

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

OBJECTIVES

- ☞ To gain experience in doing anthropological fieldwork.
- ☞ To gain experience in objectively recording data.
- ☞ To gain experience in interacting with and collecting data from a key informant.
- ☞ To apply fieldwork techniques discussed in class and readings.

INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork is the single most important method used by anthropologists to gather data. One aspect of doing good fieldwork is to be an objective observer. Another aspect involves interviewing informants. An informant is a native member of the culture being observed. In the interview process you are asking someone else to describe or explain events, behaviors, and customs to you. This person can provide the fieldworker with insights and a perspective that may not be apparent from initial observations. To elicit information from informants, the fieldworker must be careful to ask questions in the same way each time so that responses can be compared. The project will involve conducting background research and interviewing someone with a cultural background different from your own.

PROCEDURES

1. Select an informant who has spent less than five years in this country. This must be someone who has been enculturated into a culture different from your own. Do not select a family relative. Remember to distinguish between a culture and a nation.
2. Consider using a friend or coworker to facilitate the initial introductions.
3. Research the informant's culture before your initial meeting. Plan how you will attempt to establish rapport. Sharing a photo album or a homemade food item is often effective. Be creative and imaginative.
4. Explain to your informant that this is a class project.
5. Review the interview questions [see Procedures #3]. Prepare both formal and informal types of questions.
6. Record your feelings, expectations, and attitudes about this project before you begin the actual interview.
7. Remember to treat your informants with respect. They are doing you a favor. One way to show respect and concern for your informants is to avoid topics that may make them uncomfortable [for example, politics or religion]. In a field situation, the anthropologist will talk many times to a key informant. Do not expect to obtain intimate details about their life in just one or two meetings.
8. Determine how you will compensate your informant. Seek out a culturally acceptable form such as buying them a soft drink or coffee.
9. Proceed with the interview. Record questions and responses. You can take written notes, tape or video record the experience—but develop a strategy after consulting with the informant.

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PRE-INTERVIEW AND POST-INTERVIEW QUESTIONS [TO BE INTEGRATED INTO THE FINAL PAPER]

1. **BEFORE** you meet the informant, record your feelings, expectations, and attitudes about the pending interview and describe how you prepared for the experience.
2. **AFTER** the interview, report how the interview went:
 - a. Describe how you explained yourself. Describe the general tenor of the experience from the beginning to the end. Did the conversation flow smoothly? Be candid and be specific.
 - b. Describe how the informant [and his or her family, if appropriate] responded to you.
 - c. Describe how you compensated the informant [for example, bought the informant lunch].
 - d. Describe what lessons this interview experience taught *you* and what lessons you would share with others who will conduct future interviews.

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

1. Be as objective as possible and continually check your own cultural bias. Avoid ethnocentrism.
2. Do not challenge the individual's "correctness of thinking," especially when she or he is making observations about aspects of *your* culture.
3. Avoid questions of a personal nature.
4. Frequently ask for clarification if you do not understand a point being made.
5. Be willing to ask for a second meeting to clarify and follow up on specific points.

TYPES OF SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

1. Find out how the informant's first impressions of this culture [and its people] were shaped.
 - a. Inquire whether friends [or family] PRECEDED the informant to this culture.
 - b. Ask whether the media [for example, TV, movies] influenced the informant's perceptions of this culture BEFORE [and AFTER] his or her arrival.
 - c. Ask about the role of the advertising media in the decision to immigrate. [Travel brochures do not always convey an accurate portrayal of a destination.]
 - d. Explore how the informant's views were shaped by his or her experiences at the port of entry or at the train [or bus] stations. Do not overlook the impact of jetlag or first experiences with the North American transportation infrastructure.
2. Ask about what the informant misses most from his or her original culture.
3. Explain ethnocentrism, and ask whether the informant has experienced it. Attempt to elicit specific examples.
4. Explore cultural attitudes and cultural customs with your informant

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PAPER FORMAT

1. The paper is to be prepared in *Microsoft Word*, double-spaced; all margins are to be one inch. The font should be a serif font not to exceed 12 points. Submit to me as an attachment to an e-mail.
2. Estimated length should be between ten to fifteen complete double-spaced pages.
3. Use spell check, and proofread the paper carefully.
4. Create an appendix containing the following:
 - a. Your name, email address, course, due date.
 - b. Background information on informant: culture, country of origin, length of time in this culture, gender, approximate age, marital status, and number of children.
 - c. Date, location, and length of interview.
 - d. Describe the meeting; describe how rapport was [or was not] established.
 - e. General discussion of responses to interview questions [include narrative paragraphs about each of the questions.
 - f. Your evaluation of the experience.
 - g. explain anthropological rationale for interviewing an informant who has been in this cultural environment for less than five years.
 - h. optional: photos, drawings, maps.
 - i. supplemental information.