The Ethnographic Interview, James Spradley

Ethnographic Interviewing

Interview five-seven people about how they identify themselves ethnically. Vary age, ethnicity, gender, class, occupation. Use a notebook for your field notes.

To help you prepare for this experience, read the following selection from The Ethnographic Interview by James Spradley.

The Ethnographic Interview

James Spradley

James Spradley is a cultural anthropologist who has helped clarify the nature of ethnography (the study of culture and cultural diversity). In his book Participant Observation (1980), he makes explicit some basic concepts and skills needed for doing ethnography. The Ethnographic Interview (1979), from which this selection is taken, provides guidelines for students to do ethnography without years of training. "Ethnography," Spradley explains in this Preface, "offers all of us the chance to step outside our narrow cultural backgrounds, to set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism." Ethnography is "more than a tool for anthropologists." It is "a pathway into understanding the cultural differences that make us what we are as human beings." Here Spradley provides a sequence of steps for conducting a successful ethnographic interview that will lead to a rich description and, hopefully, greater understanding.

Ethnographers work together with informants to produce a cultural description. This relationship is complex . . . The success of doing ethnography depends, to a great extent, on understanding the nature of this relationship. I use the term informant in a very specific way, not to be confused with concepts like subject, respondent, friend, or actor. In this chapter I want to clarify the concept and role of informant.

According to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, an informant is "a native speaker engaged to repeat words, phrases, and sentences in his own language or dialect as a model for imitation and a source of information." Although derived primarily from linguistics, this definition will serve as a starting point for our discussion. Informants are first and foremost native speakers . . .

Informants are engaged by the ethnographer to speak in their own language or dialect. Informants provide a model for the ethnographer to imitate; the ethnographer hopes to learn to use the native language in the way informants do. Finally, informants are a source of information; literally, they become teachers for the ethnographer.

Most people act as informants at one time or another without realizing it. We offer information to others in response to questions about our everyday lives. "What kind of family did you come from?" "What do you do at school?" "What kinds of problems do you have working as a cocktail waitress?" "You collect comic books? That sounds interesting: what does it involve?" Such questions place us in the role of informant.

An ethnographer seeks out ordinary people with ordinary knowledge and builds on their common experience. Slowly, through a series of interviews, by repeated explanations, and through the use of special questions, ordinary people become excellent informants. Everyone, in the course of their daily activities, has acquired knowledge that appears specialized to others. A shaman knows how to perform magic rituals; a housewife can prepare a holiday meal; a sportsman is an expert in fishing for lake trout; a physician knows her way around a large hospital and can perform open heart surgery; a tramp has acquired strategies for making it; a boy can maneuver with skill on a skate board. Knowledge about everyday life is a common property of the human species. So is the ability to communicate that knowledge in a native language. This ability makes it possible for almost anyone to act as an informant.

Interviewing informants depends on a cluster of interpersonal skills. These include: asking questions, listening instead of talking, taking a passive rather than an assertive role, expressing verbal interest in the other person, and showing interest by eye contact and other nonverbal means. Some people have acquired these skills to a greater degree than others; some learn them more quickly than others. I recall one novice ethnographer who felt insecure about interviewing an urban planner. During the interviews she kept thinking about the next question she should ask and often looked down at a list she had prepared. Each time she lost eye contact with her informant, he interpreted it as lack of interest. She seldom nodded her head or encouraged her informa[illegible]ver realized urban

planners did so much!" Although she continued the interviews, rapport developed slowly because she lacked this specific skill of showing interest.

Activities

1. Make a list of potential informants . . . .
2. Identify five or six of the most likely informants . . .
3. Compare this list of potential informants on the five minimal requirements for a good informant. Place the selections in rank order.

Examining the Ethnographic Interview

When we examine the ethnographic interview as a speech event, we see that it shares many features with the friendly conversation. In fact, skilled ethnographers often gather most of their data through participant observation and many casual, friendly conversations. They may interview people without their awareness, merely carrying on a friendly conversation while introducing a few ethnographic questions.

It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants. Exclusive use of these new ethnographic elements, or introducing them too quickly, will make interviews become like a formal interrogation. Rapport will evaporate, and informants may discontinue their cooperation. At any time during an interview it is possible to shift back to a friendly conversation. A few minutes of easygoing talk interspersed here and there throughout the interview will pay enormous dividends in rapport.

The three most important ethnographic elements are its explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations, and ethnographic questions.

1. **Explicit purpose**. When an ethnographer and informant meet together for an interview, both realize that the talking is supposed to go somewhere. The informant only has a hazy idea about this purpose; the ethnographer must make it clear. Each time they meet it is necessary to remind the informant where the interview is to go. Because ethnographic interviews involve purpose and direction, they will tend to be more formal than friendly conversations. Without being authoritarian, the ethnographer gradually takes more control of the talking, directing it in those channels that lead to discovering the cultural knowledge of the informant.

2. **Ethnographic explanations**. From the first encounter until the last interview, the ethnographer must repeatedly offer explanations to the informant. While learning an informant's culture, the informant also learns something—to become a teacher. Explanations facilitate this process. There are **five types of explanations** used repeatedly.

- **Project explanations**. These include the most general statements about what the project is all about. The ethnographer must translate the goal of doing ethnography and eliciting an informant's cultural knowledge into terms the informant will understand. "I am interested in your occupation. I'd like to talk to you about what beauticians do." Later one might be more specific: "I want to know how beauticians talk about what they do, how they see their work, their customers, themselves. I want to study beauticians from your point of view."

- **Recording explanations**. These include all statements about writing things down and reasons for tape recording the interviews. "I'd like to write some of this down," or "I'd like to tape record our interview so I can go over it later; would that be OK?"

- **Native language explanations**. Since the goal of ethnography is to describe a culture in its own terms, the ethnographer seeks to encourage informants to speak in the same way they would talk to others in their cultural scene. These explanations remind informants not to use their translation competence. They take several forms and must be repeated frequently throughout the entire project. A typical native language explanation might be, "If you were talking to a customer, what would you say?"

- **Interview explanations**. Slowly, over the weeks of interviewing, most informants become expert at providing the ethnographer with cultural information. One can th4en depart more and more from the friendly conversation model until finally it is possible to ask informants to perform tasks such as

drawing a map or sorting terms written on cards. At those times it becomes necessary to offer an explanation for the type of interview that will take place. "Today I'd like to ask you some different kinds of questions. I've written some terms on cards and I'd like to have you tell me which ones are alike or different. After that we can do the same for other terms." This kind of interview explanation helps informants know what to expect and to accept a greater formality in the interview.

- **Question explanations**. The ethnographer's main tools for discovering another person's cultural knowledge is the ethnographic question. Since there are many different kinds, it is important to explain them as they are used. "I want to ask you a different type of question, " may suffice in some cases. At other times it is necessary to provide a more detailed explanation of what is going on.

3. **Ethnographic questions: Three main types and their functions**

- **Descriptive questions**. This type enables a person to collect an ongoing sample of an informant's language. Descriptive questions are the easiest to ask and they are used in all interviews. Here's an example: "Could you tell me what you do at the office?" or "Could you describe the conference you attended?"

- **Structural questions**. These questions enable the ethnographer to discover information about domains, the basic units in an informant's cultural knowledge. They allow us to find out how informants have organized their knowledge. Examples of structural questions are: "What are all the different kinds of fish you caught on vacation?" and "What are all the stages in getting transferred in your company?" Structural questions are often repeated, so that if an informant identified six types of activities, the ethnographer might ask, "Can you think of any other kind of activities you would do as a beautician?"

- **Contrast questions.** The ethnographer wants to find out what an informant means by the various terms used in his native language. . . .Contrast questions enable the ethnographer to discover the dimensions of meaning which informants employ to distinguish the objects and events in their world. A typical contrast questions would be, "What's the difference between a bass and a northern pike?"

The Verbatim Principle

The ethnographer must make a verbatim record of what people say. This obvious principle of getting things down word for word is frequently violated. Whether recording things people say in natural contexts or in more formal ethnographic interviews, the investigator's tendency to translate continues to operate. . . . [Spradley cautions that the words informants speak hold "a key to their culture."] It may seem wiser, under the pressure of an interview situation, or in some natural context, to make a quick and more complete summary rather than a partial verbatim record. Such is not the case. . . .
Both native terms and observer terms will find their way into the field notes. The important thing is to carefully distinguish them. The native terms must be recorded verbatim. Failure to take these first steps along the path of discovering the inner meaning of another culture will lead to a false confidence that we have found out what the natives know. We may never even realize that our picture is seriously distorted and incomplete.
The best way to make a verbatim record during interviews is to use a tape recorder. It is especially valuable to tape record the first two or three interviews in order to quickly acquire a larger sample of informant statements. However, tape recorders are not always advisable, especially during the first few interviews when rapport is beginning to develop. The use of a tape recorder may threaten and inhibit informants. Each ethnographer must decide on the basis of the willingness of informants and their feelings about using a tape recorder. . . .Here are some general rules for making a decision:

1. Always take a small tape recorder in case the opportunity arises to use it. . . .

2. Go slowly on introducing a tape recorder immediately. . . .With an enthusiastic and eager informant, it is possible to ask casually, "How would you feel about tape recording this interview?" . . . .It is possible to do good ethnography without a tape recorder; it is not possible to do good ethnography without rapport with key informants.

3. Watch for opportunities to tape record even a small part of an interview. After talking for half an hour, it might be appropriate to say, "This is so interesting and I'm learning so much, I wonder if you would mind if I tape recorded some of this. I can turn it off any time you want." Most informants will be more than willing to oblige.

Whether or not the ethnographer tape records interviews, it is still necessary to take notes during each interview. Sometimes tape recorders do not work; often some information from the interview is needed before it can be transcribed. Let's look more closely at how to take field notes.

Kinds of Field Notes

The Condensed Account

All notes taken during actual interviews or field observations represent a condensed version of what actually occurred. It is not humanly possible to write down everything that goes on or everything that informants say. Condensed accounts often include phrases, single words, and unconnected sentences. . . .

It is advisable to make a condensed account during every interview. Even while tape recording, it is good to write down phrases and words used by your informants. The real value of a condensed account comes when it is expanded after completing the interview or field observation.

The Expanded Account

The second type of field notes represents an expansion of the condensed version. As soon as possible after each field session the ethnographer should fill in details and recall things that were not recorded on the spot. The key words and phrases jotted down can serve as useful reminders to create the expanded account. When expanding, different speakers must be identified and verbatim statements included. . . .

Tape-recorded interviews, when fully transcribed, represent one of the most complete expanded accounts. . . .However, some investigators transcribe only parts of an interview or listen to the tape to create an expanded account, marking all verbatim phrases and words. . . .

Field Work Journal

In addition to field notes that come directly from observing and interviewing (the condensed account and expanded account), ethnographers should always keep a journal. Like a diary, this journal will contain a record of experiences ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise during field work. A journal represents the personal side of field work; it includes reactions to informants and the feelings you sense from others.

Each journal entry should be dated. Rereading at a later time shows how quickly you forget what occurred during the first days and weeks of field work. . . Later when the ethnographer begins to write up the study, the journal becomes an important source of data. Doing ethnography differs from many other kinds of research in that the ethnographer becomes a major research instrument. Making an introspective record of field work enables a person to take into account personal biases and feelings, to understand their influence on the research.

Analysis and Interpretation

The fourth type of field notes provides a link between the ethnographic record and the final written ethnography. Here is the place to record analyses of cultural meanings, interpretations and insights into the culture studied. Most of the tasks in the remaining steps involve detailed analysis and can be recorded in this category of field notes.

Analysis and interpretation notes often represent a kind of brainstorming. Ideas may come from past reading, from some particular theoretical perspective, from some comment made by an informant. It is important to think of these field notes as a place to "think on paper". . .

Activities

1. Set up a field-work notebook or file with sections for
· condensed accounts
· expanded accounts

· journal
· analysis and interpretation

2. Begin making an ethnographic record with entries in each section for field work completed to date.

3. Contact an informant and arrange for the first ethnographic interview.

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Ethnic Identification Project: Taking Field Notes

Who's doing the defining? Note some information about the person you are interviewing (age, ethnic identification, and so on). Include in your notes some exact quotations.

Consider these questions as you prepare for an interview.

1. With what ethnic group or groups does the interviewee identify?

2. Does the person seem knowledgeable about the problems of ethnic identification? (Does it appear to you that this person has thought about these distinctions before?)

3. To what degree would you say this person is interested in the problems of ethnic identification in the U.S.A.? Did the interviewee respond immediately with definitions or have to ponder first?

Use the following "Ethnographic Interview Record" to record your notes.

Ethnographic Interview Record

Project: Ethnic IDentity

Interviewer:_____

Date of Interview:

Informant (name of person being interviewed):

Informant's occupation or student status:

Informant's gender: Age:

Informant's ethnic identification:

*Note: Allow as much space as you need for the three categories below.

Exact Quotations

Summary of Interview

Comments

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from *The Ethnographic Interview*. James Spradley. NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston: 1979