

# Interview Protocol

## Interview Protocol

A skilled interviewer knows how to ask questions and knows the right questions to ask and in what order. Here we focus on the writing of an interview protocol to gain in-depth information from users, stakeholders, or experts to guide design decisions.

After completing this sub-block, you will be able to:

- Explain the importance of interviews in design processes and decision making
- Create a thorough and effective interview protocol
- Craft a variety of types of questions to elicit high-quality information
- Organize interview questions in a structure that facilitates gaining the most useful and meaningful information

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# Core Content

**(Reference: D-School Interview Preparation)**

Time with users is precious; you need to make the most of it! While you must always allow room for the spontaneous, blissful serendipity of a user-guided conversation, you should never abdicate your responsibility to prepare for interviews. Especially in following up with users (after testing, etc.), it is imperative to plan your interviews. You may not get to every question you prepare, but you should come in with a plan for engagement. Write down all of the potential questions, identify themes or subject areas into which most questions fall; once you've identified the themes of your question-pool, determine the order that would allow the conversation to flow most naturally. This will enable you to structure the flow of your interview, decreasing the potential for hosting a seemingly-scattershot interaction with your user.

## **Section 1: Introduction**

*Writing the interview protocol is a means to help the interviewer prepare for the interview, ensuring he/she not only knows what to ask overall, but also to determine the most important information he/she is trying to obtain. Interview protocols help ensure the interviewer does not forget key points he/she wants to or must address throughout the interview. They also serve to help remind the interviewer to relay important bits of information to the interviewee, such as stating (or re-stating) the purpose of the interview, what will happen to the information obtained, and any confidentiality concerns.*

### **What is an Interview Protocol?**

**(Patton 2015)**

An interview guide lists the questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. An interview guide is prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed. The guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. Thus, the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined. The guide serves as a checklist during the interview to make sure that all relevant topics are covered.

The advantage of an interview guide is that it makes sure that the interviewer/evaluator has carefully decided how best to use the limited time available in an interview situation. The guide helps make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored. A guide is essential in conducting focus group interviews for it keeps the interactions *focused* while allowing individual perspectives and

experiences to emerge. With an interview guide in hand, the investigator has a rough travel itinerary with which to negotiate the interview. It does not specify precisely what will happen at every stage of the journey, how long each layover will last, or where the investigator will be at any given moment, but it does establish a clear sense of the direction of the journey and the ground it will eventually cover.

### **Examples of Interview Protocols**

Interview guides can be developed in more or less detail, depending on the extent to which the interviewer is able to specify important issues in advance and the extent to which it is important to ask questions in the same order to all respondents. The guide provides a framework within which the interviewer could develop questions, sequence those questions, and make decisions about which information to pursue in greater depth. Usually, the interviewer would not be expected to go into totally new subjects that are not covered within the framework of the guide. Other topics might still emerge during the interview-topics of importance to the respondent that are not listed explicitly on the guide and therefore would not normally be explored with each person interviewed.

*[Click here](#) to look through an interview protocol developed for interviewing engineering students that also includes performance tasks the interviewer asked the students to complete.*

*The following protocol example was conducted for a study determining and evaluating collaborative engineering opportunities. [The entire article may be found here](#) - you must be signed in the UMich Library System to access it. **[CHECK IF THIS LINK REQUIRES SIGNING IN]***

### **Appendix A: CE Opportunity Discovery Protocol**

#### Establish Common Meaning

1. People apply many different meanings to the word 'collaboration.' When you say 'collaboration' what do you mean?

- a. When we speak of ‘collaboration’ we mean a “joint effort toward a common goal.”

### Identify Candidate Practices

2. Do you or your people have any important recurring tasks where they must work in a group to create a joint deliverable?
  - a. How are these tasks going?
  - b. Are any of these processes good candidates for enhancement or improvement?
3. Are there other high-utility activities that require the efforts of a group on a regular basis?
  - a. How are those processes working for you?
  - b. Are they painful processes?

### Discovering Opportunities for Improvement

4. What are the toughest tasks you or your people have to do in a group?
5. What other group tasks give you or your people the most trouble?

### Other People’s Challenges

6. Who else do you know that has a tough collaboration challenge?
7. Do you know any other groups who must work together frequently, who may hate some part of their task?

### Prioritization / Direction

8. Reviewing the processes we’ve talked about, which is THE highest priority one? THE highest priority three?
  - a. We’ve heard about (X) processes from you. Would you please rate these work practices with an A, B, C, or Z? (A = very high priority, B = Medium Priority, C = Low priority, Z = Don’t want to touch it)

The following table shows sample questions prepared for an interview on “learning through service (LTS)” with engineering faculty:

**TABLE I**  
**SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS MAPPED TO THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

Research Question	Pertinent Interview Questions
How do LTS faculty practitioners and community partners engage to establish an effective LTS community of practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How did you become interested in using LTS?</li><li>• What curricular unit does the LTS project tie into?</li><li>• Can you explain how you are using LTS in extracurricular programs?</li><li>• Do you receive any help from community partners?</li></ul>

Below is the first page of an interview protocol from a [dissertation paper](#) (Appendix N, pages 276-284):r



Interview Protocol  
**Daughter/Son Social Role**  
University of South Florida Social Roles Research

**INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS:**

**Note to Interviewer:** If there is only one parent, please adjust the language appropriately throughout the interview.

2. Do you have at least one living parent, step-parent, or parent-in-law?  Yes  No

If you answered "No," has one of your parents (step-parents, parents-in-law) died within the last year?  Yes  
 No If yes, would you be willing to talk with me about your role as a [Daughter/Son] during the last year?  
 Yes  No

**Note to Interviewer:** Please be sensitive to the difficulty that speaking about a recently deceased parent may present to the respondent. If there is no living or recently deceased parent whom the respondent feels comfortable discussing with you, terminate the interview and thank the respondent.

Interviewer:

*During this interview, you will be asked to tell me about being a [Daughter/Son]. This may have to do with being a natural or adopted child, a stepchild, or a [daughter-in-law/son-in-law] of your spouse's parents. I am interested in your experiences and activities as an adult child of your parent or parents. The questions will ask you to think about all of your living or recently deceased parents, including your natural or adoptive parents, your stepparents, and your parents-in-law. Some questions may not apply to your present situation, so just let me know that. You should think about your current situation during the last year in your answers.*

*There are no right or wrong answers, so please be as honest as you can be in helping me to understand what being the adult child of your parents is like. Remember that the information is confidential and will be used only for research about the experience of being an adult child in 2007.*

3. Do you live with any of your parents?  
 Yes  In your home?  In your parent's home?  
 Other? (Specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
 No  
Does most of your financial support come from your parents?  Yes  No  
If yes, are you a financially dependent student, with your own residence?  Yes  No

## Preparation for Writing an Interview Protocol

(Cooper 2014)

In parallel with stakeholder interviews, the design team should review any literature pertaining to the product or its domain. This can and should include product marketing plans, market research, technology specifications and white papers, business and technical journal articles in the domain, competitive studies, Web searches for related and competing products and news, usability study results and metrics, and customer support data such as call center statistics. The

design team should collect this literature, use it as a basis for developing questions to ask stakeholders and SMEs [Subject Matter Experts], and later use it to supply additional domain knowledge and vocabulary, and to check against compiled user data.

## **Section 2: Content of the Interview Protocol**

**(Jacob and Furgerson, 2012)**

An interview protocol is more than a list of interview questions; it also extends to the procedural level of interviewing and includes a script of what you will say before the interview, script for what you will say at the conclusion of the interview, prompts for the interviewer to collect informed consent, and prompts to remind the interviewer the information that she or he is interested in collecting. Interview protocols become not only a set of questions, but also a procedural guide for directing a new qualitative researcher through the interview process.

### **Writing Successful Interview Protocols**

1. *Research should guide your questions*

Before even writing the first question, you should know what the research literature says about the people you are studying. In some cases, there will be lots of research; in others, you will find little to nothing and will have to read the research on similar populations. Using research to guide your questions means that you have done a thorough review of the literature and that you know what other scholars say about the people you are studying. Knowing the research leads to developing questions that are grounded in the literature, that differ from what previous research says, and that still need to be answered. It also helps you focus or narrow your questions in ways that will create meaningful data.

*In researching postpartum hemorrhage (PPH) in low-resource settings, you learn that common methods for treatment include administering medication, performing blood transfusions, performing active management of the third stage of labor and utilizing internal and external devices that apply pressure on the uterus to occlude blood vessels. You also learn that low-resource settings often utilize the active management of the third stage of labor more so than resource-rich countries, due to lack of resources such as blood and medical supplies.*

2. *Use a script for the beginning and end of your interview*

The script should prompt you to share critical details about your study such as what you are studying and why you are studying it. It should remind you to explain the notion of informed consent and direct you to have the participant sign the statement of informed consent. The script should provide wording that will help you alleviate any concerns the participant might have about confidentiality. You may also want to use the script as your reminder for telling the interviewee a little about yourself in order to begin building rapport. At the end of the interview, going back to the script can help you remember to

provide your contact information and to relay to the interviewee that there may be a subsequent contact if there is a need for you to clarify information, ask additional questions, or perform member checking or “soliciting feedback from one’s respondents on the inquirer’s findings” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 88).

*Hello ! My name is \_\_\_\_\_, I’m an engineering student from the University of Michigan. I’m here to learn about maternal health and the types of devices used in hospital settings. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. The purpose of this interview is to learn about postpartum hemorrhage and how your hospital addresses it. There are no right or wrong answers, or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel. If it’s okay with you, I will be tape-recording our conversation since it is hard for me to write down everything while simultaneously carrying an attentive conversation with you. Everything you say will remain confidential, meaning that only myself and my teammates will be aware of your answers - the purpose of that is only so we know whom to contact should we have further follow-up questions after this interview.*

### 3. Questions should be open-ended

A closed-ended question can only result in one of two answers—yes or no. These types of questions will not allow the interviewee to offer you any additional information. The goal of qualitative research is to uncover as much about the participants and their situations as possible and yes or no questions stop the interviewee before getting to the “good stuff”. While you could ask, “Are there things I would want to know about developing a good interview protocol? What?” A better way to ask that question is, “Tell me about the things I might want to know to create a successful interview protocol.”

*Instead of : “Do nurses administer medication to treat PPH?”*

*Ask: “Can you walk me through the standard treatment protocol for PPH in your hospital?”*

### 4. Start with the basics

Ask your interviewee basic background data about her/himself (things like name, where they grew up, etc.) as a way of warming up your participant. You want to build trust between you and your interviewee as you collect important background data. You should look to the literature to help you decide what background data is important to collect. For instance, if you are doing a study about how African American women make decisions about college, you will want to consult college choice literature as you decide what background information you need to collect. If the literature says the type of high school a student attended significantly impacts student college choice, you will want to ask about the student’s high school.

*How did you get into the medical field?*

*What experiences have you had in practicing medicine?*



5. *Begin with easy to answer questions and move towards ones that are more difficult or controversial*

Arrange questions in order from those that are least difficult or contentious to those that are most difficult. The idea, again, is to slowly build confidence and trust with the interviewee. In other words, you would not want to start with a big, probing, “high stakes” question like, “Have you ever been [assaulted]?” Chances are if you do, your interviewee will withdraw. If you are interested in learning something about this topic, you might instead begin with a question like, “Tell me about the ways that people have taken advantage of you in college.”

*First: What is the standard of care for treating PPH?*

*Later: How is your hospital under-resourced in treating PPH effectively?*

6. *The phrase “tell me about...” is a great way to start a question*

The phrase “tell me about” is not only an invitation for the interviewee to tell you a story, but also it assumes that the interviewee will talk and it subtly commands the interviewee to begin talking. Also the phrase “tell me about” makes it almost impossible to create a question that is too complicated, too detailed, or too difficult to answer. It keeps the question general enough that the interviewee can take the question in several directions and leaves room for ideas, impressions, and concepts which you have not thought of to emerge from the data.

*Tell me about cesarean delivery procedures.*

*Tell me about your interactions with patients.*

7. *Write big, expansive questions*

Qualitative research is all about the materialization of unexpected data from your participants and writing big, expansive questions allows the participant to take your question in several directions. When you write big questions your participant will might say things that you would have never thought to ask and often those things become one of the most important parts of your study. Also, writing lots of small, detailed questions does not allow the interview to freely flow from your interviewee, but rather makes it a choppy back and forth between you and the participant. For instance, if you want to know several things about a participant’s background it is better to say, “Tell me about your background” than, “What is your age? What is your race? Where did you go to high school?” By saying, “Tell me about your background” you allow the interviewee to talk uninterrupted. When they are finished you can prompt them to talk about anything they missed that you want to know.

*Tell me about the leading causes of maternal mortality in your hospital.*

8. *Use prompts*

Creating probes or prompts for each question helps keep you on track. Prompts also help to remind you of your questions while at the same time allowing for unexpected data to emerge. To use prompts effectively, you must first design a broad question (as mentioned in tip # 7) that might take an interviewee in several different directions.

Directly under this question, you should design bullet points that remind you of areas that have emerged from the literature or things you think will enrich your data. Using the above example of, “Tell me the ways in which people have taken advantage of you in college.” You might list the following probes as bullets: academically, friendship-wise, sexually, etc. In essence, you ask the general question, let the interviewee talk in any direction, and then use your prompts to get at pre-planned specifics they did not mention.

*Tell me about the leading causes of maternal mortality in your hospital.*

- *Incidence of PPH (which is leading cause worldwide)*
- *Types of drugs, how they work, how often they are used: oxytocin, cytotec*
- *Blood transfusion/shortage*
- *Amount of staff members needed/resourced*
- *Most commonly used devices (tamponades, anti-shock garments, etc...)*
- *Risk to mother vs infant*

9. *Be willing to make “on the spot” revisions to your interview protocol*

Being willing to make adjustments in the interview also allows for the design of the study to emerge as you conduct research. If you go off book from the interview protocol, you may find something interesting that you did not expect. You can add the new question to the remainder of your interviews if you find that the information you uncovered in your current interview is useful. Emergent design (Creswell, 2007) is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research and sticking to your interview protocol exactly does not allow for the design to emerge naturally as you conduct research.

*During an interview you learn that the most severe cases of postpartum hemorrhage are not dealt with at the hospital you are interviewing at. Rather, the patients are referred to a tertiary hospital for treatment. This is unexpected information, as such, you ask:*

*Can you describe the procedure for transferring a patient from your hospital's perspective? What are your thoughts on this transfer protocol (positive/negatives)? What resources are available to treat a patient who is unable to reach a tertiary hospital in time?*

## **Section 3: Developing the Interview Protocol**

### **Speech Events**

**(Spradley, 1979) [LINK](#)**

An ethnographic interview is a particular kind of *speech event*. Every culture has many social occasions defined primarily by the kind of talking that takes place. In our society most of us quickly recognize when someone gives us a *sales pitch* for a used car or a set of encyclopedias. We recognize Johnny Carson's *monologue* on the Tonight Show. We can easily tell the difference between a *lecture*, a *job interview*, or a *friendly conversation*. Many of the cues to

distinguish among these speech events remain outside our awareness, but we use them nonetheless. All speech events have cultural rules for beginning, ending, taking turns, asking questions, pausing, and even how close to stand to other people. In order to clarify the ethnographic interview, [let's] compare it with a more familiar speech event, the friendly conversation.

### **Friendly Conversation Example (p. 461-2)**

**BOB:** "Hi Fred! How are you?" (Bob extends his hand while Fred hurriedly shifts a package to his left hand so he can respond.)

**FRED:** "Fine. It's good to see you." (A firm handshake is now underway, one that goes on for several seconds as they continue to talk.)

**BOB:** "How's the family? I haven't seen you since March. Did you have a good summer?"

**FRED:** "They're all doing fine. Jean just left for college a few weeks ago."

BOB: "That's right! How does it feel to have your oldest gone? Hardly seems possible. Billy's talking about the University of North Carolina for next year."

FRED: "Did you have a good summer?"

BOB: "Well things were pretty hectic at the office. We did get away for a couple weeks to the Smokies. Then Barbara and I had a long weekend up in D.C."

FRED: "The Smokies? That sounds great. We've never been to that part of the country."

BOB: "It was beautiful. But hot in August. We camped out for part of the time. If we go again I think we'd try to make it in September, maybe even after the leaves have started to turn. How about you? Did you get away?"

FRED: "Yes, we spent three weeks in July up in Wisconsin."

BOB: "Really! Where did you stay?"

FRED: "Rented a cabin up in the northwest corner of the state. Did a lot of fishing. Best time was canoeing on the Brule River—nice rapids, but not too much for the kids. Had to rent two canoes, but we spent several days doing that river."

BOB: "What kind of fish did you get?"

FRED: "Bass, mostly, and panfish. John caught a musky and I think I had a northern pike on my line but he got away."

BOB: "Say, how are things at the company?"

FRED: "In May Al was transferred to Fort Lauderdale and that took a lot of pressure off. And since then sales have been up, too. Had a really productive week in early June—all the field men came in and I think that helped. How about you, still thinking of a transfer?"

BOB: "Well, they keep talking about it. I've told them I'd rather wait till Danny finishes high school, but I don't think I could turn down a regional if it came along."

FRED: "Look, I've got to meet Joan up the street in a few minutes; I'd better be off. It was really good to see you."

BOB: "Yeah, let's get together sometime. I know Barbara would love to see Joan."

FRED: "O.K. Sounds good. Take it easy now."

BOB: "You too. Have a good day."

It is not difficult to recognize this exchange between Fred and Bob as a friendly conversation rather than a lecture, a sales presentation, or an interview for employment. The greeting, the casual nature of the encounter, the speech acts they used, and certain cultural rules they followed, all clearly define this speech event as a friendly conversation.

Let's turn now to an example of an ethnographic interview based on research on the culture of cocktail waitresses in a college bar.

### Cocktail Waitress Example with Commentary



ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

ETHNOGRAPHER: Hi, Pam. How are you?

PAM: Good. How are things with you?

ETHNOGRAPHER: Fine. How's school going?

PAM: Pretty slow; things are just getting started in most classes.

ETHNOGRAPHER: I'm really glad you could talk to me today.

PAM: Well, I'm not sure if I can help you. I just don't know what you want to know.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, as I told you on the phone, I'm interested in understanding your work as a cocktail waitress. You've had quite a bit of experience, haven't you'?

PAM: Oh, yes! (laughs) But I don't know if that qualifies me to tell you very much.

ETHNOGRAPHER: How did you get the job at Brady's Bar?

PAM: Well, it was July, a couple years ago. I didn't have any waitress experience before. It was really a fluke that I got the job at all. I went to Brady's one night with some friends and they bet me I couldn't get a job so I just walked up to the bartender and asked for it and I got it! Started the very next week. I've only worked part time during school but full time during the summer.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You know, Pam, I've seen waitresses working in bars and restaurants, but as a customer. I'm sure my impressions of what they do is far different from the way that waitresses see the same things. Don't you think that's true?

PAM: Oh, yes! Very different. I found that out when I started.

ANALYSIS

**Greetings.** This exchange of questions and words like "Hi," is a bit more formal than what might occur between close friends.

**Giving ethnographic explanations.** This begins here in recognizing they are going to "talk." Pam expresses doubts about her ability: she is unsure of the purpose of the interview.

**Asking friendly question.** This is not strictly an ethnographic question, but one that might be asked in a friendly conversation. It does provide information and helps relax the informant.

**Expressing cultural ignorance.** This can be done in many ways. Here the ethnographer places himself in the position of seeing waitresses but *not knowing* what their work is like. This paves the way for an ethnographic explanation. The ethnographer asks the informant to agree that the ethnographer is *truly* ignorant.



ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, let me explain what I'm interested in. I would like to find out what it's like to work as a waitress. I guess what I want to know is if I got a job at Brady's Bar and worked there for a year or two, how would I see things? What would I have to know to do a good job and survive and make sense out of what goes on? I'd like to know what you do each night, the problems you have, just everything that goes into being a cocktail waitress.

PAM: Well, I could tell you some things, but I'm not sure I can answer all your questions.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, let me begin with a simple question. I've never been to Brady's Bar and I don't know what takes place there on a typical night. Even when I've been to other bars, it's usually for an hour or so, never an entire evening as a waitress would spend. Could you start at the beginning of an evening, say a typical night at Brady's Bar, and describe to me what goes on? Like, what do you do when you first arrive, then what do you do next? What are some of the things you would have to do on most nights, and then go on through the evening tight up until you walk out the door and leave the bar?

PAM: Well, first I should say that there's no typical night at Brady's.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, that's fine, just go through any night and tell me what you think might usually happen.

PAM: It depends if I go on at 7 or 9 o'clock. I usually start at 9, at least lately.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K. Why don't you tell me what you would usually do, from the beginning of the evening at 9 o'clock when you come in, until the end when you go home

PAM: I usually get there at about 8:45. I'll go to the kitchen and hang up my coat or sweater, then go back to the bar and sit for a while. I might ask for a coke and then pass the time joking with the bartender or some regular who is sitting nearby. If it's real busy, I'll punch in and go right to work. Anyway, by 9 o'clock I punch in and go to my waitress station and set up my tray. I'll take either the upper section or the lower depending on what the other waitress wants. Depending on what bartenders are working I might say, "Bob's on tonight, can I have the upper section?" But she has first choice since she came in at 7. The upper section is smaller and you get different types of people than in the lower section. You get more dates. My section was really popular last night. It was jammed. I couldn't even take my tray with me by the end of the evening, just carried one drink at a time.

*Giving ethnographic explanations.* He conveys the nature of the project without using technical terms like *CULTURE*, ethnography, science. Or cultural knowledge. It is put in everyday language that the informant will understand. Another important ethnographic element here is *repeating*. In several different ways the project explanation is repeated.

*Asking ethnographic questions.* Before asking, he states that he is going to ask one, thus preparing the informant. Then, *repeating* occurs in which the ethnographer asks the question in several different ways.

*Expressing cultural ignorance* prefaces the repetition of questions.

*Asking descriptive questions.* This is a special kind of descriptive question called a "grand tour question." It is asked, not in a simple statement, but with repeated phrases, expanding on the basic question. Expanding allows the informant time to think, to prepare her answer.

Pam's response gives the ethnographer an opportunity to *repeat* the grand tour question, thus giving Pam more time to think.

Pam's short answer gives the ethnographer another chance for repeating the descriptive question.

Pam now begins to answer the grand tour question, easily describing the things she does at the bar each night. Some informants will talk for fifteen or twenty minutes without stopping: others pause to be sure they are doing the right thing. *Pausing* provides the ethnographer with a chance for *expressing interest*.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Really! That must make it difficult.

PAM: (Nods her head)

ETHNOGRAPHER: You said that you would go to your waitress station and set up your tray. Could you describe for me what you do when you set up your tray'?

PAM: Sure. You have a little round tray, like a pizza tray, two ash trays on it, one on top and one on the bottom. My tips go in the bottom and my loose change goes in the top ash tray. And the bills go under the ash tray, with the big bills on the bottom and the ones on top so you don't make the mistake of handing out a five or a ten.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Oh, that's interesting and probably important for not losing money. I'd never thought of that.

PAM: Yeah, it gets dark and can be really hard to see.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K. Now, let's go back to my earlier question. You've punched in, gone to your section, set up your tray, and started to work. Could you describe what that would in vol ve?

PAM: Well, first I'd look around and see if anyone wants anything. If someone is looking my way or looks like they want me, I'd go right to their table. Otherwise I'd just walk through the section, picking up empty bottles, emptying ash trays, cleaning up any empty tables. Then I'd watch and take orders and clean tables and all evening I'd be serving orders until finally I'd make last call and that would end the evening.

*Expressing interest.* In long responses to grand tour questions it is important to watch for every opportunity to verbally express interest.

*Restating.* The ethnographer begins to use Pam's words, this tells her it is important for her to use them.

*Incorporating.* As soon as possible, the ethnographer wants to move from questions that use his words to ones that incorporate native terms. Restating and incorporating are two of the most important elements and they often occur together in this way.

*Mini-tour question.* The phrase "set up your tray" was incorporated into a mini-tour question. This is a descriptive question that asks the informant to describe some smaller unit of an event or activity. Mini-tour questions can be asked almost any time, even before the grand tour question has been fully answered.

*Expressing interest.*  
*Expressing cultural ignorance.*

*Restating.* The ethnographer picks up a whole series of terms the informant has used to describe what she's doing and repeats them. This serves to jog the memory of the informant, it helps return to the original question, and it helps her expand on the description. The ethnographer could have said, "What do you do next?" but by expanding the question and restating native terms, the informant will have an easier time answering it.



ETHNOGRAPHER: You've mentioned quite a number of things you do during a typical evening. You punch in, set up your tray, pick up empty bottles, take orders, clean tables, serve orders, and make last call. Now, would you say that these are all the things you do at Brady's Bar?

FAM: Oh, yes. Every night. That's about all I do.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Can you think of any other things you would do?

FAM: Well, I make change and sometimes I mix drinks.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You do? I thought only the bartender did that,

FAM: Well, if he has to go somewhere for a few minutes and it isn't too busy, he might ask me to get behind the bar and mix drinks for a few minutes. And another thing I do is help the other girl, if she wants.

ETHNOGRAPHER: I'm interested in the way waitresses would talk to each other at work. Could you give me a sentence a waitress might use to let you know she wants help'?

FAM: Well, she might say, "Could you catch that table of guys over there?" but usually, if I'm not busy and I see her real busy in her section, I'd just go down and say, "Can I give you a hand?" Some girls will say, "Oh, thanks, I've really had a rush." But sometimes they'll say, "That's O.K., I'm almost caught up."

ETHNOGRAPHER: Now, I'd like to ask a different kind of question. I'm interested in the differences between some of your activities. What is the difference between *taking orders* and *servicing orders*?

FAM: Well, for one thing, you get more hassles taking orders than servicing orders.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Oh, really? Now that's something that as a customer I'd never know. But it's probably something every cocktail waitress knows'?

FAM: Oh, yeah.

*Asking structural questions.* The ethnographer wants to introduce a structural question and begins by restating a list of activities that Pam has already mentioned. These make up a domain—things a waitress does at work—and the ethnographer wants to elicit a complete list of the terms in this domain. This question sequence begins with a *verification question*, then after Pam agrees, the structural question is asked.

*Expressing ignorance.* The ethnographer takes every opportunity to express his ignorance, to let the informant know he really doesn't know about the world of cocktail waitresses.

*Ethnographic explanation.* The ethnographer reminds the informant that he wants to know how she would use her native language (so she won't use her translation competence). *Asking a native language question.* This descriptive question asks for an expression related to what the informant is talking about—but in her native language.

*Explaining a question.* The ethnographer merely introduces it and says it will be different.

*Asking a contrast question.* All contrast questions restate and incorporate terms.

*Expressing interest*

*Expressing cultural ignorance e.* Here the ethnographer not only indicates it is something he wouldn't know, but something that every cocktail waitress would, i.e. it is common cultural knowledge to insiders.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You know, you've mentioned several places in Brady's Bar, like the bar itself, the waitress station, the upper section, the lower section. I wonder if you could describe the inside of the bar to me. For instance, if I were blind and you took me into Brady's and took me throughout the bar telling me each place we were standing or you were looking at, what would it be like'?

PAM: Well, when we first came in the front door, you'd be standing in front of a large horseshoe bar. On the left of the bar are a row of stools and behind the stools is a wall, On the right side of the bar are other stools and along that side are the two waitress stations. Then, on the right side of the bar, at the front is the lower section, to the back is the upper section. On the far side, against the wall, are the two restrooms and the door to the kitchen. And that's about it.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, that's great. I've really learned a lot today, but it also makes me aware that you know a great deal more. We didn't get to discuss the details of taking orders or any of the different kinds of drinks. I'm sure there are a lot of other things. I'd like to go over my notes

and I'm sure I'll think of other questions. It's really an interesting place and a lot more goes on there than meets the eye.

PAM: Yes, it's more complex than most people realize. In fact, I didn't realize there was so Much that went on! (laughs)

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, could we meet again next week at this time'!

PAM: Sure, that would be fine.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K. Thanks for coming today. This has really been interesting and I'm looking forward to learning a great deal more.

PAM: Well I enjoyed talking about it.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, I'll see you next week, then. Bye,

PAM: Fine. Bye.

*Restating.* In leading up to another question, the ethnographer uses the informant's language again to remind her of its importance.

*Mini-tour question.*

*Creating a hypothetical situation*

This element is used frequently to place the informant in the scene and help her to use terms and phrases from her own language.

*Expressing ignorance.* This is a prelude to taking leave.

*Taking leave.* This ' element is very different from the friendly conversation. After expressing interest and that there is much more to learn, the ethnographer identifies topics he

doesn't know about, things he wants to find out in the future. This helps the informant realize she knows more than she may think she knows, that she can teach the ethnographer a great deal more.

*Expressing interest.*

This example had a specific purpose: to give an overview of the elements in an ethnographic interview. In contrast to a friendly conversation, some striking alterations appear. In addition to an explicit purpose, the use of ethnographic explanations and the use of ethnographic questions, we can identify the following changes.

1. *Turn taking is less balanced.*

Although the informant and ethnographer take turns, they do not take turns asking the same kinds of questions or reporting on their experience. The relationship is asymmetrical: the ethnographer asks almost all the questions; the informant talks about her experience.

2. *Repeating replaces the normal rule of avoiding repetition.*

Not only does the ethnographer repeat things the informant has said, restating them in her language, but questions are repeated. In a more lengthy interview, the ethnographer would ask similar questions over and over, such as, " Can you think of any other things you do on a typical night?"

3. *Expressing interest and ignorance occur more often but only on the part of the ethnographer.*

Again, this aspect of the relationship is more symmetrical than in friendly conversations. Especially at first, most informants lack assurance that they know enough, that the ethnographer is really interested, and these two elements become very important. Each can occur nonverbally as well as verbally

4. *Finally, in place of the normal practice of abbreviating, the ethnographer encourages expanding on what each person says.*

His questions are phrased and rephrased, expanding into paragraph length. And these very questions encourage the informant to tell more, not less, to go into more detail, not less. It takes many reminders for some informants to overcome the long-established practice of abbreviating.

## Types of Interview Questions

(Spradley, 1979) ([LINK p. 48](#))

Ethnographic interviewing... begins with the assumption that the question-answer sequence is a single element in human thinking. Questions always imply answers. Statements of any kind always imply questions. This is true even when the questions and answers remain unstated. In ethnographic interviewing, *both questions and answers must be discovered from informants.*

There are three main ways to discover questions when studying another culture. First, the ethnographer can record the questions people ask in the course of everyday life... Second, the ethnographer can inquire directly about questions used by participants in a cultural sense. Black and Metzger have suggested three strategies:

1. To ask the informant, "What is an interesting question about \_\_\_\_\_?"
2. To ask the informant, "What is a question to which the answer is \_\_\_\_\_?"
3. To ask the informant to write a text in question-and-answer form on some topic of interest to the investigator (1965: 146)



A third strategy for discovering questions simply asks informants to talk about a particular cultural scene. This approach uses general *descriptive questions* that are less likely to reflect the ethnographer's culture. Answers can be used to discover other culturally relevant questions. This approach is like offering informants a frame and canvas and asking them to paint a word-picture of their experience. "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" and "Could you describe a typical evening at Brady's Bar?" are examples of such *descriptive questions*.

[There are] more than thirty kinds of ethnographic questions... the three main types [are as follows:]

1. *Descriptive Questions*

This type enables a person to collect an on going 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?"

2. *Structural Questions*

Structural 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 kinds of activities you would do as a beautician?"

3. *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*?"

## **Types of Descriptive Questions**

Descriptive questions take "advantage of the power of language to construe settings" (Frake 1964a:143). The ethnographer does need to know at least one setting in which the informant carries out routine activities... There are five major types of descriptive questions and several subtypes. Their precise form will depend on the cultural scene selected for investigation. Descriptive questions aim to elicit a large sample of utterances in the informant's native language. They are intended to encourage an informant to talk about a particular cultural scene. Sometimes a single descriptive question can keep an informant talking for more than an hour.

1. *Grand Tour Questions*

A grand tour question simulates an experience many ethnographers have when they first begin to study a cultural scene. A grand tour usually takes place in a particular locale: a jail, a college campus, a home, a factory, a city, a fishing boat, etc. Grand tour questions about a locale almost always make sense to informants. In addition to *space*, informants can give us a grand tour through some *time* period: "Could you describe the main things that happen during the school year, beginning in September and going through May or June?" They can take an ethnographer through a sequence of *events*: "Can you tell me all the things that happen when you get arrested for being drunk, from the first moment you encounter the police, through going to court and being sentenced, until you finally get out of jail?" An informant can give the ethnographer a grand tour through some group of *people*: "Can you tell me the names of all your relatives and what each one is like?" Some large events such as a ceremony are made up of *activities* that can become the basis for a grand tour question: "What are all the things that you do during the initiation ceremony for new members who join the fraternity?" Even a group of *objects* offers an opportunity for a grand tour: "Could you describe all the different tools and other equipment you use in farming?" Whether the ethnographer uses *space*, *time*, *events*, *people*, *activities*, or *objects*, the end result is the same: a verbal description of significant features of the cultural scene. Grand tour questions encourage informants to ramble on and on.

## 2. *Mini-Tour Questions*

Responses to grand tour questions offer almost unlimited opportunities for investigating smaller aspects of experience. Because grand tour questions lead to such rich descriptions, it is easy to overlook these new opportunities. One ethnographer, investigating the culture of directory assistance operators working for Bell Telephone Co., began with a grand tour question: "Could you describe a typical day in your work as a directory assistance operator?" After a lengthy description, she discovered that one recurrent activity was "taking calls." Each call lasted an average of 37 seconds. This led to a mini-tour question: "Could you describe what goes on in taking a call?" The informant was able to break down that brief period of time into more than a dozen activities, ones that were far more complex than the ethnographer realized when she asked the question.

Mini-tour questions are identical to grand tour questions except they deal with a much smaller unit of experience. "Could you describe what you do when you take a break at Brady's Bar?" "Could you draw me a map of the trusty tank in the Seattle City Jail?" "Could you describe to me how you take phone calls in your work as a secretary?" The four kinds of mini-tour questions (typical, specific, guided, task-related) use the same approaches as their counterparts do with grand tour questions.

## 3. *Example Questions*

Example questions are still more specific, in most cases. They take some single act or event identified by the informant and ask for an example. A tramp, in responding to a

grand tour question, says, "I was arrested while pooling," and so I would ask, "Can you give me an example of pooling?" A waitress states, "There was a table of guys who really gave me a hard time last night." An example question: "Could you give me an example of someone giving you a hard time?" This type of question can be woven throughout almost any ethnographic interview. It often leads to the most interesting stories of actual happenings which an ethnographer will discover.

#### 4. *Experience Questions*

This type merely asks informants for any experiences they have had in some particular setting. "You've probably had some interesting experiences in jail; can you recall any of them?" "Could you tell me about some experiences you have had working as a directory assistance operator?" These questions are so open ended that informants sometimes have difficulty answering them. They also tend to elicit atypical events rather than recurrent, routine ones. They are best used after asking numerous grand tour and mini-tour questions.

#### 5. *Native-Language Questions*

Native-language questions are designed to minimize the influence of informants' translation competence. Because descriptive questions are a first step to discovering more culturally relevant questions, they sometimes contain words and phrases seldom used by informants. This encourages informants to translate. Native-language questions ask informants to use the terms and phrases most commonly used in the cultural scene.

Native-language questions serve to remind informants that the ethnographer wants to learn their language. They can be used whenever one suspects an informant is translating for the ethnographer's benefit. They should be employed frequently in early interview until an informant begins to state voluntarily, "The way we would say it is \_\_\_\_\_," or "Our term for that is \_\_\_\_\_." Every ethnographer can develop ways to insert native-language queries into each interview.

## **Structural and Contrast Questions**

**(Vaughn, 1994)**

While descriptive questions provide a rich core of data, *structural and contrast question* provide the researcher with the opportunity to fine-tune, clarify, and verify analysis categories. Asking structural and contrast questions allows the researcher to test hypothesized categories and domains and to discover additional terms. Spradley (1979) suggests nine principles to be used in asking structural and contrast questions. These include:

#### 1. *Concurrent Principle*

Ask structural and contrast questions concurrently with descriptive questions. They complement descriptive questions.

## 2. *Explanation Principle*

Let the informant know you are asking a structural or contrast question for they are not typical in ordinary conversation. For example, the interviewer might say, “We’ve been talking about how (student) interacts during reading groups. How does (student) compare to the other students in the group?”

## 3. *Repetition Principle*

Repeat structural and contrast questions to be sure that all examples or comparisons have been made. For example, the interviewer might say, “You have told me how (student) compares to the other students in terms of oral reading, how does he compare in terms of understanding what he/she reads?”

## 4. *Contextual Principle*

Provide the informant with contextual information, particularly when a structural or contrast question is being introduced. For example, the interviewer might say, “You work with (student) and four other students four times a week in a small reading group. Think for a minute about this group. How would you compare (student’s) performance in that group with the other students?”

## 5. *Cultural Framework Principle*

Provide a cultural framework for structural and contrast questions. Informants oftentimes discuss a topic or domain in relation to their own personal experiences. If the goal is to obtain an exhaustive list of all included terms in a domain, then it will be important to have the informant go beyond his/her personal experiences. For example, in trying to obtain an exhaustive list for the cover term “difficult to teach” children, the interviewer might say, “You have described ‘difficult to teach’ children based on the ones that you have had in your classroom. Could you describe any additional characteristics of ‘difficult to teach’ children regardless of whether or not you have had students with these characteristics in your classroom?”

## 6. *Relational Principle*

Provide opportunities for the informant to describe how one idea, category, or domain is related to another. For example, when trying to clarify the informant’s definition of learning disabilities, the interviewer might inquire, “How does the term ‘learning disabilities’ relate to the term ‘learning problems’?”

## 7. *Use Principle*

Ask how something is used rather than asking what it means. Spradley (1979, p.156) suggests, “If we ask for meaning, we will only discover the explicit meanings, the ones

that people can talk about. If we ask for use, we will then tap the great reservoir of tacit meanings which exists in every culture.

#### 8. *Similarity Principle*

Ask how one term is similar to a related term. This will assist in clarifying and discovering the boundaries associated with the term. For example, the inquirer could ask: "How is the term 'learning disabilities' similar to the term 'learning problems'?"

#### 9. *Contrast Principle*

Ask how one term is different from a related term. The meaning of a term is based as much on what it does not mean as what it does mean. For example, the inquirer could ask: "How is the term 'learning disabilities' different from the term 'learning problems'?"

### **Types of Structural Questions**

#### **(Spradley, 1979)**

Structural 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 re-peated, 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?"

#### 1. *Introductory Example*

We've been talking about your ballet classes and you've mentioned some of the different exercises you do in class. Now, I want to ask you a slightly different kind of question. I'm interested in getting a list of all the different kinds of exercises done in class or at least all the ones you have done since you started taking ballet. This might take a little time, but I'd like to know all the different types, what you would call them?

#### 2. *Explanation Questions*

Structural questions often require an explanation. Although ordinary conversation is sprinkled with structural questions in one form or another (What kind of car did you buy? What kinds of cars have you thought about buying?), they are not as common as descriptive questions. In a sense, the ethnographer moves further away from the friendly conversation when introducing structural questions. Unless informants understand this, a structural question may take them off guard and limit their response. Consider two examples drawn from a study of ballet culture; each example uses the same structural question, but one does not include an explanation:



ETHNOGRAPHER: I've learned from other salespeople that certain phrases or sayings are used pretty often, like "Hooray for Colliers!" Would you use that phrase?

INFORMANT: Oh, yes, all the time.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, if I'm going to understand the meaning of phrases like this, what they mean to you and other salespeople, I need to go into this whole area in depth. First, I'd like to know all the different phrases that are used frequently when you're with other salespeople. After we get a list of all the different ones we can go back over them and find out how each kind is different from the others. O.K., let's begin. Can you tell me some different phrases I would hear from Colliers sales-people when they are together?

INFORMANT: Well, there is "Hooray for Colliers," "Rock 'em and sock 'em," "Fantastic," "I'm enthused," and "Are we oysters or are we eagles?"

### 3. *Repetition*

Another type of example, one used almost all the time, repeats the included terms already discovered. I make it a rule never to ask a structural question without repeating at least some of the included terms (if I know them) for the informant. This serves to make clear what I want to know and jogs the memory of the informant. Here are two typical structural questions which include this repetition of included terms:

- a. I'm interested in knowing all the different ways the deaf use to communicate. You mentioned ASL, signed English, pantomiming, speaking, Quad Speech, and writing. Can you think of any other ways the deaf use to communicate?
- b. We've talked about your classroom and all the things you do there during school. Now, I'd like to ask you a different kind of question about all the parts of the room, so I can get them clear. You said there was the doorway, where you come in; and there's the blackboard, that's a part of the room. And the reading center, and the bulletin board. Can you think of any other parts of the classroom?

By listing several known included terms in this manner, most informants immediately recall additional terms. One such example speaks more clearly than several explanations.

## **Types of Contrast Questions**

### **(Wordpress source that refers to Spradley)**

Contrast questions guide inquiry into the similarities and differences that exist among the terms in each domain (at all levels – not just among the first level included terms under a given domain cover term but also among the subsets of included terms within included terms. [There are] three basic types of contrast questions:

### 1. *Dyadic Contrast Questions*

Compare two members (included terms or subsets of terms within included terms) of a single domain by asking, “In what ways are these two things similar and different?” For example, in the domain “Student roles,” one might ask, “What are the differences between the included terms ‘teacher assigned roles’ and ‘teacher expected roles’?” There are several possible answers to this question, which constitute possible dimensions of contrast for interpreting students’ experiences.

### 2. *Triadic Contrast Questions*

The researcher looks at three included terms within a domain at once (or among subsets of included terms) and asks, “Which two are most alike in some way, but different from the third?” By asking this contrast question many times about all the terms previously identified in a domain (and even among domains within a super domain), the inquirer can discover both similarities and differences at the same time.

### 3. *Card-Sorting Contrast Questions*

Allow[s] the informant or the inquirer to compare *all* the identified terms (included terms and their subset terms) of a large domain to each other to identify differences and similarities. Each term is written on a card and then the person asking the contrast questions reads through the cards asking themselves, “Are there any differences among these things?” If the items do not seem different in any way, they are placed in a single pile. When the person doing the sorting comes to the first item that appears different for any reason at all, they place that card in a new pile. Now with two piles, the sorter continues to sort the cards until they find one that does not fit in either of the piles; then they start a third pile, and so on until all the cards are sorted into piles. All the items within a pile are considered to be similar. Cards in different piles contrast with one another. The piles constitute dimensions of contrast, which the inquirer attempts to name and describe. Illustrating this use of contrast questions here is too complex; but you should try it with your own project.

It is possible that even after searching your field notes using contrast questions, you will not identify any dimensions of contrast. However, it is likely that you will have identified domains and categories of included terms within those domains. By returning to the field and using selective observations and interviews, you should begin to identify those differences. Once you have discovered one or two differences, you may still need to discover more; continued use of contrast questions while reviewing field notes and during selective inquiry should help you do this. Once you have discovered a dimension of contrast that applies to two or more terms in a domain, you may still want to find out if it applies to the other members of that domain. Again, this may involve more selected observations and interviews in addition to reviewing field notes with these contrast questions in mind.

# How to Ask Interview Questions

## Building Rapport

(Spradley, 1979) p. 44-48

Rapport refers to a harmonious relationship between ethnographer and informant. It means that a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information. Both the ethnographer and the informant have positive feelings about the interviews, perhaps even enjoy them. However, rapport does not necessarily mean deep friendship or profound intimacy between two people. Just as respect can develop between two people who do not particularly like one another, rapport can exist in the absence of fondness and affection. It is impossible to identify universal qualities that build rapport because harmonious relationships are culturally defined in every society. And so the ethnographer must pay particular attention to friendly relationships in each cultural scene to learn local, culture-bound features that build rapport. Probably the only universal characteristic of rapport is that it changes and fluctuates over time. On first encounter a potential informant may appear eager and cooperative. During the first interview this same informant appears uncomfortable, anxious, and even defensive. A different informant, after several interviews conducted in a harmonious fashion, becomes suspicious and bored, even discontinuing further contact.

The rapport process, in cases where it develops successfully, usually proceeds through the following stages: Apprehension - Exploration - Cooperation - Participation.

### 1. *Apprehension*

Some degree of uncertainty starting with the first contact through one or two interviews is common. The informant doesn't know what to expect, doesn't really understand the purposes and motives of the ethnographer. Both researcher and informant are unsure how the other person will evaluate responses. Informants may fear that they will not meet the expectations of the ethnographer. They may comment: "I don't know if I know enough," or "I'm not sure I can really help you, maybe you ought to talk to someone else about this." The realization that ethnographic interviews begin with some uncertainty in the relationship can help the beginning ethnographer relax and accept this fact. At the same time, several things can help move the interviews through the stage of apprehension. The most important thing is to get informants talking. Descriptive questions are especially useful to start the conversation and keep an informant freely talking. It does not usually matter what a person talks about; it does matter that the informant does most of the talking during the first couple of interviews. When an informant talks, the ethnographer has an opportunity to listen, to show interest, and to respond in a nonjudgmental fashion. These kinds of responses represent the most effective way to reduce an informant's apprehension. They communicate acceptance

and engender trust. One of the most important principles, then, for the first interviews is to keep informants talking.

## 2. *Exploration*

In this stage of the rapport process, both ethnographer and informant begin trying out the new relationship. Together they seek to discover what the other person is like, what the other person really wants from the relationship. Exploration is a time of listening, observing, and testing. "What does he want me to say? Can she be trusted? Is she going to be able to answer my questions? What does she really want from these interviews? Am I answering questions as I should? Does he really want to know what I know?" Informants need the opportunity to move through the stage of exploration without the pressure to fully cooperate. It takes time to grasp the nature of ethnographic interviews. It takes time to see if the ethnographer's actions will match the explanation offered during the first interview. Valuable data can be collected during this stage if the ethnographer is willing to wait for full cooperation. During this stage a certain tenseness exists and both parties may find the interviews exhausting.

Three important principles facilitate the rapport-building process during this stage. First, *make repeated explanations*. One dare not assume that informants appreciate the nature of ethnographic interviews based only on the first explanation. Repetition before each interview, during interviews, and at the end of each will pay great dividends. Second, restate what informants say. Using this principle, the ethnographer selects key phrases and terms used by an informant and restates them. Restating in this fashion reinforces what has been said by way of explanation. Restating demonstrates an interest in learning the informant's language and culture. The third principle states, don't ask for meaning, ask for use. Beginning ethnographers often become over-concerned with meanings and motives. They tend to press informants with questions like, "What do you mean by that?" and "Why would you do that?" These questions contain a hidden judgmental component. Louder than words, they seem to shout, "You haven't been clear; you haven't explained adequately; you are hiding the true reasons for what you told me." Ethnographic interviewing differs from most other approaches by the absence of probing "why" and "what do you mean" questions. Asking for use is a guiding principle that underlies all ethnographic interviewing. When combined with restating and making repeated explanations, ethnographic interviews usually move quickly through the stage of exploration.

## 3. *Cooperation*

In time, the rapport process moves into the next stage - cooperation. Informants often cooperate from the start of the first interview, but this stage involves more complete cooperation based on mutual trust. Instead of uncertainty, the ethnographer and informant know what to expect of one another. They no longer worry about offending each other or making mistakes in asking or answering questions. More and more, both



persons find satisfaction in meeting together to talk. Informants may offer personal information and feel free to ask the ethnographer questions. Most important, both share in the definition of the interviews; they both know the goal is to discover the culture of the informant in the language of the informant. Now informants may spontaneously correct the ethnographer: "No, I wouldn't say 'the police arrested me,' but that 'a bull pinched me.'

#### 4. *Participation*

The final stage in the rapport process is participation. After many weeks of working closely with an informant, sometimes a new dimension is added to the relationship, one in which the informant recognizes and accepts the role of teaching the ethnographer. When this happens there is a heightened sense of cooperation and full participation in the research. Informants begin to take a more assertive role. They bring new information to the attention of the ethnographer and help in discovering patterns in their culture. They may begin to analyze their culture, but always from their own frame of reference. Between interviews they are on the lookout for information relevant to the ethnographic goals. Not all informants progress to this last stage of participation. If they do, they increasingly become participant observers in their own cultural scene. The ethnographer's role is then to help informant/participant-observers record what they know.

#### **(Allison, 2013)**

Influential people, good leaders especially, are skilled at building rapport. Think of a time that you met someone you felt that you opened up to immediately. You just felt like sharing your story and they felt like an immediate friend. Time felt like it was flying, you were probably very productive in your meeting, and very-likely, this person achieved his or her goals in the meeting. And very-likely, this person was good with power questions.

A power question is a provocative, specific, open-ended question that really allows a person to open up to you and feel as if you care about what they have to say. Using power questions in conversation will get your partner talking, keep the attention off you and more on them, which is what everyone wants.

- *So, tell me...*

One builds rapport by being interested in the person one wishes to build it with. So, when someone asks you about your weekend, you say you went fishing, saw some friends and barbecued some burgers. The next thing that comes out of your mouth must *not be about you*. The next thing you say must direct the attention back on your inquisitor.

You say: "So, tell me about the best part of your weekend."

Wait...that's not a question. That's an order. By not asking, you are showing confidence. You are also placing yourself as the leader of the conversation. By ordering, you're making clear you want to make conversation out of interest, not social obligation.

For rapport-building, you start your line of questioning off with an order: "So tell me..."

"So, tell me how you're dealing with the challenges of this project."

When you say this, you are looking directly into their eyes and if not completely smiling, you are looking friendly and interested. You are essentially lobbing the metaphorical ball of conversation onto their side of the court so they can send it back to you without effort. Your order should also be specific. For example, instead of inquiring generally about their project, you have them tell you about the challenges of the project.

- *Repeat after me*

Next, you play the repeating game, and it goes like this:

You: "So, tell me how you did on your 10K race this weekend."

Them: "Well, it was really crowded. I think it brought down my time, but it's better than I expected."

You: "So, the race was really crowded and even though the crowds brought down your time, you're faster than the time you received." \*thinks deeply about this\*

What just happened there? *You repeated what they just said to you.* This tells them that you heard them. You also show them that you are thinking about what they just said. Because they are an *important person*.

In order to ensure effectiveness, you've not only got to mirror the meaning of their words but also the tone of their voice. If they're excited, you get excited, too. If they're bland, make sure you express through your tone that what they are saying is interesting without overdoing it.

Benjamin Disraeli said, "talk to a man about himself and he will listen for hours."

- *Question time*

To recap, you've ordered them to tell you something (flipping the focus off you and onto them), mirrored back their answer (ensuring they know you're listening and confirming that what they have to say is important), next you continue the conversation.

After you repeat back to them the same thing they just said. They will most likely answer with "Yes." Of course they will. You just reaffirmed something they said. They are not going to disagree with themselves. And if they do, you've done something wrong.

You've got to have your power questions in the hopper, because if you wait too long, the conversation is going to sink faster than the Titanic. Now, there are so many variables to a conversation that it is impossible to have them pre-fabricated, but you can use some rules of thumb:

Make sure they're open-ended. This means there are no yes and no answers. Each answer should have an explanation.

Be specific. Pick a few items out of what they've already told you and combine them to get specific. If you're going down the wrong path you'll know, or they will show you the path they want to go down by switching the topic. People tend to talk about what they know best.

Then, you take something from the answer they give you and use it in their next question.

- *Verbing*

How can you keep the conversation going? Conversations are all about momentum. If the momentum drops, the conversation drops. You've got to keep asking questions for the conversation to keep going. A quick and easy tip for designing questions in a pinch is using is what's called verbing. Take a verb from the person's answer and add it into your next question.

They say **run**. You ask about their **run**.

Them: "I ran a 10K. It was okay."

You: "How often do you run?"

They say **forgot**. You ask about their forgetfulness.

Them: "I forgot about my son's birthday. He'll never be the same..."

You: "Ouch. How do you think you forgot that?"

They say **clowned**. You ask them about clowning.

Them: "We just clowned around all weekend. It was nuts."

You: "Interesting...what exactly do you mean by clowning around?"

They say **managed**. You ask them about managing.

Them: "We're managing a team of six right now."

You: "What do you find works best about managing a team of that size?"

Rinse and repeat.

- *Emotion*

Don't go into an emotion question right away, because it may be a little too intense. After you've run a few questions, and you're both feeling comfortable, ask: "How did that feel?" Only pull out the feels when you've assessed the situation. If you haven't pumped them up enough yet or gone deeper into the conversation, trying to force being best buds will only come off as fakery.



The formulate for building rapport:

- Order an answer (ie: "So, tell me...")
- Repeat it back.
- Power question.
- Use verbing to avoid getting stuck.
- Bring in the feelings

This all needs to be done in an emotionally friendly manner. You must feel the meaning of the words in order for this to be effective.

**(Werner & Schoepfle, *Systematic Fieldwork*, 1987, Volume 1, p.10 1987)**

**"Reproduced with permission of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD.**

The formulation of appropriate questions on a given topic is not a trivial matter. In order to obtain a meaningful answer, the ethnographer must first ask a meaningful question.

Unfortunately, many, perhaps most, questions that the ethnographer brings to the field from personal study at home are unsuitable for presentation to consultants.

Some people, such as Studs Terkel, the author of many books based on taped interviews (e.g., *Working* 1972), have a knack for asking relevant questions. A large part of such "knack" is preparation. These people try to find out as much as possible about the interviewee before the interview. Similarly, the ethnographer's task is to learn as much as possible about a culture and its natives in advance. Early interviews may be used to learn important background information that will lead to better interviews later

## **Ask Open-Ended Questions**

### **Patton (2015)**

Qualitative inquiry - strategically, philosophically, and methodologically - aims to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses like fixed survey items ("strongly agree"). Rather, questions should be asked in a truly open-ended fashion so people can respond in their own words. Those open-ended responses are the heart of qualitative data, and they emerge from asking open-ended questions.

The standard fixed-response item in a questionnaire provides a limited and predetermined list of possibilities: "How satisfied are you with the program? (a) very satisfied, (b) somewhat satisfied, (c) not too satisfied, (d) not at all satisfied." The closed and limiting nature of such a question is obvious to both questioner and respondent. Many researchers seem to think that the way to make a question open-ended is simply to leave out the structured response categories. But



doing so does not make a question truly open-ended. It merely disguises what still amounts to a predetermined and implicit constraint on likely responses.

Consider the question "How satisfied are you with this program?" Asked without fixed-response choices, this can appear to be an open-ended question. On closer inspection, however, we see that the dimension along which the respondent can answer has already been *identified-degree of satisfaction*. The interviewee can use a variety of modifiers for the word satisfaction - "pretty satisfied", "kind of satisfied," "mostly satisfied," and so on. But, in effect, the possible response set has been narrowly limited by the wording of the question. The typical range of answers will vary only slightly more than what would have been obtained had the categories been made explicit from the start while making the analysis more complicated.

A truly open-ended question does not presuppose which dimension of feeling or thought will be salient for the interviewee. The truly open-ended question allows the person being interviewed to select from among that person's full repertoire of possible responses those that are most *salient*. Indeed, in qualitative inquiry, one of the things the inquiry is trying to determine is what dimensions, themes, and images/words people use among themselves to describe their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Examples, then, of truly open-ended questions would take the following format:

What's your reaction to \_\_\_\_\_ ?

How do you feel about \_\_\_\_\_?

What do you think of \_\_\_\_\_?

The truly open-ended question permits those being interviewed to take whatever direction and use whatever words they want to express what they have to say. Moreover, to be truly open-ended, a question cannot be phrased as a dichotomy.

ACTUAL QUESTIONS ASKED AND ANSWERS GIVEN	GENUINELY OPEN-ENDED ALTERNATIVES WITH RICHER RESPONSES
<p>Q1. Were you doing a formative evaluation?</p> <p>A. Mostly.</p>	<p>Q1a. What were the purposes of the evaluation?</p> <p>A. First, to document what happened, then, to provide feedback to staff and help them identify their "model," and finally to report to funders.</p>
<p>Q2. Were you trying to find out if the people changed from being in the wilderness?</p> <p>A. That was part of it.</p>	<p>Q2a. What were you trying to find out through the evaluation?</p> <p>A. Several things. How participants experienced the wilderness, how they talked about the experience, what meanings they attached to what they experienced, what they did with the experience when they returned home, and any ways in which it affected them.</p>
<p>Q3. Did they change?</p> <p>A. Some of them did.</p>	<p>Q3a. What did you find out? How did participation in the program affect participants?</p> <p>A. Many participants reported "transformative" experiences—their term—by which they meant something life changing. Others became more engaged in experiential education themselves. A few reported just having a good time. You'd need to read the full case studies to see the depth of variation and impacts.</p>
<p>Q4. Did you interview people both before and after the program?</p> <p>A. Yes.</p>	<p>Q4a. What kinds of information did you collect from the evaluation?</p> <p>A. We interviewed participants before, during, and after the program; we did focus groups; we engaged in participant observation with conversational interviews; and we read their journals when they were willing. They also completed open-ended evaluation forms that asked about aspects of the program.</p>

ACTUAL QUESTIONS ASKED AND ANSWERS GIVEN	GENUINELY OPEN-ENDED ALTERNATIVES WITH RICHER RESPONSES
<p>Q5. Did you find that being in the program affected what happened?</p> <p>A. Yes.</p>	<p>Q5a. How do you think your participation in the program affected what happened?</p> <p>A. We've reflected a lot on that and we talked with staff and participants about it. Most agreed that the evaluation process made everyone more intentional and reflective—and that increased the impact in many cases.</p>
<p>Q6. Did you have a good time?</p> <p>A. Yes.</p>	<p>Q6a. What was the wilderness experience like for you?</p> <p>A: First, I learned a great deal about participant observation and evaluation. Second, I came to love the wilderness and have become an avid hiker. Third, I began what I expect will be a deep and lifelong friendship with one staff member.</p>

## Clarity of Questions

The interviewer bears the responsibility to pose questions that make it clear to the interviewee what is being asked. Asking understandable questions facilitates establishing rapport. Unclear

questions can make the person being interviewed feel uncomfortable, ignorant, confused, or hostile. Asking singular questions helps a great deal to make things clear. Other factors also contribute to clarity.

First, in preparing for an interview, find out what special terms are commonly used by people in the setting. For example, state and national programs often have different titles and language at the local level. CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act Programs) was designed as a national program in which local contractors were funded to establish and implement services in their area. We found that participants only knew these programs by the name of the local contractor, such as "Youth Employment Services," "Work for Youth," and "Working Opportunities for Women." Many participants in these programs did not even know that they were in CETA programs. Conducting an interview with these participants where they were asked about their "CETA experience" would have been confusing and disruptive to the interview.

When I was doing fieldwork in Burkina Faso, the national government was run by the military after a coup d'etat. Local officials carried the title "commandant" (commander). However, no one referred to the government as a military government. To do so was not only politically incorrect but risky too. The appropriate official phrase mandated by the rulers in the capital, Ouagadougou, was "the people's government."

Second, clarity can be sharpened by understanding what language participants use among themselves in talking about a setting, activities, or other aspects of life. When we interviewed juveniles who had been placed in foster group homes by juvenile courts, we had to spend a good deal of preparatory time trying to find out how the juveniles typically referred to the group home parents, to their natural parents, to probation officers, and to each other in order to ask questions clearly about each of those sets of people. For example, when asking about relationships with peers, should we use the word *juveniles*, *adolescents*, *youth*, *teenagers*, or what? In preparation for the interviews, we checked with a number of juveniles, group home parents, and court authorities about the proper language to use. We were advised to refer to "the other kids in the group home." However, we found no consensus about how "kids in the group home" referred to group home parents. Thus, one of the questions we had to ask in each interview was "What do you usually call Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_?" We then used the language given to us by that youth throughout the rest of the interview to refer to group home parents.

Third, providing clarity in interview questions may mean avoiding using labels altogether. This means that when asking about a particular phenomenon or program component, it may be better to first find out what the interviewee believes that phenomenon to be and then ask questions about the descriptions provided by the person being interviewed. In studying officially designated "open classrooms" in North Dakota, I interviewed parents who had children in those classrooms. (*Open classrooms* were designed to be more informal, integrated, community based, project oriented, and experiential than traditional classrooms.) However, many of the teachers and local school officials did not use the term *open* to refer to these classrooms because they wanted to avoid political conflicts and stereotypes that were sometimes

associated with the notion of "open education." Thus, when interviewing parents, we could not ask their opinions about "open education." Rather, we had to pursue a sequence of questions like the following:

What kinds of differences, if any, have you noticed between your child's classroom in the past year and the classroom this year? (Parent responds.)

Ok, you've mentioned several differences. Let me ask you your opinion about each of the things you've mentioned. What do you think about ?

This strategy avoids the problem of collecting responses that later turn out to be uninterpretable because you can't be sure what respondents meant by what they said. Their opinions and judgments are grounded in descriptions, in their own words, of what they've experienced and what they're assessing.

A related problem emerged in interviewing children about their classrooms. We wanted to find out how basic skills were taught in "open" classrooms. In preparing for the interviews, we learned that many teachers avoided terms like *math time* or *reading time* because they wanted to integrate math and reading into other activities. In some cases, we learned during parent interviews, children reported to parents that they didn't do any "math" in school. These same children would be working on projects, such as the construction of a model using milk cartons, that required geometry, fractions, and reductions to scale, but they did not perceive of these activities as "math" because they associated math with worksheets and workbooks. Thus, to find out the kind of math activities children were doing, it was necessary to talk with them in detail about specific projects and work they were engaged in without asking them the simple question, "What kind of math do you do in the classroom?"

Another example of problems in clarity comes from follow-up interviews with mothers whose children were victims of sexual abuse. A major part of the interview focused on experiences with and reactions to the child protection agency, the police, welfare workers, the court system, the school counselor, probation officers, and other parts of the enormously complex system constructed to deal with child sexual abuse. We learned quickly that mothers could seldom differentiate the parts of the system. They didn't know when they were dealing with the courts, the child protection people, the welfare system, or some treatment program. It was all "the system." They had strong feelings and opinions about "the system," so our questions had to remain general, about the system, rather than specifically asking about the separate parts of the system (Patton, 1991).

The theme running through these suggestions for increasing the clarity of questions centers on the importance of using language that is understandable and part of the frame of reference of the person being interviewed. It means taking special care to find out what language the interviewee uses. Questions that use the respondent's own language are most likely to be clear. *This* means being sensitive to "languaculture" by attending to "meanings that lead the researcher beyond the words into the nature of the speaker's world" (Agar, 2000, pp. 93-94).



*This* sensitivity to local language, the "emic perspective" in anthropology, is usually discussed in relation to data analysis in which a major focus is illuminating a setting or culture through its language. Here, however, we're discussing languaculture not as an analytical framework but as a way of enhancing data collection during interviewing by increasing clarity, communicating respect, and facilitating rapport.

Using words that make sense to the interviewee, words that reflect the respondent's worldview, will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview. Without sensitivity to the impact of particular words on the person being interviewed, the answer may make no sense at all - or there may be no answer. A Sufi story makes *this* point quite nicely.

*A man had fallen between the rails in a subway station. People were all crowding around trying to get him out before the train ran him over. They were all shouting. "Give me your hand!" but the man would not reach up.*

*Mulla Nasrudin elbowed his way through the crowd and leaned over the man. "Friend," he asked, "what is your profession?"*

*"I am an income tax inspector," gasped the man.*

*"In that case," said Nasrudin, "take my hand!"*

*The man immediately grasped the Mulla's hand and was hauled to safety. Nasrudin turned to the amazed bystanders. "Never ask a tax man to give you anything, you fools," he said. (Shah, 1973, p. 68).*

Before leaving the issue of clarity, let me offer one other suggestion: Be especially careful asking "why" questions.

### **(Spradley, 1979) p.47**

Let me contrast the use of *why questions* and *meaning questions* with the strategy of asking informants how they use their ordinary language. An unfamiliar term emerged in my interviews with tramps; it was called "days hanging." I heard an informant say, "I had twenty days hanging so I pled guilty and asked the judge for the alcoholism treatment center." Another recalled, "Well, I left town because I had a lot of days hanging." Tramps could respond to direct questions and at first I asked things like, "Why did you have twenty days hanging?" "Why did you leave town?" and "What do you mean you had twenty days hanging?" However, this kind of questioning led directly to translations for my benefit. "Well, I had twenty days hanging because I'd made the bucket four times in a row." "I left town 'cause I knew I'd do hard time." And such translations required still more probing "why" questions—"Why did you have twenty days?" "What do you mean, did hard time?"

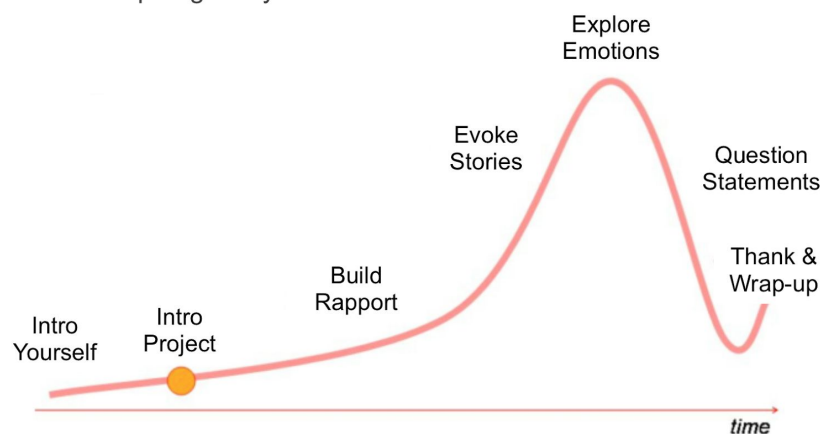
Such questions communicated to my informants that they had not been clear. In a subtle, unspoken way, these questions pressured informants to use their translation competence. As

time went on I learned that instead of asking for meaning, it worked best to ask for use. Cultural meaning emerges from understanding how people use their ordinary language. With tramps, I would restate, then ask how the phrase was used. For example, I would say, "You had twenty days hanging. Could you tell me what you would say to the judge if you had ten or thirty or sixty days hanging?" Or I might ask for the way others used this phrase: "Would tramps generally talk about the days they had hanging before they went into the courtroom? What kinds of things would I hear them saying?" I might be more direct: "What are some other ways you could talk about days hanging?" or "Would someone ever say, 'I had twenty days hanging so I pled not guilty?'" Asking for use is a guiding principle that underlies all ethnographic interviewing. When combined with restating and making repeated explanations, ethnographic interviews usually move quickly through the stage of exploration.

## **Section 4: Writing the Interview Protocol**

### **(D-School Interview for Empathy)**

Use this map to guide your interview.



**Diagram A**

This diagram provides a guideline to creating questions for an interview protocol. Under each section, you will want to create questions to satisfy introduction, kickoff, rapport, etc. Here, we provide a short explanation of each of these topics:

**Introduction:** After the introduction, the interviewee should know who you are, and your purpose in interviewing them. This is where all formalities, such as consent forms and recording devices are attended to.

**Kickoff:** The Kickoff will directly follow the formalities of the introduction. Here the interviewer will use conversational, yet relevant questions to make the respondent feel comfortable, and warm them up to answering more complex questions.

**Build Rapport:** Rapport refers to a harmonious relationship between an ethnographer and informant. It means that a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information. Here the ethnographer and the informant develop a positive attitude towards the interview, perhaps even enjoy them. The dialogue is still relevant to the topic, and continues to prepare the respondent for the grand tour questions.

**Grand Tour:** These questions are meant to provide in-depth details for your design; Grand tour questions elicit deeper meaning and allows the interviewee to talk at length to answer a particular question. As mentioned above, grand tour questions may be related to a specific place, time or task. An example of a place-based question may include: tell me about your home, how is it organized? Time-based question: tell me about a time you did not have access to clean water? Task-based question: tell me about your morning routine from arriving to the office to ending the day?

It's important to keep in mind that these questions are broad, and in order to get the most information, you will need to ask more guided questions. For example, in asking about the morning routine to end of day, you may also ask: what do you typically do on days where you have a meeting? What about if you have something due at the end of the day? -- these questions are considered mini-tour questions and are asked in addition to broader, grand tour questions.

**Reflection:** As stated in the reading document, reflection based questions occur later in the interview as a way of bridging all that you've learned and gives you the opportunity to clarify statements that were made at different points early on in the interview. When building a protocol, it's important to create the skeleton for the types of questions you might want to ask based on what the interviewee has stated.

Question: You said earlier that \_\_\_\_\_, can you clarify why this is \_\_\_\_\_ [anything can go into these blanks. For example, the interviewee may have mentioned what their ideal stove looks like, including all the features they'd like. You may want to get clarity on why these features are important to them.]

**Wrap Up:** Thank the interviewee: this is the point in the interview where you are coming to a close and it should be clear. This does not have to be the end of the interview, simply thank them for their time and follow up with letting them know how helpful they have been. Here, you may also ask them for final thoughts on the interview and find out how they felt about the entire process. Finally, ask if they have any questions for you. Be sure to leave enough time at the end

that you can allow yourself to fully answer their questions while possibly asking the interviewee additional questions if they are raised.

## **Section 5: Conclusion**

**(Jacob and Furgerson, 2012)**

A good interview protocol is essential to getting the best information from the participants in your study; however, a good protocol does not ensure that you will have a successful interview. There are several things you can do to ensure the interview runs smoothly. In addition to making sure that the procedural part of doing an interview works, it is also imperative to try to make good connections with the people you interview. Making good connections means people share more of their story with you and as a result you get better data. If you do not make good connections, listen, or allow yourself to become distracted in an interview, you run the risk of not getting the real story and your research will be incomplete at best. Conducting good interviews is hard work and students who want to do qualitative research should be prepared to do the work of connecting to other people.

Conducting qualitative research can be exciting for both the seasoned researcher and the new researcher alike. When others open up their lives for us to investigate, it is a gift for both the speaker who is heard and for the listener who learns something from the investigation. Researchers need people's stories for many reasons. They help us describe people, explain phenomena, and can lead to improvement in many fields of study. When we faithfully nurture other people's stories, not only our separate fields of study, but also the field of qualitative research can be enriched by what we learn.

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