions throughout the study; in general, however, survey questions should predominate in the early stages of fieldwork and more specific questions in the middle and final stages.

Specific Questions

Once survey questions reveal a category of some significance to both fieldworker and native, specific questions about that category become most useful. The difference between a survey question and a specific or detailed question depends largely on context. The question, "What do librarians do?," is a grand tour question in a library study, but it would be a specific question in a university study.

In my library study, specific questions focused on the differences among divisions within the library and among types of librarians in each division—for example, between the curator in public services and the original cataloger in technical services. More refined specific questions concerned the differences between two members of the same division and department, such as those between an original cataloger and a copy cataloger in the catalog department.

Specific questions probe further into an established category of meaning or activity. Whereas survey questions shape and inform a global understanding, specific questions refine and expand that understanding.

Structural and attribute questions—subcategories of specific questions—are often the most appropriate approach to this level of inquiry. Structural and attribute questions are useful to the ethnographer in organizing an understanding of the native's view. For example, a series of structural questions in the library study included the following: "What are the major parts of the library?" "How is this place organized?" and "What kinds of departments or divisions exist in the library?" The responses to these questions provided the insider's perspective on the library's structure. I learned about three major divisions: public services, technical services, and administrative services. Probing further, I elicited a detailed description of the departments within these divisions. Following up with another structural question, I asked, "What types of librarians work in each of these divisions?" Participants explained that catalogers and conservationists work in separate departments within one division, and curators work in a completely different division. For greater generalizability, I compared perceptions of several individuals to identify similarities and differences in perspective resulting from power, status, and role differences. I also called and visited other research libraries to learn whether this structural pattern was typical of research universities throughout the country. (Tele-

phone and written questionnaires are useful tools for determining how representative the particular patterns are within an organization and across organizations.) Structural questions provide the similarities that exist across the conceptual spectrum—in the native's head. (See Spradley & McCurdy, 1972, for additional information about the construction of taxonomic definitions.)

Attribute questions—questions about the characteristics of a role or a structural element—ferret out the differences between conceptual categories. Typically, the interview will juxtapose structural with attribute questions. Information from a structural question might suggest a question about the differences between various newly identified categories. For example, after learning about the various divisions and departments that constitute a research library, I could logically ask about the differences between them using the following attribute question: "What is the difference between librarians who work in technical services and librarians who work in public services?" In addition to learning the functional differences between these two positions, I learned much about perceived discrepancies in status between catalogers who work in the "bowels of the library"—in near sweatshop conditions, unseen by the rest of the university—and curators, who work with students, staff, and faculty in plush, air-conditioned, carpeted offices with plenty of space and light. To discover more about each division and department, I followed this response with the following structural question: "What are the departments in technical services?" Librarians eagerly taught me about the various departments in that division, including acquisitions, cataloging, serials, binding and finishing, and conservation. The following attribute question was then useful in clarifying my understanding of the library's organization: "What is the difference between acquisitions and cataloging?"[1] The response to this question gave me a clearer idea about the production flow of the books in this system. (See Spradley & McCurdy, 1972, for a discussion about componential analysis.)

Structural and attribute questions derive from a cognitive theory (symbolic interactionism) about how the world works (Blumer, 1969). Clearly, however, these question types are valuable in almost any theoretical approach because they help to organize the fieldworker's perception of how others define reality.

Open-Ended or Closed-Ended Questions

Ethnographers use both open-ended and closed-ended questions to pursue fieldwork. An open-ended question allows participants to interpret it.

For example, in studying an emergency room, I asked a regular emergency room nurse the following question: "How do you like working with the helicopter nurses?" This question elicited a long and detailed explanation about how aloof she thought they were and how unfair it was that the helicopter nurses did not pitch in during the busy periods. She said she could list five or six activities that emergency room and helicopter nurses did together during the week, but she said these activities were all superficial.

This response opened new doors to my study. I followed up with questions to helicopter nurses, who indicated that they did wait around a great deal of the time waiting for a call to rush to the helicopter. They explained that they could not pitch in during regular emergency room busy periods because they might be called away at any time, and leaving in the middle of a task would be unfair to both the regular nurses and the patients. Thus, an open-ended question helped to illuminate the conflicting worldviews these two sets of nurses held about the same emergency room experience—information that a closed-ended question, such as "How many times do you interact with the helicopter nurses each week?" might not have elicited.

Closed-ended questions are useful in trying to quantify behavior patterns. For example, asking both sets of nurses how many times they interact with each other in a week would be a useful test of varying perceptions of reality and a means of documenting the frequency of that particular behavior pattern. Differing responses would also be a useful cue to probe further about the quality of that interaction.

Ethnographers typically ask more open-ended questions during discovery phases of their research and more closed-ended questions during confirmational periods. The most important question to avoid is the stand-alone vague question. Asking regular nurses whether they work with helicopter nurses frequently—without defining frequently—is useful to neither the researcher nor the participant.

Interviewing Protocols and Strategies

A protocol exists for all interviews—the product of the interviewer's and the participant's personalities and moods, the formality or informality of the setting, the stage of research, and an assortment of other conditions.

The first element common to every protocol is the ethnographer's respect for the culture of the group under study. In an interview or any other interaction, ethnographers try to be sensitive to the group's cultural norms. This sensitivity manifests itself in apparel, language, and behavior. Wearing expensive designer clothes to conduct an informal interview with a disenfranchised and impoverished high school student is as insensitive and inappropriate as wearing cutoff jeans and a T-shirt to conduct an interview with a chief executive officer. Inadvertent improprieties or faux pas will occur, and people will generally forgive them. A consistent disregard or lack of concern for the group's basic cultural values, however, will severely impede research progress.

Second, an overarching guide in all interviews is respect for the person. An individual does the fieldworker a favor by giving up time to answer questions. Thus, the interview is not an excuse to interrogate an individual or criticize cultural practices. It is an opportunity to learn from the interviewee. Furthermore, the individual's time is precious: Both the industrial executive and the school janitor have work to do, and the ethnographer should plan initial interviews, whether formal or informal, around their work obligations and schedules. Later, the fieldworker becomes an integral part of the work. Even greater sensitivity to the nuances of timing are essential at this point, however. The observant ethnographer responds to signals from the interviewee. Repeated glances at a watch are usually a clear signal that the time is up. Glazed eyes, a puzzled look, or an impatient scowl is an interviewee's way of letting the questioner know that something is wrong: The individual is bored, lost, or insulted. Common errors involve spending too much time talking and not enough time listening, failing to make questions clear, and making an inadvertently insensitive comment. The ethnographer must listen to the language of the interviewees. In one fashion or another, they are always communicating.

In formal settings, such as a school district, a highly formalized, ritualistic protocol is necessary to gain access and interview students and teachers. Soliciting and securing permission may involve an introductory meeting with various stakeholders (including the superintendent and principal) to exchange pleasantries, a formal explanation of the research project (including submission of the proposed research), letters of permission, and periodic formal exchanges, including notice of the study's termination. Similarly, structured interviews require a more structured protocol of introductions, permission, instructions, formal cues to mark major changes in the interview, closure, and possible follow-up communications.

Informal interviews require the same initial protocol. The researcher, however, casually and implicitly communicates permission, instructions, cues, closure, and follow-up signals. Pleasantries and icebreakers are important in both informal and formally structured interviews, but they differ in the degree of subtlety each interview type requires. Sensitivity to the appropriate protocol can enhance the interviewer's effectiveness.

Strategies or techniques can also enhance the quality of an interview. The most effective strategy is, paradoxically, no strategy. Being natural is much more convincing than any performance. Acting like an adolescent does not win the confidence of adolescents, it only makes them suspicious. Similarly, acting like the consummate lawyer is useless during an interview with lawyers for obvious reasons. First, ethnographic training emphasizes honesty in fieldwork, including interviews. Deceptive games have no place in the interview setting or elsewhere. Second, in any data gathering interview, the objective is to learn from the interviewee and not to impress the person with how much the questioner already knows about the area. Third, even a consummate actor is bound to slip during a lengthy interview and thus undermine all credibility. Being natural is the best protection.

More experienced ethnographers learn when it is appropriate or possible to test their knowledge of the system by breaking a minor cultural norm, such as sitting in someone else's chair during an official meeting to test status, hierarchy, and grouping patterns. This knowledge development strategy, however, requires a great deal of experience and a very healthy rapport, usually the product of much time spent with the group under study. Being cavalier about even minor cultural norms can be quite costly in hurt feelings, damaged rapport, and severely distorted lines of communication—all resulting in bad data.

A degree of manipulation takes place in any interview. The interviewer is trying to learn something about an individual's life—not everything about it. Achieving this goal requires some conscious or subconscious shaping of the verbal exchange—through either explicit or implicit cues borrowed from the cues in natural conversation. For example, to borrow a strategy from courtroom proceedings, asking the same question in several different ways within one session checks both the interviewer's understanding of the response and the individual's sincerity—that is, whether the answer is what the person believes or what he or she wants the ethnographer to hear (or thinks the ethnographer wants to hear). This strategy usually provides the ethnographer with a slightly modified, refined understanding of the initial response. Often, repeated questions or variations of the same question draw responses that shed a completely new light on the topic. The interviewer should scatter these types of questions throughout the interview. One right after another, repeated questions can be insulting and fruitless. Some interviews reach the point of diminishing returns more quickly than others. The interviewer must recognize when to linger and when to move on.

A similar strategy involves asking for repetition of the participant's questions. A person's questions are as informative as his or her answers. In repeating a question, the interviewee provides a broader perspective on the topic and on relevant concerns. Similarly, the interviewer can ask the interviewee to repeat or clarify an answer when the tone or manner of the answer triggers some doubt about the completeness of the response. This approach is effective in stimulating discussion with an interviewee who responds to inquiries with only terse, efficient replies.

Of the hundreds of useful interviewing strategies, the most successful place the interviewee at ease, acknowledge the value of the information, and reinforce continued communication. Many books about interviewing also emphasize control. In formal structured and semistructured interviews, maintaining control of the direction of the interview is useful to ensure that the interview produces the target information in the short time allotted. The ethnographer wants the interviewee to be in control much of the time, however. The "how" of communication is as instructive as the "what." A person's manner, emphasis, and presentation can teach much about that person's perception of time, organization of thoughts, and feelings about interpersonal relationships. Taking charge of most interviews and maintaining control of them can sacrifice too many data. The skillful ethnographer learns when to let the interviewee ramble and when to shape or direct the information flow—a decision generally shaped by the stage of research or inquiry. In exploratory work, letting the participant control the communication flow is most useful. Focused periods of formal hypothesis testing require that the ethnographer maintain greater control.

Silence is also a valuable interview strategy. Learning how to tolerate the empty space between question and reply is difficult for many Americans. The fieldworker, however, learns not to routinely jump in and clarify a question whenever silence falls. The best approach is to let the participant think about the question and digest it for a while before responding. After the participant has apparently finished discussing a topic, a brief pause can bring out more information or an important qualification to the information. The burden of silence falls on both parties. An experienced ethnographer learns how to use silence in a skillful fashion—to encourage interviewees to speak but not to make them feel uncomfortable or threatened. Such strategies, and those described in the following sections, will ensure a more natural and useful flow of communication, minimizing role playing, various other contaminating factors, and nonproductive time.

Key Actor or Informant Interviewing

Some people are more articulate and culturally sensitive than others. These individuals make excellent key actors or informants. *Informant* is