



ETHNOGRAPHER'S TOOLKIT

*book 3*

*second edition*

**ESSENTIAL**  
*ethnographic*  
**METHODS**

*A Mixed Methods Approach*



Jean J. Schensul  
Margaret D. LeCompte



ESSENTIAL  
ETHNOGRAPHIC  
METHODS

# ETHNOGRAPHER'S TOOLKIT

*Second Edition*

Jean J. Schensul, Institute for Community Research, Hartford, Connecticut  
Margaret D. LeCompte, University of Colorado, Boulder

## PURPOSE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S TOOLKIT

The second edition of the **Ethnographer's Toolkit** is designed with the novice field researcher in mind. In this revised and updated version, the authors of the **Toolkit** take the reader through a series of seven books that spell out the steps involved in doing ethnographic research in community and institutional settings. Using simple, reader-friendly language, the **Toolkit** includes case studies, examples, illustrations, checklists, key points, and additional resources, all designed to help the reader fully understand each and every step of the ethnographic process. Eschewing a formulaic approach, the authors explain how to develop research questions, create research designs and models, decide which data collection methods to use, and how to analyze and interpret data. Two new books take the reader through ethical decision-making and protocols specific for protection of individual and group participants in qualitative research, and ways of applying qualitative and ethnographic research to practical program development, evaluation, and systems change efforts. The **Toolkit** is the perfect starting point for students and faculty in the social sciences, public health, education, environmental studies, allied health, and nursing, who may be new to ethnographic research. It also introduces professionals from diverse fields to the use of observation, assessment, and evaluation for practical ways to improve programs and achieve better service outcomes.

1. *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research: An Introduction, Second Edition*, by Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul
2. *Initiating Ethnographic Research: A Mixed Methods Approach*, by Stephen L. Schensul, Jean J. Schensul, and Margaret D. LeCompte
3. *Essential Ethnographic Methods: A Mixed Methods Approach, Second Edition*, by Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte
4. *Specialized Ethnographic Methods: A Mixed Methods Approach*, edited by Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte
5. *Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic Data: A Mixed Methods Approach, Second Edition*, by Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul
6. *Ethics in Ethnography: A Mixed Methods Approach*, by Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul
7. *Ethnography in Practice: A Mixed Methods Approach* by Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte



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A division of  
ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
*Lanham • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK*

Published by AltaMira Press  
A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.  
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
www.rowman.com

10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth PL6 7PP, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Schensul, Jean J.

Essential ethnographic methods : a mixed methods approach / Jean J. Schensul,  
Margaret D. LeCompte. — 2nd ed.

p. cm. — (Ethnographer's toolkit ; Book 3)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7591-2203-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-7591-2204-8 (electronic)


1. Ethnology—Methodology. 2. Ethnology—Research. 3. Ethnology—Fieldwork.

I. LeCompte, Margaret Diane. II. Title.

GN345.S3619 2012

305.8001—dc23

2012023519

 The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE *ETHNOGRAPHER'S TOOLKIT*

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 The *Ethnographer's Toolkit*, a mixed method approach, is a series of texts on how to plan, design, carry out, and use the results of applied ethnographic research. Ethnography, as an approach to research, may be unfamiliar to people accustomed to more traditional forms of research, but we believe that ethnography will prove not only congenial but also essential to many researchers and practitioners. Many of the investigative or evaluative questions that arise in the course of answering basic questions about ongoing events in a community or school setting or in the context of program planning and evaluation cannot be answered very well with other approaches to research, such as controlled experiments or collection of quantifiable data. Often there are no data available to quantify or programs whose effectiveness needs to be assessed! Sometimes the research problem to be addressed is not yet clearly identified and must be discovered. In such cases, ethnographic research provides a valid and important way to find out what *is* happening and to help research-practice teams plan their activities.

## **NEW IN THE SECOND EDITION OF THE *ETHNOGRAPHER'S TOOLKIT***

In this second edition of the *Toolkit*, we have updated many sections of the books and, based on feedback from our colleagues, we have clarified many of the concepts and techniques. Book 1 of the *Ethnographer's Toolkit* remains an introduction and primer, but it includes new material on data collection, definition, and analysis as well as new chapters on research partnerships and using ethnography for a variety of applied purposes. In Book 1 we define what ethnographic research is, when it should be used, and how it can be used to identify and solve complex social problems, especially those not readily amenable to traditional quantitative or experimental research methods alone. Book 2 now is devoted to the process of developing a conceptual basis for research studies and to more detailed questions of research design and sampling. Books 1 through 4 emphasize the fact that ethnography is a peculiarly human endeavor; many of its practitioners have commented that, unlike other approaches to research, the *researcher* is the primary tool for collecting primary data. As we demonstrate in these books, ethnography's principal database is amassed in the course of human interaction: direct observation, face-to-face interviewing and elicitation,

audiovisual recording, and mapping the networks, times, and places in which human interactions occur. Further, the personal characteristics and activities of researchers as human beings and as scientists become salient in ethnography in ways not applicable in research that permits the investigator to maintain more distance from the persons and phenomena under study. Interpretation of ethnographic research results emerges only from the process of engaging researcher understanding with direct, face-to-face field experience.

Book 4, a collection of individually authored chapters, now includes new chapters on cutting-edge approaches to ethnography. Books 6 and 7 also are entirely new to the *Toolkit*. The former provides extensive detail on the burgeoning field of research ethics, and the latter approaches the dissemination and application of ethnographic research in new ways.

We have designed the *Toolkit* for educators; service professionals; professors of applied students in the fields of teaching, social and health services, communications, engineering, and business; and students working in applied field settings. The examples we include throughout the books are drawn from these fields as well as our own research projects and those of our colleagues.

### INTRODUCTION TO BOOK 3

*Essential Ethnographic Methods: A Mixed Methods Approach* is intended to provide readers with an introduction to the fundamental, face-to-face data-collection tools that ethnographers and other qualitative researchers use on a regular basis. All ethnographic studies make use of participant and other forms of observation and various forms of open-ended and focused individual and group interviews. “Mixed methods” approaches also may include surveys based on concepts and constructs that emerge from qualitative inquiry. We call these surveys *ethnographic* because they are specific to the sociocultural settings within which the research is being conducted, rather than using questions, scales, and other measures created by other researchers in different settings. By describing in detail how to go about these basic ethnographic tasks, our goal is to improve the quality and scope of the data ethnographers collect.

This book on essential methods provides ethnographers with tools to answer the principal ethnographic questions: “Of what does this setting consist?” “What’s happening in this setting?” “Who is engaging in what kind of activities?” “Why are they doing what they are doing?” and “What do these activities and behaviors mean to the people engaged in them?” Ethnographers use these questions to enter a field situation and to obtain basic information about social structure, social events, cultural patterns, and the meanings people give to these patterns. The essential methods include open-ended and focused listening, questioning strategies, participant and nonparticipant observation, visual recall,



and recording techniques. We present ways of developing these skills in chapter 1 and explain why they are the building blocks of good ethnography. Basic skills, relationships that must be established in order to conduct ethnography in the field, and challenges researchers confront are the subject matter of the remainder of the first chapter. Chapter 1 also reminds the reader of the exploratory modeling process described in Books 1 and 2. These help to guide the study and focus the various steps in data collection.

In the remaining chapters, which we summarize here, we cover approaches to collecting data through participant and nonparticipant observation (recording what the researcher sees); interviewing individuals and groups (recording what participants say); mapping the environments and contexts in which participant behavior occurs; and engaging in ethnographically informed survey research. The last involves developing systematically administered structured interviews and confirmatory questionnaires that are based on and grounded in less structured data collection. The purpose of such surveys is to assess the degree to which the information obtained from a small group of key informants actually applies to the entire community or to larger groups within the community. These data-collection strategies are fundamental to good ethnographic research. Because they require ethnographers to become involved in the local cultural setting and to acquire their experience through hands-on experience, the essential tools also permit ethnographers to learn about new situations from the perspective of an “insider.”

In chapter 2 we describe the process of entering the field site. Even for experienced ethnographers, encountering new and sometimes surprising or even painful experiences in the early days in the field is reason for self-reflection. Ethnography cannot be conducted without good relationships in the field, and in this chapter, the first steps in building lasting relationships in the field are described. In chapter 3 we discuss the ways ethnographic data are developed, recorded, and organized in the form of field notes, including observations, interviews, and audio- and video-recorded information. We believe that organizing the ways that information is captured, recorded, transcribed, and stored for later management and analysis should be considered and begun early in the fieldwork experience.

With chapter 4 we begin the description of methods for collecting essential forms of data—various types of observations, interviews, and other tools that facilitate discussion with people in the field setting. Chapter 4 introduces participant observation and informal interviewing, the building blocks of good field research. In chapter 5 we describe some additional tools, including timelines, social maps, and organizational charts that complement participant observation and interviewing in the exploratory phase of a study.

In chapter 6 we focus specifically on how to conduct in-depth open-ended interviews with knowledgeable individuals in a field setting so as to learn more about the context, setting, history, social organization, roles and responsibilities of individuals, daily routines, and important events and rituals. These interviews help to expand the exploratory model and provide guidance for the semistructured open-ended interviews that are the subject of chapter 7. Semistructured open-ended interviews are interviews conducted with individuals about their personal experiences. The intent is to collect somewhat different information from each respondent, using the same set of open-ended questions. The analysis of these interviews produces overall dominant and minor or contradictory themes and variables and items that can be included in ethnographically based surveys.

It is now very common for qualitative researchers to rely on focus groups as the basis for their study. Focus groups can be used with community experts or key informants in the exploratory phase of a study, as well as at other times. They are useful in obtaining insights into study results and for reviewing surveys for acceptability and validity. In chapter 8, we discuss the pros and cons of focus groups, where and when they should and should *not* be conducted, and how to make decisions about the topic, organization, management, and use of focus group data in the context of ethnography.

The unstructured and semistructured qualitative methods we describe in chapters 4 through 8 generate an overall description of social settings and social dynamics in the research site and a set of hypotheses that seek to explain and distinguish the attitudinal and behavioral characteristics of various subgroups among the population under study. The next step in the research process is to test these ethnographically informed hypotheses on a representative sample of the total population in the site with a survey instrument or observational scheme that obtains quantified data from structured, closed-ended questions and/or an observational coding system.

In chapter 9 we discuss ethnographic surveys, or structured, closed-ended, quantitative surveys and observational protocols, with representative samples of the study population or events, activities, and interactions that can be observed systematically. These surveys and structured observations are used to determine whether the information acquired during open-ended research methods with small groups of participants actually can be applied to the larger population in the study site, in other words, if they are generalizable. Chapter 10 addresses approaches to sampling suitable for different stages of the ethnographic process. First we outline approaches to selective sampling against a set of theoretically derived criteria, useful for exploratory work, in semistructured interviewing, and in other cases, such as the study of events or classrooms. Next we turn to representative sampling, using systematic or random approaches to choosing a



sample for observation or interviewing so that the results are generalizable. We discuss the conditions under which each of these approaches can be used and potential challenges and biases in their use.

Finally, chapter 11 reviews issues of research quality, especially regarding how traditional concepts of validity, reliability, and credibility of evidence are applied to ethnographic research. These issues are critical in determining the quality of any ethnographic or otherwise qualitative study. Throughout each chapter, we will draw on examples from our own research in communities and organizations in the United States and other countries, and as well as from the work of other researchers.

# 1

## ESSENTIAL DATA COLLECTION


### WHAT IS ESSENTIAL DATA COLLECTION?


Ethnographic research consists of face-to-face interaction with local experts and residents in schools, clinics, parks, community settings, and institutions. As we mentioned in Book 1, ethnographic research differs from, although it may include, narrative interviews and other forms of qualitative inquiry (QI) or qualitative methods (QM) that separate individuals and their life histories from immediate observation and interaction in the contexts in which they occur.

Most people can learn most of the skills required to conduct ethnography in a live setting. However, not everyone can become a skilled ethnographer. That is because good ethnography is based on two critical factors: building relationships with others and the ability to enjoy living in unfamiliar situations. Good ethnographers like to “make the ordinary new” and “make the new ordinary.” To do this requires curiosity, genuine pleasure in encountering difference, and a sense of wonder at the vast diversity of ways in which human beings go about their daily business and try to solve their human problems.

Ethnography takes the position that the best and most authentic way to understand a different cultural setting is to immerse oneself in it. Immersion involves socialization into the rules, rituals, practices, beliefs, activities, organizations, and daily life schedules of those whose lives are the subject

*What Is Essential Data Collection?*  
*Why Are Research Questions Required to Guide Essential Data Collection?*  
*The Value of Research Modeling Based on Research Questions and Prior Knowledge*  
*Basic Skills Required in Essential Data Collection*  
*Establishing Professional Boundaries: Intimacy and Relationships in Face-to-Face Data Collection*  
*Summary: Challenges in Collecting Observational and Interview Data in Person*

**Cross Reference:**   
See Book 1, chapter 1;  
Book 2, chapter 1

**Cross Reference:**   
See Book 1, chapter 2, describing the characteristics of a good ethnographer

of study. Ethnographers believe that empathetic understanding through lived experience is the best—though not the only—way to build relationships and to convey accurate and socially valid accounts of community situations and problems. Although some ethnographers make do with the stories that informants or local experts tell about local experiences, nothing substitutes for day-to-day participation in the lives of local residents—in their meetings, discussions, conflicts, crises, and other activities that are informative in terms of how life is lived, culture is performed, and meaning is constructed (Geertz 2000; LeCompte and Preissle 1993; LeCompte and Schensul 2010).



**Definition:**

Essential data collection includes the primary means through which ethnographers collect data approximating daily life—observation, conversation, and interviewing



**Key point**

The term **essential data collection** refers to the primary means by which ethnographers collect and interpret data that most closely approximates daily life—observation, conversation, and interviewing. It also, by extension, refers to those skills required to integrate into daily life in new settings. *Essential ethnographic skills are relating, listening, explaining, observing, questioning, communicating, recording, discussing, and revising.* We discuss each of these skills in turn. In the context of discussion we will refer to community entry and to the ongoing dynamics of interaction between ethnographers and their community counterparts.

### WHY ARE RESEARCH QUESTIONS REQUIRED TO GUIDE ESSENTIAL DATA COLLECTION?

Some researchers advise novice researchers to enter a field setting without any *a priori* considerations or assumptions. Dedicated to purely inductive research, they take the position that research questions, review of the literature, or other preparatory activities limit the ability of the researcher to “see” and learn new things. But as we have explained in Books 1 and 2, all researchers begin their journey with a set of assumptions, values, biases, and implicit questions, hunches, and hypotheses (Sudman and Bradburn 1982). While some researchers might argue that these questions and hunches will be identified once in



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 5, on research questions and models; Book 2, chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6

the field, we take the position that it always is best to try to identify them in advance. Furthermore, most researchers do not have the time or luxury to “go to the field” simply to explore. It also is difficult to explain to increasingly research-experienced and sometimes research-weary residents and community leaders that the topic of a study will “emerge” from exposure. Although most people around the world are generous with their time and continue to be relatively unsuspecting when it comes to research in their communities, more and more communities are recognizing that research can provide them with important information that can be used for their own purposes (Ammerman et al. 2003; Arcury, Quandt, and Dearry 2001; Flicker 2006). Consequently, having a set of research questions and a research model in mind makes sense. It makes sense for the researcher who needs to streamline the research process and clearly identify an initial direction as well as personal biases and mistakes with respect to the research site, and it makes sense for the research participants who may also be research partners who are helping to design the study and participating in various ways both during and after the study is completed.

The first step in the development of any research project is a focus for the study and a set of study questions that outline what the researcher is interested in and wants to know. Research questions arise from the researchers’ own observations, as they notice a new local health problem in the newspaper, read a body of literature of personal interest, observe a new population in a local community, or have an interest in an emerging social phenomenon, such as social movements. These observations, stemming from personal interests, beliefs, or convictions then are shaped into a general research question, which may be very broad; for example, “What are the barriers to educational achievement for newly arrived Somalis in the United States?” This statement holds within it the seeds of a set of smaller research questions; a set of assumptions, biases and values; and the potential for developing a guiding or formative research model.



Research questions that can be derived from this larger question might be:

1. What are Somali parents' expectations about public education? Do these differ by length of time in the United States or by their place of origin? Do they differ by gender or age of children?
2. What situations do Somali families face that might affect school attendance or performance?
3. What are intergenerational differences in expectations and behavior that might affect family relationships and school performance?
4. Do Somali parents have any interactions with the schools their children attend?
5. What family or other factors might keep children out of school?



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 5, for another example of how researchers elaborate a question

To begin to think more deeply about these questions requires some initial forays into the network of organizations that work with refugees and literature on adaptation issues as well as the educational concerns of families emigrating from Africa to the United States.

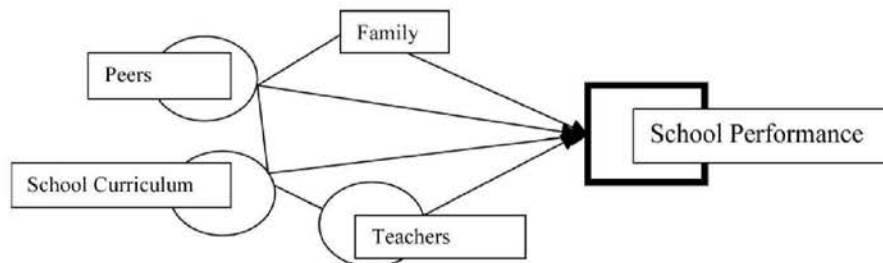
Researchers generating questions such as these clearly hold some specific assumptions and values about formal education. They probably believe that education is a right and that all Somali children should go to school regularly. They also may believe that parents should be able to reach and speak directly to the teachers of their children, and that they should make every effort to support their children's education in ways similar to those used by parents in Western countries. Finally, based on similar research with other African immigrant communities, researchers may hold the belief that there are at least implicit biases against Somali families and that these are expressed in the systemic failure of schools to remove barriers to education for Somali children. Such researchers may also have data obtained from the local school system that show that Somali children have irregular attendance and lower achievement scores than other children. In sum, questions can arise from personal beliefs, prior research, and actual, in-hand data.

**THE VALUE OF RESEARCH MODELING BASED ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PRIOR KNOWLEDGE**

The situation we have just outlined presents a problem to be studied. It can be organized into a research model such as that displayed in Figure 1.1 that stems from, but is more efficient than, a set of research questions. Here, the “problem” or dependent variable domain is “school performance.” The researcher wants to know what accounts for poor school performance of Somali children in contrast to the better school performance of other children, including other newly arrived immigrant children. Researchers who have read about Somalis, spoken to some knowledgeable people about Somalis’ issues as immigrants, and visited the Somali refugee organization will be ready to state that “something” in four domains—family situation, peers, school curriculum, and teachers—is likely to be an important factor explaining or accounting for Somali children’s poor school performance.

While the researchers do not understand exactly what is happening in each of these domains to affect school performance, they do have some hunches about the phenomenon. For example, parents may not be able to provide support for homework because they are not formally educated, they have to work too hard, and there may be many children to support in the household, which leaves parents limited time to devote to each one. Peers may be distracting Somali children by texting and using social-network sites; non-Somali peers’ parents may control children’s time on those sites, but Somali parents do not. School curriculum may be taught in ways that are pedagogically unfamiliar to the students—cooperative learning and small-group

**Cross Reference:** See Book 1, chapter 5, and Book 2, chapters 4, 5, and 6 on research modeling



**FIGURE 1.1** Domain Model: Predictors of Somali Students’ Educational Performance

**Definition:**

Hypotheses are proposed explanations for a condition or problem that can be tested through observations and shown to be true, partially true, or incorrect

instruction are not the way the children learned in their home country, and the children may be having trouble adjusting to the freedom and independence that are characteristic of this instructional modality. Teachers may think that Somali parents don't care about their children's education, and may not be able to communicate with the parents because of a language barrier. Any of these hunches or initial **hypotheses** may be plausible, but it's important for researchers also to recognize that these mere hunches could be incorrect or incomplete. In our model the hypotheses or hunches link the "independent" or contributor domains on the left-hand side of the model in Figure 1.1 to the "outcome" or "dependent" domain—school performance of Somali children. There may also be hypotheses that connect the "independent domains." For example, because Somali parents are not in a position to help their children with homework, their children may turn more toward their peers, which could result in further encouragement to use social-networking sites. The main hypotheses linking the independent domains to the dependent domain are summarized in Table 1.1.

To generate this model, the researcher formulates initial hypotheses to explore what factors might make a difference in performance and to explain reasons for the importance of these factors over others. In the first full fieldwork stages of the research (entering the field and conducting explor-


**TABLE 1.1** Hypotheses Linking Independent Domains in the Research Model to the Dependent Domain—Somali Children's School Performance

| <i>Domain</i>    | <i>Hypotheses</i>  |
|------------------|--|
| Family (parents) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents may not have sufficient education to be able to help children with their schoolwork</li> <li>• The number of children parents must care for precludes paying attention to each of them</li> <li>• Parents may be working and unable to spend time with children's homework</li> <li>• Parents may not understand or be able to influence children's recreational time on computers</li> </ul> |
| Peers            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peers may be encouraging Somali students to communicate with them through social-networking sites</li> </ul>  |
| Curriculum       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Somali children may not understand group-learning curriculum, causing difficulties in both learning and concentration</li> </ul>  |
| Teachers         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers may not want to meet with Somali parents</li> </ul>  |

atory interviews and observations), new domains of explanation may be included in the model. During this time, the links between the domains and factors, as expressed, may or may not be confirmed, and there may be new factor-based explanations. The new model that is generated should be compared with the initial research questions to make sure that the model and the research questions are consistent.

The deconstruction or operationalization of these factors constitutes the next step. It involves unpacking specific aspects of the preidentified four domains of activity (Table 1.2). For example, the researcher might want to define more specifically the meaning and behaviors associated with parents' lack of control over children's use of social-networking sites. Peers' social influence regarding use of social-networking sites might involve demonstrations, demands for responses, requests to view pictures and other uploads, and to respond using text messages, and also there may be criticism of children who do not use social-networking sites. Ways in which children respond to the interactive curriculum would have to be specified based on prior research and observations in the field.

The shaping and reshaping of the model can take place throughout the life of the study, as described in Books 1 and 2. Of course, models can be more or less complex. The model portrayed in Figure 1.1 is relatively simple. A more complex model might include a set of circles (or predictors) that include factors such as the individual family and

**Cross Reference:**  See Book 2, chapters 4, 5, and 6 on modeling and operationalization

**TABLE 1.2** Unpacking Domains in a Research Model to Guide Data Collection

| <i>Domain</i> | <i>Initial Set of Factors Associated with School Performance</i>   |
|---------------|--|
| Family        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents' education level</li> <li>• Number of children in the household</li> <li>• Parents' work schedule</li> <li>• Parents' lack of control over children's use of social-networking sites</li> </ul> |
| Peers         | Social influence from peers to use social-networking sites   |
| Curriculum    | Cooperative education group learning curriculum unfamiliar to Somali children, causing difficulties in learning and concentration  |
| Teachers      | Differential effort to meet with parents based on ethnicity of students and their parents  |

peer (personal) level, and another set of circles or predictors that include barriers associated with educational institutions—curriculum, teacher preparation, school policies, and administrative procedures. A third might include service agency malfunctioning, and a fourth community influences. As we have explained in this chapter and in Books 1 and 2, formative models are revised and elaborated as the study goes on.

**Definition:**

A formative model is an initial set of guesses about which conditions or concepts (domains, factors and variables) are important in contributing to the phenomenon of interest in the study

These **formative models**, generated in the early stages of a study, are like maps, blueprints, or guides that the researcher can follow throughout the entire study. Formative models are meant to highlight and focus on social, cultural, or structural domains that researchers think are likely to be related and to provide the basis for initial explanations that can be expanded upon as the qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed. Without models, researchers all too easily can become lost in the details of ethnographic work, arriving back from the “field” with too much data that point in many directions but lead to nothing specific. With a model, researchers can easily describe the study to others, point out why it might be important to them, and help them understand the terrain of the study so that if they are willing, they can help to move it along. Finally, it is wise to remember that in the early stages of development, these models are not meant to be deductive, predictive theoretical models. Once refined, however, surveys and other ways of collecting data can be used to test the associations among domains and their constituent components to see how well the initial hunches or hypotheses hold up.

**BASIC SKILLS REQUIRED IN ESSENTIAL DATA COLLECTION**

- Relating
- Communicating—listening, questioning, explaining, discussing, explaining
- Observing
- Recording
- Revising/Reframing

### *Relating*

*The first and most important skill in essential data collection is relating well to people in the study site* (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002; DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland 1998). Building relationships in a study site is a complex enterprise. Ethnographers must determine with whom they want to establish relationships, the purpose(s) of the relationship, and how to go about building them. This process takes place over time and generally moves from stakeholders through initial contacts and key informants, to building personal relationships and friendships with others in the study site. Thus, it is important to be prepared to explain the purpose of the study over and over again. Research teams often develop “scripts” or cover stories that tell the story of the project. This is important in team research because it is critical that none of the different sectors within a community feel suspicious or have serious questions about the purpose of the study or the motives of those involved in it. The scripts ensure that team members will be consistent as they enter the field, providing the same information about the study to everyone. However the “script” is written, it should be framed with the characteristics and understandings of those being approached in mind. The script may become more elaborate as researchers become more comfortable talking with people in the field and build trust and confidence in the community. The following example describes how researchers presented a potentially sensitive study in the early stages, so as not to alienate contacts.

#### Key point



#### EXAMPLE 1.1

##### DEVELOPING A SCRIPT FOR USE IN A STUDY OF HIV AND ALCOHOL USE IN INDIA

Researchers on a field team studying HIV and alcohol use in a low-income community of a large northern city in India did not want to tell people at first that the focus of their study was HIV or sex risk. Instead they focused on alcohol as a community health problem. They developed an introductory script for use with different sectors of the community—nongovernmental organization (NGO) directors and staff, policy makers, health providers, and drinking men. With NGOs they referred to alcohol as a problem in the community; with health care providers they referred to health aspects of alcohol use; and with drinking men, they mentioned interest in

why men drank and the benefits of drinking. It was only later, once they had had a conversation or two with the key informants, that they mentioned the “real” focus of the study, alcohol’s relationship to sexual practices and HIV, both sensitive topics in that type of community.



In the following example we illustrate a script that these same field researchers used to introduce themselves that did mention in general the topic of the study, which was alcohol’s association with sexual risk behavior. This type of script is important for all researchers, but it is especially important in team research when consistency across members of the field team in describing a study is required to maintain credibility and trustworthiness in the field.

#### **EXAMPLE 1.2**



##### **MODIFYING A SCRIPT TO INTRODUCE AN ALCOHOL- AND SEXUAL-RISK STUDY TO KEY PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY**

###### **Introducing yourself: Who are you?**

Answer: “My name is \_\_\_\_\_ (add discipline, degrees, and experience only if necessary). This is my (friend, associate, colleague, co-worker) \_\_\_\_\_ and we are from the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) based in Mumbai. IIPS is an institution that does health research on reproduction, fertility, and other such topics countrywide and in Mumbai. We are located in Chembur near Chembur Station (you can add your own script here, what you are comfortable with). We are here to learn about the community, to understand the problems of the community; to find out about the health in this community.”

###### **Introducing the project: What is this project about?**

Answer: “In our project we want to know about the community, about the problems of the community and the health of the community. By health we mean an understanding of people’s physical health, their social health, their sexual health, their habits of using things like alcohol and tobacco, and how health is related to family, friends, and partners. We also want to understand what people do when they need help for certain things, for example, if they have a personal or health problem. We also have heard that many men, young and old, and sometimes women too, drink alcohol or use other substances and that for some that could be a problem. We

would like to understand about drinking and what could be done if it becomes a problem for men and for their families. We are hoping to work in this community for a long time and to see what can be done by working together to make a difference in improving some of the health problems that men have.

To learn about health and people's health habits, we would like to talk with people who live in the community and experts in the community; people who know about it, such as leaders and community members. We would also like to talk with clinics and learn what people read so that we can help to provide information on health problems like alcohol use, fevers, and problems specific to men and to women. We plan to work with the community, to share the information with the community, and to see how it can improve any policies related to health here and elsewhere in Mumbai.

Please let me know if you have any concerns or if any are raised in the future about my activities or the activities of members of our research team.”



Building relationships calls for trust and consistency. Especially in the early stages, researchers should be transparent in their goals and in the institutions with which they are connected. The script or “cover story” may be slanted to appeal to different types of people in the community, but in the end, the main theme should be consistent. A researcher concerned about gender differences in socialization practices of young children should be consistent about representing the research as focusing on the education and development of young children. More details on gender-based dimensions of the study can emerge later on, as long as the general approach is clear. Researchers studying men's health, alcohol consumption, and sexual risk behavior may refer to men's health initially, but they eventually should mention the other topics as well.

Though the goal of much ethnography is to establish relationships with multiple stakeholders, at first it is quite natural that ethnographers will be more likely to approach and build relationships with people most like them in age and gender, or who share common interests such as sports, music, education, and dancing. These relationships are easy and comfortable, and they are based on factors that cut across the class, ethnic/racial, and other notable positional or status differences between ethnographers and the



study population. Connecting with others who may be less readily accessible, especially those with power over access to people, activities, and events in the community, requires a considerable amount of bravery, since these individuals have the capacity to affect the researcher's ability to work in that community.

To enter into these bridging relationships, ethnographers must find ways to explain their work in a persuasive and nonthreatening way. They also must convince others that the information they are willing to provide is confidential and will not be shared. Studies that use an action research approach generally call for alignment with specific sectors of a community while excluding or at least not including others (Brydon-Miller 1997; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Gaventa 1991). In other studies that do not have an immediate action orientation requiring partnerships in the field, ethnographers must identify a group of stakeholders with multiple perspectives on the problem they are studying. Since ethnographers rarely enter communities with specific promises or resources to offer unless they are working with programs or conducting interventions, they must depend on other types of social exchanges to build social capital. To fulfill their social obligations, researchers might bring an appropriate gift in response to an invitation to share a meal, purchase alcohol for everyone in a bar, drive someone home, take an ill family member to the doctor, go to court to support a key informant, or attend a community wedding, funeral, or other rite of passage. Each of these behaviors signals a desire to participate in community rituals, shows concern for others, and demonstrates empathy for community members experiencing needs or difficulties. Humor, good sportsmanship, sharing games and videos, and going to the market together are other ways of showing local solidarity.

The ability to form, follow through on, and maintain trusting relationships is critical to good ethnography, not only because it yields access to wider social networks but also because good relationships produce more thoughtful and accurate data. A single encounter can result in an association that may become more intimate over time. Candor in a single interview about personal intentions



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 7 for a full discussion of the ways in which ethnography is used in conjunction with programs, resources, or to respond to specific requests for information

and motivations, beliefs and goals, identity and life experiences can go a long way to establish rapport between the ethnographer and the person being interviewed. More important, however, is that the researcher live in the study community and appear at community events on a regular basis. It is difficult to judge how many times an ethnographer should appear at community events, both private and public, in order to be viewed as a trusted member of the community. It is best to rely on local actions and responses and the reflective comments of key informants as a guide to appropriate action. When community residents turn to the ethnographer for advice, help, consultation, discussion, or dinner, or when community members begin to tease an ethnographer, one can be sure that an important relationship is being established.

It is important to remember that relationships between ethnographers and key informants develop and deepen over time. Not everyone can or should be a key informant, and not every relationship is valuable to the study. But ethnographers should remind themselves that living in a community involves building close and enduring relationships that are often maintained after the study is over.

### *Communicating*

Communication involves three critical skills:

- questioning, or the ability to ask questions that are appropriate to the setting, the topic, and the person being questioned;
- listening, or the ability to pay attention to what the person is saying;
- sharing, or exchanging ideas and personal experiences.

All of these forms of communication with others require some planning in advance and some social and relational skills.

Conversations in the field generally begin with a question. The first questions are often intentionally innocuous. “Are you from around here?” “What brings you here?”

“Where do your products come from?” “How old are the people who buy items in this store?” “Do you live around here?” “Would you mind explaining how the ritual (wedding, funeral, birthday) is going to unfold?” “Tell me about the history of this community.” A good questioner will listen carefully to the responses, observe the speaker for signs of willingness to pursue the conversation, and be prepared with related or follow-up questions. Eventually, as an opening occurs, the researcher can introduce the main topic of interest.

### EXAMPLE 1.3

#### MEETING PEOPLE KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT SMOKELESS TOBACCO USE IN MUMBAI

A research team from the National Institute for Research on Reproductive Health studying smokeless tobacco use and pregnancy entered the study community and, through a street-mapping exercise, began to talk to women who were doing work in front of their houses. Once they identified a group of women who were willing to talk with them, they introduced the study as focusing on the health of pregnant women. Eventually, in the context of talking about women’s health problems, the researchers were able to ask questions about whether women used any smokeless tobacco during pregnancy in that community. From nonusers they obtained only limited responses, but some women were users or came from families where it was common for women to use smokeless tobacco products and were very willing to talk about their own use, as well as that of others in their neighborhood.

*Listening* involves paying careful attention to key words, expressions, or openings that hint at a willingness to provide more information about an event, a person, a situation, or an historical moment. For example, a respondent might mention that she was at a community school board meeting the night before and laugh, cough, or roll her eyes. The interviewer would then recognize the cue that there was something important or unusual about the community event and would probe not only to obtain a description of the event but also to discover what might have happened that made the interviewee take note.

*Sharing* something about themselves beyond their research agenda with others in the study community helps

researchers establish closer and more trusting relationships. It always is best to obtain some information in advance about what is and is not considered to be highly personal information that might be appropriate to share or ask about at least in the initial stages of forming relationships. In parts of China, it is very common to ask about someone's household income early in a relationship; in the United States it is considered highly personal information and not appropriate for discussion unless it is asked about in an impersonal survey question. In some parts of India, revealing personal feelings is not common until a relationship has been established over a long period of time. Thus, in order to avoid violating principles of privacy and confidentiality, it is never wise to share details of personal relationships, family history, personal substance use, or sexual behavior in the early stages of a relationship in any field situation. In communities where religion is contested, it is useful to avoid sharing information with others in the field about one's own religious affiliation or convictions until the potential implications of such a disclosure are known. Political opinions and statements generally should be avoided so as to avoid appearing to be taking sides. However, information about education, travel experience, siblings and other family members, children, work experience, and sports and sports events generally are neutral and acceptable areas of informational exchange. Over time, of course, researchers may build close relationships and friendships in the study community; in fact, a number of ethnographers have gone so far as to marry partners they have met while in the field. But premature establishment of intimate relationships may limit researcher access to others in the setting, may not fall within accepted community norms, and may risk future problems in the field situation if the relationship does not endure. Thus caution is recommended before establishing intimate partner relationships.

### *Observing*

Observational skills are essential to good ethnography; they always involve sensitivity to the behavior and feelings of others and attention to context (Bogdewic 1992; DeWalt and DeWalt 2002; DeWalt et al. 1998; Johnson and Sackett



1998; Spradley 1980). A good observer takes note of conversational contexts with respect to privacy and confidentiality, inclusion (appropriate or polite behavior with regard to including others in a conversation), and evidence of social norms regarding the appropriateness of the conversation for children or adolescents. In the context of a conversation, a good observer notes body movements, facial signals, and eye contact as signs of willingness to continue with a topic or a conversation, and also recognizes that these signals can vary from culture to culture. Observers will also pay attention to the ways in which informants' interact with others in the field setting. Good observers will not let a conversation go on too long and always will keep in mind the need leave the door open to a follow-up engagement.

### *Recording*

Recording information in the field without jeopardizing relationships or raising suspicions, especially in the early stages of work, is a challenge (Sanjek 1990; Wilson 1998). Note taking can interfere with building relationships, and it requires a potentially offensive shift of the ethnographer's eyes from the interviewee's face to the ethnographer's notepad. It can indicate that the ethnographer is not paying full attention to the interviewee and can break the connection between interviewee and ethnographer. As a consequence, ethnographers initially just observe carefully and try to take mental note of conversational content without taking written notes, especially when their role in the community is not widely understood. Because ethnographers can only remember so many of these "head notes," they generally spend shorter periods of time in "the field" at first and more time behind a computer or digital recorder, recording information immediately after a session in the field so they do not forget what they have observed. Later, when relationships are established, the use of a small notepad and writing practices that avoid shifting eyes from the respondent can be used. These are less disruptive to relationship building. In later stages of fieldwork when there is agreement about what to film and how to film it, ethnographers may choose to use still- or video-camera recording devices.



#### **Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 7, on audiovisual approaches to data collection and chapter 8 on participatory film making

### *Revising/Reframing*

It is normal to enter a field setting with many preconceived notions or biases that may be partially or completely wrong, or even insulting to others. It is best for researchers to try in advance to reflect on and articulate their strong beliefs or opinions; this can be done in the process of developing the research model. However, there are many moments when researchers demonstrate premature, incomplete, or inaccurate interpretation of a situation through questions or statements and are told by people in the field that their interpretations are incorrect. Ethnographers working with the Navajo Nation may believe that exploring and camping in some of the ancient ruins in the area would be a good activity to engage in with members of the Navajo community. However, they would soon be told that most Navajo people would shun such sites because they are associated with burials and human remains, which Navajos avoid to prevent encounters with possible malevolent spirits. Researchers should be quick to recognize when there appears to be some problem associated with their ideas. They should try to clarify, revise, or reframe their ideas both to avoid conflict with informants and to deepen their understanding of the local culture.

### **ESTABLISHING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES: INTIMACY AND RELATIONSHIPS IN FACE-TO-FACE DATA COLLECTION**

The process of ethnography depends on building professional and sometimes personal relationships with people in the field on whom the researcher must depend for information, guidance, and sometimes even survival. Often ethnographers live in the home of a community resident and become part of the family. In fact, in some parts of the world, such as rural central Mexico or rural Uganda, researchers *must* be attached to a family in order to be recognized as an authentic member of the community. In many areas, researchers are referred to using terms of respect, like “uncle” or “aunty,” that represent their connection to the community or to the family with which they are living. These relationships can take on the quality



of fictive kinship or can be a professional convenience that gives the researcher the identity and permission needed to work in the setting. However, even fictive kinship can involve mandatory role obligations that ethnographers need to understand. Thus, sorting out the elements of a responsible relationship in the field can be complex and rife with mistaken assumptions.

At another level, gathering interview or conversational data on a face-to-face basis requires strategies that reduce the distance and increase the intimacy between researchers and those with whom they talk on a regular basis. Ethnographers sometimes call this “building rapport” (Bernard 1995, 2006). In the past, building rapport provided an opportunity for the researcher to obtain the information desired and use it without constraints (Pelto and Pelto 1978). This approach no longer is an ethically accepted practice. In many ways, simply building rapport as a way to obtain data has given way to more participatory forms of research and different kinds of role relationships for ethnographers (Schensul et al. 2012; Wasson, Odell Butler, and Copeland Carson 2011). In some situations, researchers may honor the setting and situation by creating opportunities for partner groups to participate in the research, to conduct it themselves with guidance from ethnographers, and to present the research results to the public (Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009; Berg and Schensul 2004). In others, the researcher may be working jointly with the community, school, or other setting to produce information desired by both the community and the researcher (Chen, Diaz, Lucas, and Rosenthal 2010). In these situations, the process of building rapport is reciprocal—less for the benefit of the researcher and more to ensure parallel and equal exchange relationships so that the research agenda benefits both researcher and community members and can proceed in a more collaborative way (Austin 2003; Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Hackenberg and Hackenberg 2004; Wilensky 2003).

A consideration of positionality (the researcher’s role in relation to the community of reference, as well as to specific individuals and specific situations at any point in time) is very important in sorting out degrees of inti-

macy and trust in a field relationship (Chavez 2008; Milner 2007; Sultana 2007). In places like China and Japan, where the qualities associated with a relationship and concomitant expected behaviors are spelled out very clearly, researchers should learn these expectations well in advance and recognize the nature of their relationships with key informants and community members. These may be instrumental, intimate, or some combination of the two. Status, educational levels, social race/ethnicity, social networks, and other factors can be significant in determining with whom an ethnographer can speak and what doors may or may not be opened.

Friendships do evolve in the field and can continue, especially if the research setting is close to home or is one in which the researcher lives. It is always a challenge to determine what to share and what to keep confidential when a former key informant becomes a personal friend. Ethical considerations require researchers to avoid sharing confidential opinions or facts that may be confidential with a friend. Such disclosure could go beyond the friend and could be shared with others, thus violating promises of confidentiality made to research participants and could jeopardize the research experience and the perceived trustworthiness of the researcher.

Intimate relationships and marriages also *do* occur between researchers and local residents. Intimate relationships (sexual or otherwise) may or may not be considered appropriate by one or more sectors of the study community. Researchers should be careful about making these relationships known. Intimate behaviors between partners such as hand holding or embracing or kissing in public also are not considered appropriate in many settings. Sometimes both parties may view or understand differently the intimate relationship that develops. Sometimes these relationships can end in misunderstanding and even tragedy and should be entered into and negotiated carefully. Assumptions about the meaning of physical intimacy also may be very different from one location to another.

In terms of relationships, ethnography is a double-edged sword. Because ethnography is an intimate pursuit, it offers the potential for the development of enriching and

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 1, and Book 2, chapter 1, for different perspectives on the dynamics of positionality

enjoyable relationships. However, at times, the inferences made about these intimate encounters may be incorrect and can lead to painful experiences, including the perception of rejection and betrayal on the part of researchers and their partners, colleagues, and collaborators in the field. Always the best strategy is to discuss openly any possible misunderstandings, conflicts, disagreements, or mistakes. In situations where the fundamental cultural assumptions of researchers differ from those of people in the local communities or groups in which they are working, it is best to assume that such misunderstandings and rough spots will occur and that there are explanations for them (Iris 2004). When all else fails, however, finding an objective and sympathetic arbitrator may be the best strategy.

#### **SUMMARY: CHALLENGES IN COLLECTING OBSERVATIONAL AND INTERVIEW DATA IN PERSON**

Conducting face-to-face research in local settings presents a number of contradictions and challenges. Field research is inherently uncomfortable, especially at the beginning because it involves entering into new situations and interacting with unfamiliar people. Researchers must integrate themselves into the life of the community but not so much that they forget about their research. They are often called upon to be helpful but have to assess each situation to make sure that what they are asked to do are appropriate actions for an “outside insider” to take and will not have significant and unwanted implications for future relationships and work. Participant and other forms of observation should be carried out unobtrusively but ethically. Researchers need to remember that consent to do research is an ongoing process. Researchers are required to identify themselves and explain their research on an ongoing basis, even though doing so can be disruptive at times, both for the researcher and for people in the study community or setting. Writing field notes is an onerous task, but field notes constitute the basis for the data upon which the study is based: no field notes, no data. Recording equipment may fail, or field notes may get lost or stolen. Wars, strikes and other armed conflicts, government crackdowns, police activity in the

neighborhood, and other such external intrusions can make it impossible to carry out research and may even require the shifting of the study site to another similar locality. On the personal side, it is very easy to form friendships that go far beyond the boundaries of in-the-field relationships, but while this is a positive feature of face-to-face research, intimacy may lead inadvertently to unwise or unintended sharing of confidential information.

Leaving the field, if it is a long way from the ethnographer's home, is a difficult transition for both friends in the study community or setting and the researcher. Leaving requires preparation and planning, including transitional rites of passage that mark the ethnographer's move away from the local community and the anticipation of reverse culture shock on return (LeCompte 2008). All of these challenges can be met with proper anticipation and open and forthright communication. Further, without taking those first reluctant steps into the field, no research will be accomplished. Entering the daily lives and experiences of others and seeing the world through other eyes is a unique privilege and benefit that has profound and transformational implications for the lives of researchers and their field friends and collaborators. In the remainder of this book, we describe the variety of skills, methods, and approaches that will help to make face-to-face observational and interviewing activities easier, more comfortable, and more productive.

*Fieldwork and  
the Field  
The  
Ethnographer as  
Self-Reflective  
Tool for Inquiry  
Establishing  
Relationships to  
Facilitate Entry  
Steps in Entering  
a Research  
Setting*

## 2

# DEFINING AND ENTERING THE FIELD

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As we discussed in Book 2, ethnographic field research requires a number of prior conceptual steps.

### CONCEPTUAL STEPS IN PREPARATION FOR FIELDWORK

- Developing the main research questions
- Reviewing ideas drawn from the previous studies reported in the literature
- Looking at available secondary data
- Talking with other people who have had research experience in the chosen setting
- Building an initial conceptual framework for guiding the research based on personal experience and literature on the topic
- Identifying initial domains and factors for further exploration and analysis
- Testing the initial model against preliminary data



**Definition:**

Entry is the process of developing the presence and relationships in the designated research setting that make it possible for the researcher to collect data


Having completed these steps, ethnographers are ready for **entry** into the field. In this chapter, we discuss how ethnographers organize the process of “entry” to the field setting in ways that build relationships and create baseline information that can support the overall research plan over time (Iris 2004; Kawulich 2011). Since many ethnographers now

work in interdisciplinary or intersectoral teams and have partners with various roles, skills, and community connections, we will discuss both individual researcher-driven projects and team projects.

### FIELDWORK AND THE FIELD

The concepts of “the **field**” and “fieldwork” are critical to distinguishing ethnography from other approaches to research. Fieldwork, then, involves the actual research tasks carried out in that setting or location (Bernard 2006). The field is a physical setting, the boundaries of which are defined by the researcher in terms of institutions and people of interest, and their associated activities in geographic space. For ethnographers, the field can be any natural geographic/social setting or location where a selected research problem is to be studied. Some examples of field settings described in this book series include a location where many people use drugs (a shooting gallery) in Hartford, Connecticut; classrooms or schools in Colorado; a school district in Phoenix, Arizona, or in the Navajo Nation; a low-income community in Mumbai, India; an elder adult housing in Hartford, Connecticut; a psychiatric ward in an urban hospital; and a factory production floor in Mauritius.

When we state that ethnographic researchers go to the “field,” we mean that they move from their own communities, institutional settings, and familiar behavioral and cognitive patterns to “enter” another social world—the world in which the research is to be conducted. In this sense, the field can mean everything from the next neighborhood over, a community down the highway, a town in the next state, or one or more urban areas in another country. The concept of “field” differentiates those researchers who collect data by making appointments with people for formal interviews and focus and in-depth interviews, often scheduling them in the researcher’s preferred location, from others who enter into the participants’ home environment and collect their data—observations and interviews—by observing events as they transpire in real time. The presence of ethnographers in the field setting is required because they must learn what residents of the field already

**Definition:**  The field is the natural, nonlaboratory setting or location where the activities in which a researcher is interested take place



know—the language of the setting, the rules guiding social relationships, and the cultural patterns, expectations, and meanings that people in the setting share. Through their presence, they learn how to behave and think like the people with whom they are interacting. Learning their rules, norms, boundaries, and behaviors is the task of ethnographers (Robben and Sluka 2007).

The first step in learning local culture and behavioral norms and rules is the establishment of the relationships through which socialization can take place. Even for researchers who are from or who have grown up in the study community, however, the entry process can be complicated because every researcher entering a new field situation must learn a number of new things at the same time. These include:

- How to function in a new setting or role where the language, rules of behavior, norms, beliefs, social relationships, dietary patterns, and other aspects of life in a community may be very different or where the researcher's own language use has changed with time and formal disciplinary education—as is the case with individuals studying their own home community or work place
- How to locate and build relationships with people who have access to important information and other resources relevant to the study, or to extend existing relationships beyond the comfort zone to new populations
- When and how to decide when research relationships become research field partnerships and when the information to be collected must serve multiple purposes simultaneously
- How to collect and record information in the setting in a way that is both unobtrusive and efficient, and how to overcome the inertia of recording what seems familiar and commonplace
- How to begin to sort out what information is new, interesting, and likely to be useful for study purposes, especially in situations where everything the

researcher encounters is new and different or “old” and familiar

Constant self-conscious reflection is called for to work through these issues in a systematic way.

Most ethnographic researchers choose to do their research in field settings unfamiliar to them, or in communities to which they do not belong, at least initially. But as we have stated in Book 1, some researchers choose to study communities or settings within which they hold some form of membership. They may have grown up in the community or belong to the ethnic group they wish to study. They may self-define as members of the group of research interest in terms of sexual preference, religious choice, or personal interest. Most ethnographers do not live and work in the community, the school, or the hospital where fieldwork is to take place, but some do, and they may already have preestablished formal and informal relationships. They also know how to behave appropriately in accordance with the formal and informal rules, guidelines, perceived norms, and practices and conventions in the setting. However, regardless of their group membership or identification, no researcher can be fully identified with members of the group under study.

No single researcher can be old and young, poor and wealthy, educated and not educated—in other words, no one can ever be fully representative of every potentially important constituency or sector of a given community. ***Ethnographic researchers hold an identity that is never fully coterminous with the group of individuals who are members of the community or research setting in question.***

Thus, when conducting research, researchers always are to some degree marginal, whether or not they are members of, or view themselves as coming from, the community of study. Over time, however, they become increasingly less marginal, more included in the ongoing life of the community. We refer to this as the insider/outsider phenomenon (Bartunek and Lewis 1996; Coburn, Bai, and Turner 2007; Humphrey 2007). The process of ethnographic

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 1, chapters 1 and 8, and Book 2, chapter 1, for discussion of the challenges of conducting research in the researcher's community of origin



**Key point**



research demands that the researcher learn how it is to “not be me” in a physical setting that is “not mine,” with rules and guidelines for verbal and physical behavior that “I not only do not know” but may “only partly understand.” Ethnographers are simultaneously members and nonmembers of the study group and must struggle continuously with framing and reframing their roles and identity over time as the balance of member to nonmember shifts in relation to context, historical event, role, and relationships. This struggle has ethical implications because the more integrated researchers become in the field setting, the easier it is for local residents to forget that they are collecting data. Ethnographers must always remember that they are researchers and constantly remind study participants of their identity as researchers, even at times when they may be acting as friends, counselors, providers of information, helpers, and cultural brokers.



**Cross Reference:**

See the researcher’s role, Book 1, chapters 2 and 10; see also Book 6

Another complication is that more than one ethnographer may be working in the field at the same time, either as independent researchers or as part of a research team or field school. Field schools place groups of students in ongoing field sites, and studies that call for team ethnography require coordination of efforts. Both efforts require agreement in the way that researchers present themselves in the field setting. Differences in “cover stories” and research purposes can confuse local residents, engender distrust, and raise questions about the researchers’ presence, which could alienate local residents. At the same time, field team members must practice regular communication with each other both for sharing information and for addressing any issues or problems that arise as a result of any one researcher’s actions. Members of field teams thus have special responsibilities with respect to negotiating their identities and sharing information with their team members (Louis and Bartunek 1992).

### THE ETHNOGRAPHER AS SELF-REFLECTIVE TOOL FOR INQUIRY

Ethnographic research is never “autobiographical.” It requires that the researcher separate personal stereotypes, opinions, and judgments from accurate observation and

effective recording of the words, meanings, and opinions of research participants. Thus, “entry” is more than *entering* a small town, a medical clinic, a crack house, or a school; it also requires that researchers transform themselves into instruments of data collection. Ethnographic research calls for engagement in direct learning through physical and social involvement in the field setting. **Knowing**, for ethnographers, is first and foremost **experiencing**—by observing, building relationships, participating in conversations and daily activities of members of the community under study—and second, **recording and reflecting** upon these observations and experiences. In addition, for ethnographers, recording the observations is only one component of a more elaborate set of tasks or activities. These include:

- Understanding the setting
- Careful and ongoing reflection on the meaning of the experiences in the setting
- Reflecting on the personal and behavioral transformations that are required or that come about because of these experiences in the field

Taking these activities seriously helps an ethnographer to function increasingly effectively within the social sphere of the group under study. The ability to function unobtrusively (in a culturally competent manner) is critically important to doing good ethnography because it minimizes the influence of the researcher on the field setting. The less obtrusive the observer, the more likely the people are to behave as they normally would. The renowned anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was one of the first social scientists to make this point about the effect of his presence in a Trobriand Island community over time, noting, “It must be remembered that the (local people) saw me constantly every day; they ceased to be interested or alarmed or made self-conscious by my presence and I ceased to be a disturbing element in the tribal life which I was to study, altering it by my very approach as always happens with a newcomer to every . . . community” (Malinowski 1922, 8). Now, of course, most researchers would recognize that local residents may be accepting but

can quickly return to perceptions of difference if and when things go wrong or differences of opinion arise.

In every field situation, personal characteristics of the researcher play a role in facilitating or hindering the field experience and shifting the researcher's positionality from "insider" to "outsider." Readily identifiable physical characteristics such as age, skin color, language skills, and gender may have positive, negative, or complex and variable meanings to local residents in a field situation. Thus, entry and acceptance must be negotiated and renegotiated repeatedly. The "positionality" of the researcher with reference to community members and situations shifts constantly, shaping the information that is or is not revealed. The more researchers know about the differing groups and views in the study community, the more readily they can seek ways of addressing or moving beyond the social distance that differential power and roles create between researchers and community members, and the better they can assess the **validity** of the information they obtain (c.f. Golafshani 2003).

This approach places a great deal of responsibility on ethnographic researchers as they shift from familiar settings in which they can behave in ways that are unconscious, unreflective, and automatic to unfamiliar settings that call for self-conscious reflection and careful selection of appropriate new behaviors. This complex and often overwhelming task requires researchers to:

- Listen.
- Record and understand the meaning of the language used in the field setting.
- Observe, record, and interpret behavior.
- Organize information and understanding so that they increasingly predict future observed events.
- Reflect on the ways that what is heard and seen affects behavior, attitudes, and values of both themselves and community members.
- Consider how their personal traits shape the information they acquire and how their experiences change their behavior, values, and over time, their identities.



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 1, for a discussion of positionality and its impact upon research participants



**Definition:**

Validity here refers to information consistency over time, from multiple sources and across different types of data



**Cross Reference:**

For more information on validity and reliability in qualitative research, see chapter 11 in this book

Thus, ethnographers voluntarily expose themselves to a process of “enculturation” or socialization in which they become learners of local culture, while at the same time studying their own transformation as it occurs.

Often ethnographers enter environments where they do not speak the local language(s). This is a formidable problem, interfering with the listening, observing, and recording critical to fieldwork. Not speaking the language makes learning local culture and the rules and nuances of relationships and behavior much more challenging. In such cases, researchers have several options. They can spend time learning the rudiments of the local language(s) in advance and improve their capacity in the field. They can hire translators to work hand in hand with them to translate and interpret. Such individuals are difficult but not impossible to identify. If they can be located, they become indispensable to a study. A third option is to learn the local language through immersion, which requires spending several months in a language field school or a field environment where people are generous enough to assist with language learning. Sometimes researchers combine all three options. A fourth option, available to larger field teams, is to partner with ethnographers or other researchers in the study country and site in order to conduct the study jointly. Regardless, lack of complete language fluency requires time and attention to assure proper face-to-face translation as well as competent transcription of field notes and a variety of methods of cross checking to make sure that all parties agree on what is being recorded and how to interpret the data (Dortins 2002; Temple and Young 2004; Twinn 1997).

Another unique feature of ethnographic entry is the fact that ethnographers generally bring with them few inducements for local people to cooperate with the researcher other than the opportunity to build a trusting relationship and to talk about topics of mutual interest. As we mentioned in chapter 1, the process of establishing personal relationships in the field built upon trust is referred to as **building rapport**. Good ethnographers build relationships easily. While sensitive to topics that might be contentious in the community, they have few reservations about asking questions that enable them to learn new things.

#### Cross

#### Reference:

See Book 1, chapter 4, for information on transcription, and Book 5, chapters 10 and 11 for a discussion of interpretation



#### Definition:

Building rapport means developing good personal relationships with people in the research setting. These relationships facilitate access to activities and information necessary for conducting the study



**Definition:**

Key informants or cultural experts are people with recognized special expertise in a topic of interest to the researcher. “Cultural expert” is a term used by anthropologists and folklorists to refer to people who have special cultural expertise

Sometimes, ethnographers even have paid **key informants** or **cultural experts** for the time it takes to participate in an interview (Dickert, Emanuel, and Grady 2002; Singer and Kulka 2002). Others have found different forms of compensation such as gifts, contributions of food or product coupons, or protective devices to be useful. For example, ethnographers involved in AIDS research generally carry bleach kits, condoms, and other materials that they can pass out or leave behind to assist respondents in protecting themselves against AIDS. Educational ethnographers may carry out evaluations or construct data-collection instruments needed by school staff as a way of expressing reciprocity or appreciation for access to research opportunities. Researchers who invite young people to participate in focus groups often find that offering them food that they enjoy, such as pizza, makes the experience more appealing.

All ethnographers should understand the importance of reciprocity in building relationships. For this reason, they may share their time, transportation, knowledge, relationships with service providers, or other forms of social or cultural capital that research participants, communities, and schools need or consider to be valuable. For the most part, however, when ethnographers enter the field, they do so armed only with their social skills, their intellectual persistence, commitment to the research topic, and personal good will.

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 6, chapter 1, on the researcher’s role for a discussion of the “cover story”

Ethnographers undergoing the discomforts of the entry process should be encouraged by the knowledge that most people in a community or institutional setting pay little attention to the explanation of the project or the “cover story.” What is more important in the end is not how the research was explained initially, or even the organizational base and reputation of the researcher. **Rapport ultimately rests on the connections through which ethnographers have been introduced to the community setting, how comfortable researchers are with people in the field, how well they maintain confidentiality, and how fast they learn local customs and norms.** The researcher’s appearance, manner of expression, use of language (including humor), perceived comfort level, growing knowledge of the setting,

**Key point**

and reactions to difficult or challenging new situations are all important in building the personal relationships that mark the entry process in ethnography.

Initially, local people give researchers a fair amount of latitude in the field. It is usually quite acceptable, for example, for unsuspecting researchers to shake hands when bowing is more appropriate. Eventually, however, participants will come to expect that the researcher will learn more culturally appropriate behavior. Handshaking between Western men and Sri Lankan women is tolerated (although hugging and cheek kissing is not), but the Buddhist greeting, which involves placing hands together at chest level, bowing slightly, and saying *ayubowan* is more appropriate. Learning the appropriate greeting in the first few weeks in the field will be viewed as an important sign of social integration.

Learning quickly to blend in by engaging in typical behaviors minimizes the degree to which the ethnographer disrupts the normal, ongoing process of interaction within the group, and it sometimes minimizes the social distance between the new researcher and the community. Ethnographic researchers must establish rapport and trust based on their personal characteristics and their ability to learn local culture, and not based on not their status and their promises. In this sense, entry for the field researcher is not very different from a nonresearcher's entry into a new social situation. The difference lies in the researchers' need to make clear that they are doing *ethnographic research*, and their actions will be directed toward producing a piece of written work that may (or may not) be of use to the local population.

In these early stages of research, ethnographers will be listening and asking questions in order to understand the setting, learning how to behave properly, recording conversations, and conducting interviews and observations. At the same time they will undergo personal transformations (acquiring new knowledge, perspectives, and sensitivities, and perhaps losing some old sensitivities) during the rapport-building and acceptance process. In this context, the friendships forged by the ethnographer are to some degree instrumental.

**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 9, and Book 6 on the ethics of field research and on the researcher's ethical responsibilities in conducting field research



### ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS TO FACILITATE ENTRY



#### Key point

The researcher begins to develop interpersonal relationships during the entry phase of field research. *Often some of the first members of the group to be attracted to the new “outsider” will be those more marginal members who hope to promote their own interests or enhance their personal status by befriending the researcher.* While these individuals may be most receptive and forthcoming initially, they may be self-serving, be inclined to have specific biases, and also be the least well informed. Members of the group who are more reserved, ask more probing questions about the researcher’s work, and are initially more reluctant to offer information may later become important members of the researcher’s network of contacts.

Any researcher who is perceived to be an “outsider” or who becomes the observer in his or her own social group finds that gaining access to important social events and settings is a complex process. Because the length of the research period usually is limited by time and money, entry to the field must proceed relatively smoothly and rapidly, building strong and appropriate relationships in a short period of time. Researchers seeking good access to the ideas, behaviors, and social activities of people in the study setting must find ways of truncating the process of becoming fully integrated into the group. The discussion to follow outlines in detail steps researchers can take to build the kinds of relationships that facilitate successful ethnographic inquiry.



#### Cross Reference:

See Book 1, chapter 8, and Book 6, chapter 2, for more information on how to build relationships for conducting field research and how to create research partnerships

### STEPS IN ENTERING A RESEARCH SETTING

- Obtain official or formal permission to enter from appropriate gatekeepers.
- Establish contact with people knowledgeable about the local setting.
- Identify and conduct interviews with local gatekeepers.
- Carry out observation from a distance.


- Obtain introductions through local gatekeepers and local experts to others in the research site.
- Gain direct involvement in the research setting through the assistance of either gatekeepers or local experts.

### *Obtaining Official Permission*


Some field situations are so open that there are no obvious “officials” or **gatekeepers** from whom to obtain permission to enter. But most situations are not so fluid, and the researcher’s professional and personal security, as well as professional courtesy, requires identifying senior officials or stakeholders and obtaining their formal permission prior to beginning a study. Senior officials from whom formal entry permission for entry must be sought include union or company presidents or vice presidents, heads of social service agencies and immigration offices, heads of voluntary organizations, school district officials and headmasters or principals, mayors, tribal leaders, or other senior political officials, ministry heads, and in-country heads of international agencies with regional offices.

In addition, **researchers who wish to conduct research in locations outside their own country must obtain the necessary formal entry permits.** It also is advisable, and sometimes required by **Institutional Review Boards**, to gain the support of a local institutional sponsor, such as:

- A national university or department head (Makerere University in Uganda; the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, India; Peking Union Medical College, Beijing, China);
- the regional office of a bilateral or international agency (the U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], the United Nations Development Program [UNDP], the World Health Organization [WHO], or the China Center for Disease Control [CDC], which has regional offices);

**Definition:**  Gatekeepers are those who control access to information, other individuals, and settings.

**Key point** 

**Definition:**  An institutional review board is a body that is assigned to review projects for ethical protection of communities, human subjects, and researchers in the field and to grant permission for research to proceed.

- a large nongovernmental or voluntary organization (for example, the Mauritius Family Planning Organization in Port Louis, Mauritius; the International Center for Research on Women, Delhi, India; the Undugu Society in Nairobi, Kenya; or Peru Mujer in Lima, Peru).

At the same time, it is always helpful to make contact with local/onsite researchers and local organizations who are familiar with your topic and who may be able to contribute to it by offering collaboration, office space, or other resources.

The following example illustrates protocols followed in gaining access to a local field research site in rural Mexico.

#### EXAMPLE 2.1



##### ACCESSING FIELDWORK SITES IN RURAL MEXICO

When Jean Schensul wanted to conduct research on changes in elementary educational curriculum content and school-community-industry relationships in rural Mexico, she could not simply arrive in the municipality she had selected as the base for her research and begin work. She first needed to contact applied researchers in Mexico City who had been involved in linking other North American anthropology students to rural sites in the state of Hidalgo. Next, she made contact with the senior official responsible for industrial development in the area, as suggested by Mexican anthropologists who had been conducting field research in the target area. Her third step, with the assistance of other researchers who had been conducting ethnographic research on educational change in the area, was to meet the principals of public/governmental regional high schools and elementary schools to explain the purpose of her work. Next she met important families in the market town near her research site who provided her with a “family” base. Finally, she sought permission from the local educational administrator in the market town to conduct research in an elementary school in the town she had identified as her research site.




A team of researchers led by Stephen Schensul wanted to conduct research in shantytowns (*asentimientos humanos* [human settlements] or *pueblos jóvenes* [new towns]) in the northwest section of Lima, Peru, and they followed similar procedures.

 **EXAMPLE 2.2****ACCESSING SHANTYTOWNS IN A FIELD SITE IN THE NORTHWEST SECTOR OF LIMA**

To conduct research on the relationship between pediatric morbidity and the evolution of community infrastructure, Stephen Schensul established a relationship between his home university, the University of Connecticut, and a private medical school in Lima with a history of commitment to community and public health research and service. He arranged for the University of Connecticut Health Center to extend an invitation to the rector (provost) of the medical school to visit Connecticut. The visit was designed to show to the rector examples of community health research as practiced in Hartford and to establish contacts with the Connecticut medical school faculty. The visit involved a series of formal and informal dinners with university officials and community researchers and the signing of a *Convenio*, or an agreement to explore joint research and training ventures.

Several months later, the team of Connecticut researchers arrived in Lima, and Schensul, as head of the Connecticut research team, immediately contacted the rector. The rector invited the team to a formal meeting at the university to discuss the study with department heads and interested community medicine faculty. The rector's endorsement of the project signaled to the Lima faculty as well as to the project *la luz verde* (the green light), an authorization to develop the first joint project between the Universidad Cayetano Heredia and the University of Connecticut Medical School.

At the same time, the meeting resulted in the identification of faculty interested in the project. These faculty included members of the department of community medicine and pediatrics who were working in the area of Lima that had been identified as a potential location for the study and who could provide entry to community leaders and health professionals in that area.



Individuals such as other researchers, senior officials, university administrators and department heads, and key community members hold power and influence over the research setting. They control the researcher's access to the setting and the resources needed to support a study. If they understand the nature of the project, the reasons for the research, and the ways in which it will benefit their constituencies (as well as avoiding harm to these same constituencies), they can be valuable allies and assets to the study. If they do not understand the project's goals and objectives and are not personally familiar with the researcher, they

may become suspicious of the project and find ways to interfere with its success. When they understand the goals, they can be extremely supportive.

Sometimes relationships with key people who can facilitate entry to a community, ethnic/national, or indigenous group are established because of a serendipitous discovery—unexpected or newly discovered shared common history, language, or cultural experience. Chrischona Schmidt, a German-born anthropologist at the Australian National University, provides several such instances.

### EXAMPLE 2.3



#### WHEN THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S ETHNICITY EASES ENTRY TO THE FIELD

When she first graduated as a BA Honors student in 2005, Chrischona Schmidt started an internship at the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs, Central Australia, working in the archives department, which stores all the family trees of aboriginal peoples collected by the German Australian linguists T. G. H. Strehlow and his father, Carl Strehlow, the first full-time Commonwealth public servant dedicated to aboriginal affairs.

Schmidt writes: “After I’d been in the Centre for a few weeks, we were approached by a group of Aboriginal women who wanted to find links to their family. As they were all from Hermannsburg, where the Strehlows had lived and worked, their family tree was part of the Strehlow collection. At the time, the research centre had no female staff in the archives department. The women had heard about me and a friend of mine who was doing a similar internship with me, and decided that since we were women, they could ask us to help them find out about their family. Once at the centre, they asked the librarian a few questions about us, and he soon mentioned that I was German. Suddenly the women approached me, and speaking in German, hugged me with tears in their eyes. They had once lived on a German Lutheran mission, which meant that they were never badly treated. In fact, they emphasized their many fond memories of the mission times and said how happy they were there. Simply by accident of my being German, the women became really comfortable talking to me.

Within my PhD research I had a similar experience. My chosen field site, the community of Utopia, is situated about 230 km northeast of Alice Springs. I had known through my field research preparations that two German brothers had lived in the area in the 1920s. It turned out that one of these brothers had married an Indigenous woman of the area and had had children with her. On my second field trip people started asking me where I was from, where I lived, etc. I told them that I was German and that all my family is still over in Germany. As a result, the family

who had served as my key informants so far became more interested in me. The fact that I am German too had meant that I was part of the “family,” not a stranger and it made my research much easier from then on. (Chrischona Schmidt, personal communication, June 2011)



### *Establishing Contact with People Knowledgeable about the Local Setting*

Once in the country or the geographic area where the research is to be conducted, ethnographers must identify and gain access to the community or institutional settings where the study will take place. Researchers should contact local officials to obtain their approval and support in entering the settings that have been selected for the research. Local researchers and other professionals familiar with potential study sites also are very important in helping to select schools, clinics, hospitals, communities, or other locations suitable for the proposed research.

Some such people and the locations in which they can be found (and where research is likely to be conducted) are shown in Table 2.1.

Individuals such as those identified in Table 2.1 can help to identify such critical characteristics as:

- Demographic characteristics of the people who are the focus of the study
- A history of previous research in the area, or prevailing attitudes toward research or researchers
- Background information relevant to the study
- Political constraints and historical dynamics, including individuals or circumstances that might facilitate or hinder the study
- Specific persons who might pave the way for introducing the study into the community or institutional setting
- Cultural problems in introducing or carrying out the study
- Relevant approaches or protocols for sampling

TABLE 2.1 Gatekeepers and Key Informants

| <b>Roles</b>  | <b>Locations</b>  | <b>Types of Information and Other Resources Provided</b>  |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Teachers</b>                                       | Schools, Meetings, Union Offices  | School census data, children's school performance, health and family problems, access to children   |
| <b>Factory-Floor Supervisors</b>                      | Factory Settings  | Production schedules, employee characteristics, factory and floor organization  |
| <b>Local Politicians</b>                              | At Home, Municipal Meeting Locations, Community Meetings  | Community access, community issues, organizations, sectors and factions, key contacts, and other gatekeepers  |
| <b>Taxi Drivers</b>                                   | At Taxi Stands  | Clients, routes, areas where specific activities occur  |
| <b>Hotel Receptionists and Other Personnel</b>        | In Hotels, Motels, Rooming Houses   | Information on types of clients, clients' communities of origin, and patterns of use  |
| <b>Agency Heads and Program Directors</b>             | In Communities  | Community issues, program or agency issues, program access, client/user access, information about organizations, sectors and factions, information about key contacts and other gatekeepers, client records |
| <b>Leaders of Blocks or Other Formal Social Units</b> | In Communities  | Information on membership, lifestyle, concerns, level of organization, needs, resident records  |
| <b>Informal Leaders</b>                               | In Communities, by Referral   | Information on community residents' lifestyle, issues, needs, locations of activities, key informants   |
| <b>Community Health Workers</b>                       | Clinics and Health Outposts, Hospital Outpatient Departments, Local Ministries of Health, Public Health Departments | Information on community health needs, access to homes and home visits, village geography, patterns of health maintenance and health care use   |
| <b>Union Leaders</b>                                  | Union Offices, Factory Shop Floors, at Home by Referral   | Information on workers, work availability, work and workers' health conditions, employment, salaries and wages, organization of work  |

- Potential “key informants” or local experts with critical knowledge of the topic and the communities or sites in which the research is to be conducted

In addition, researchers can seek help and information in a variety of other places. In a study of commercial sex workers in Hainan, researcher Su-Su Liao wished to visit and interview young women involved in the sex trade and then to introduce an AIDS prevention intervention in rural restaurants and dance halls. For this purpose, she sought help from the provincial ministry, health educators, family planning personnel, and town officials (Liao, Schensul, and Wolfers 2003).

### *Interviews with Local Gatekeepers*

Local gatekeepers are persons who control access to resources—human, geographic, social, or informational. The best strategy for any researcher is to attempt to find out whom they must meet to gain access to a specific research environment in order to study it. Some gatekeepers are obvious and easy to identify, others less so. In a school, the principal may be an “official” gatekeeper, but a coach, secretary, counselor, or hall monitor may be an unofficial gatekeeper with reference to accessing students or information about a specific topic, such as dropping out of school or violence in the building. In a hospital setting, official gatekeepers may be the ward chief, the head of nursing, or the hospital director, while an unofficial gatekeeper may be the head nurse at the nursing station. A personnel director, a union steward, or a supervisor may be the primary gatekeepers in an industrial setting. Other examples based on our experience include a village chief in Ankole in southwestern Uganda; the building manager of a large residential building for people aged fifty and over in Hartford, Connecticut; the local councilwoman in a low-income community of New Bombay (Navi Mumbai, a planned city on the outskirts of Mumbai, India); the head priest of a Buddhist temple in a neighborhood of Kandy, Sri Lanka; or the legal caretaker of an elderly tribal member whose oral historical information is sought for a study. These individuals may



or may not be useful sources of information, but like the senior officials mentioned earlier, they too can facilitate or block access. Depending on their characteristics, gatekeepers may become excellent research partners and key informants for ethnographic researchers.

Building relationships with gatekeepers calls for the same patience and openness as building relationships with any people who are likely to be important sources of information in the field. Gatekeepers are more likely to be helpful if researchers:

- Describe the project to them and discuss ways it might be helpful to the community or other communities like it.
- Ask for their opinions and support.
- Interview them about the community, their own role, their contacts, and their views on topics related to the subject of the research.
- Ask for their help in identifying others in the community who might be able to provide information on the research topic.
- Maintain regular communication with them to ensure continued rapport and support.

Gatekeepers also are an important initial and primary audience when the study is completed, findings are available, and are ready to be presented to the community or study site. These individuals can help researchers be sure that their findings are presented accessibly and in ways that are most helpful to the community (Kawulich 2011).

### *Identifying Key Informants or Local Experts*



**Definition:** Key informants are individuals who have broad knowledge of the research setting or deep knowledge of an important aspect of the research

Effective **key informants** are individuals who have broad knowledge of the research setting or deep knowledge of an important aspect of the research. According to Valerie Gilchrist, “Key informants differ from other informants by the nature of their position in a culture, and by their relationship to the researcher which is generally one of longer duration, occurs in varied settings and is more intimate” (Gilchrist 1992).

Key informants are skilled in the ability to communicate their knowledge and experience to others, including researchers. Most often they have gained their knowledge by virtue of their position and the depth of their experience in the community, their established network of relationships, their ability to express themselves orally, and the importance of the study subject matter in their lives. Such informants know a great deal about the topic of interest and have more information than most other people who could be interviewed. With their ability to conceptualize and express their opinions, they are able to convey useful and important perspectives relevant to the research topic and the domains included in the formative theoretical model. They also often have a unique capacity to stand outside of their own role in the community and provide a dispassionate analysis of events and phenomena.

Because key informants have in-depth knowledge of a subject or topic, it is beneficial to talk with them repeatedly. A good key informant is open to building an ongoing relationship with the researcher and often becomes curious about and interested in the development of the study. A strong relationship with a key informant is important for deeper understanding and validity checking, as new situations that require interpretation arise over time in the study setting.

As with gatekeepers, key informants cannot be expected to know everything there is to know about a topic. Furthermore, their own exposure to information or their personal experience may be limited by their positionality—for example, their gender, age, social class, ethnicity, or geographic accessibility. Although the primary purpose for interviewing key informants is to gain deeper knowledge about one or more specific topics, it is always better to interview several local experts on the same topic to ensure validity and reliability. In this way accumulated data obtained from several different key informants can be compared and cross checked. Ethnographers can be more convinced that what they are learning from a key informant has validity when they hear the same information from several people and/or observe the same phenomena in the field more than once and in different settings.

**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 1  
and chapter 11 in  
this book on validity  
and reliability in  
ethnographic research



**EXAMPLE 2.4****CONFIRMING PERCEPTIONS OF RACISM IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL**

Researchers at the Institute for Community Research (ICR) have been involved in a long-term investigation of ethnic and racial barriers to the formation of cross-ethnic and cross-generational relationships among urban teenagers. Some teenagers and a number of adult research staff and facilitators in the ICR's Summer Youth Research Institute had an initial assumption that racism was an important component of the school environment in one urban high school and a significant factor in dropping out of school. Interviews conducted by youth with key informants (three vice principals) at the school produced information to the contrary. The multiethnic team of vice principals (Puerto Rican, Irish American, and West Indian) disagreed that racism (discriminating against students or faculty because of their African origin, physical features, and linguistic and cultural practices) was a significant element at the school. They pointed out through the use of examples that, for them, gender differences were a more important source of conflict. Several student leaders, including several African American students interviewed from the same school, confirmed that from their point of view, racism was not a problem but other "isms" were. Still convinced that racism was a problem, student researchers then included questions about harassment based on racist attitudes in a survey on factors related to dropping out of school. Once again the results were negative. Information from two different groups of key informants and a survey led both adult and youth researchers to conclude that racism, as defined in the study and by key informants, was not a problem at this urban high school, but gender discrimination was.

Key informants come from different sectors in a community and have knowledge specific to different cultural domains of interest to researchers. They are selected because of their ability to provide exploratory, introductory, or overview information and because they can connect researchers to other possible key informants and sources of information. Because they can never fully represent every important demographic category or cultural domain, however, interviews with key informants should never be treated as representative of an entire population. Furthermore, their knowledge base is generally specific—that is, they may know little about any aspect of culture other than the domain in which they have special expertise.

Key informants can be chosen for exploratory reasons—to discover a topic or new domains associated with an already identified topic—or for theoretical reasons—to explore relationships among elements in an already formulated theoretical model (Johnson 1990). Regardless, they should be chosen from as broad a spectrum of the population as possible to ensure representativeness. This strategy is also important in terms of ensuring the neutral position of the researcher in the community. It is a disadvantage for researchers to be strongly associated with any one specific sector of the community, especially during the early months of a study. Choosing a narrow spectrum of local experts or the wrong key informants may close doors to the researcher before the study even begins. LeCompte's initial introduction to the Navajo community of Pinnacle was as a consultant to the school district. The response of teachers in the schools was cool and distant at first. As one teacher remarked, "All these consultants are like used car salesmen. They talk really loud, push their wares on people whether they like it or not, and then leave and never follow up to see if what they sold really works." It took months of collaborative work for LeCompte to distinguish herself from the previous sets of consultants to the district.

J. P. Spradley notes that "although almost anyone can become an informant, not everyone makes a good informant" (Spradley 1979, 45). In general, good key informants are:

- "Natural" researchers, because they are interested in the purpose of the research and in exploring the topic in their own settings, together with, as well as in the absence of, the ethnographer
- Self-critical, able to recognize that they may not know everything about their own setting or a topic in which they are viewed as having expertise and prepared to admit their own knowledge gaps to the ethnographer
- Risk takers, willing to associate with the ethnographer despite questions about the research and the identity and intentions of the researcher

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 6, chapter 1, on issues associated with identification with specific segments of the population and chapter 2 for ways of broadening the spectrum of key informants for building research partnerships





- Able to perceive and understand a variety of perspectives on a subject
- Experienced, with a number of years of involvement in the research setting or with the topic of interest to the ethnographer

Some local experts are “boundary spanners,” able to relate to a variety of different settings, sectors, networks, and individuals and willing to link the ethnographer with these informational resources (Levina and Vaast 2005; Marrone, Tesluk, and Carson 2007; Millward and Timperley 2010).

### *Gaining an Introduction into the Research Site*

At some point, ethnographic researchers will feel ready to engage in social interactions and inquiry in the study site. This may happen immediately or later in the entry process. Often a gatekeeper or local key informant will perform introductions. Sometimes the presentation process involves describing the project to many different people and sectors at the same time. In 1998, Jean Schensul and a team of researchers began a study of progression in young adults from gateway drugs such as marijuana to heroin and cocaine use. Researchers introduced the project to coordinators of youth programs, maternal outreach programs, and instructors in alternative education programs to seek their help in referring participants to the study.

In the Navi Mumbai field experience mentioned earlier, novice researchers were told to talk with easily accessible people first, such as shop owners, service providers in community centers, temple priests, representatives of political parties, and community health care providers. During these early and informal conversations, the researchers introduced themselves and their work and asked respondents which local officials should be contacted and introduced to the project. After several such informal conversations, they created a list of organizations in the community as well as gatekeepers and potential key informants whom they contacted with good success.

It is always useful to develop a “script” or “cover story” for the project, but especially so in team and multisite

research. This will ensure that the basic description of the study is consistent from location to location, even though the presentation style and the responses to questions about the project will change from one presentation to the next. In the Mumbai example, the field team worked with experienced local faculty and consultants familiar with the conduct of research in low-income communities to develop, write, and memorize an introductory script. They used this script to introduce their project to community members in a consistent manner.

Usually when someone who is well thought of in the community introduces the researcher, only a limited “cover story” is necessary. This is because in most communities, relationships are based on trust. Introduction by a trusted acquaintance or friend constitutes an endorsement of the person. To maintain a neutral position in the community, researchers should make sure that representatives from more than one sector of the community introduce them. In this way researchers can avoid being identified with any single faction and can meet people from many groups and sectors within the community within a short period of time.

Once introduced to the site, researchers should maintain visibility through regular visits, informal interviews with people at the site or in the community, and willingness to visit people’s homes, eat meals with them, shop with them, and attend community events. However, it is possible that class, cultural, health practices, or religious differences may make it difficult to know or obey all the rules of politeness while working in a community or field site. The Mumbai student research team was told never to drink water that was not bottled, as water sources in Mumbai low-income communities are often polluted. However, some researchers place response to hospitality before their own safety. A well-known anthropology professor working in central Mexico was offered *pulque*, a nutritious low-level alcoholic drink favored by rural men and prepared through fermentation in cowhide vats. He took a calculated risk and drank several gourds of *pulque*. He subsequently came down with typhoid fever that had a short run and unpleasant consequences but from which he recovered quickly. Sheryl Ludwig, however, persisted in eating meals at the

**Cross****Reference:**

See chapter 1 of this book and Book 6 for a discussion of cover stories

homes of members of the weaving cooperative in which she was studying indigenous teaching and learning. She continues to suffer from parasites acquired in the process. Some researchers eat only vegetarian foods or foods that have been cooked in front of them. In general, most researchers try their best to stay as safe as possible while still appreciating and enjoying the generosity of their hosts and repaying it as the opportunity arises.

In ethnographic research, the boundaries between the entry process and formal initiation of the study are not very clearly defined because ethnographers begin collecting information from the very first moment they step into the field. Nevertheless, the first month or so of fieldwork produces many impressions that are not accurate or relevant to the study. As researchers become more comfortable with the field setting and their eyes and ears become attuned to what is going on around them, they can begin to focus more clearly on which elements of culture are relevant to their study. Critical to the next steps in the ethnographic enterprise is the recording of field notes. In the next chapter, we discuss the meaning, organization, and initial storage of the field notes and field note summaries, which are the primary scientific record of data collected in the field.

# 3

## RECORDING AND ORGANIZING ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD DATA: FIELD NOTES, INTERVIEWS, DRAWINGS, VISUAL DOCUMENTATION, AND SURVEY DATA

*What Are Field Notes, and Why Are They Important?*

*Recording Field Notes*

*Writing Up Field Notes*

*Making Decisions about What to Write*

*Organizing and Managing Ethnographic Data While in the Field*

*Storing Quantitative Data for Subsequent Analysis*

*Summary*

### WHAT ARE FIELD NOTES, AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Field notes are the foundation of the ethnographic enterprise. Information gained in the field must be recorded, both to make it public and to make it usable. It is only through proper and accurate recording that information can be validated through additional observations, shared with others, interpreted, cross checked and cross validated, interrogated, and transformed into knowledge to be used in building theory, testing, practice, and policy. ***It is critical to plan in advance a schedule for writing, storing, and organizing field notes and other cultural artifacts while in the field.*** For this reason, we begin our discussion of data collection methods and techniques with a review of what field notes are and how to write, store, organize, and manage them.

Key point



**Definition:**

Field notes are records of observations of any kind made in the field

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 1, on collection, documentation, and analysis of cultural artifacts

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapters 7 and 8, on digital recording and participatory video

*Field notes* is a general term for recorded observations of any kind made in the field. The content of these “observations” is usually a written record. Eventually these are transcribed to become the textual fundamentals upon which ethnographic analysis is performed. The written or otherwise documented record can include descriptions of events, records of informal and more formalized interviews or conversations, photographs and brief videos of activities in the field, maps and drawings, and cultural artifacts (clothing, activities, ornaments, household tools, housing styles, etc.). Scanned items, such as fliers, newspaper articles, postcards, and other small print material relevant to a study also can be included in field notes. Though the term *field notes* usually refers to written records, increasingly ethnographers are making digital visual or audio recordings that can be stored, transcribed, coded, and organized for analysis in much the same way as text data.

Writing field notes is a complex task that requires careful listening, keen observation, and good writing skills. The main task of field notes is to record as accurately as possible the behaviors, conversations, processes, and institutional structures that unfold in the presence of or manifest themselves to the researcher. Field notes represent the data that researchers collect through their own presence and interaction with persons, places, and activities in the field. These experiences are usually recorded in small notepads in the form of “jottings” or “scratch notes” (Sanjek 1990). Jottings or scratch notes are words, phrases, and even whole sentences that act as reminders of entire conversations or behavioral segments that may transpire during a visit, an event, or during the course of a day in the community. A page of jottings based on a household visit might include the following words and word sequences: “children playing, open drain,” “job lost because of alcohol,” “in-law problem,” “woman working outside,” “I pushed him out the door.” These brief notes record observations that took place at the time when the ethnographer approached the house; they act as brief reminders of the contents of an interview with the woman in the household. Filled out, they mean that there are children associated with the household, that they play in unsafe and unsanitary spaces like open drains,

the spouse has had to go to work because her husband lost his job as a result of drinking, and that during an argument, she pushed him out of the house. Underlying each of these “reminders” is a series of smaller and more detailed observations and information about these events and many others. Ethnographers are never really “off duty.” In fact, ethnographer Pertti J. Peltó, founder and long-term Chair of the Medical Anthropology program, University of Connecticut, always carries a tiny notebook in his shirt pocket so as to be ready to record something new.

Research in the field is ongoing. A good ethnographer may interact with upward of twenty people during the course of an average day in the field. What appears transparent in a set of jottings at one moment in time, immediately after recording an interaction or observation, is likely to become increasingly fuzzy and unclear after a number of other such events. Thus, it is best if jottings can be transformed into voice recordings or slightly more detailed notes during the course of the day, or each evening after return from the field—well before the complexity of daily events dims memory’s precision. The most effective strategy for detailed recording is to end the day with several hours dedicated to field notes. If this is not possible, revision of the day’s notes, with additions, clarifications, diagrams, and reflections, is the minimum daily activity required to ensure that events and interactions are recorded in accurate and adequate detail.

**EXAMPLE 3.1****WRITING FIELD NOTES ON THE CULTURE, CONTEXT, AND LIFESTYLE OF YOUNG ADULTS**

Researcher Cristina Huebner visited the field of adolescent drug use at least three times a week for approximately six months. She attended parties, after-hours events, and street water fights and engaged with the personal lives of two groups of key informants involved in the distribution of the drug Ecstasy in her city. She took jottings in the field while she was with her informants; later on the same day or the next day, she transformed these jottings into brief notes that were dated and entered into her field note file. At the end of the week, or every ten days, she integrated these regular notes into a single file and summarized them for that period of time, with comments on her observations.



Researcher Tom Taaffe, an anthropologist employed for a time at the Institute for Community Research, collected information on locations and venues where adolescents and young adults socialize, listen and dance to music, and use various substances. He either carried a small recorder, which he used in private while in the field to record his thoughts and observations, or wrote notes in a small notebook. When possible, he used a small pocket camera to take photographs, always taking care either to ask permission or to act naturally so as to avoid raising the suspicion of people who might be observing his actions in public locations. He wrote his field notes immediately upon returning home from the field (or the next morning). When he was accompanied by another ethnographer, they both wrote field notes and edited each other's notes; a final version of the joint notes was retained for the study. Similarly, student researchers Lwendo Moonzwe and Noelle Bessette conducted unobtrusive observations in Hartford's downtown bars and clubs while recruiting participants for a study of club drugs. They both recorded their maps and observations after leaving the field, and compared notes. They pooled their field notes and wrote joint comments following their independent observations.

Anthropologists collect two different types of field notes: those based on observation in fields of activity (organizational settings, community events, group activities, classroom instruction, etc.) and those based on informal or more in-depth formal interviews with key informants or local experts on a topic or those who have personal experiences with the subject of interest. Field notes based on field observations are expansions of notes, jottings, and other mnemonic devices that help the ethnographer to remember, step by step, what took place and with whom. They may also include the substance of informal interviews in the field. Longer, planned, in-depth interviews, such as those conducted with key informants, are often digitally recorded. Field notes based on recorded in-depth interviews are based on the interview but do not describe every detail. Instead they constitute a summary of the salient points covered in, and captured during, the interview, to which the ethnographer can return again and again, even after the interview

itself is transcribed. All jottings are then translated into extended and detailed accounts of what transpired during the observation or the interview. These descriptions should enable readers other than the field researcher to understand the context, activities, and nuances of situations and interviews as if they were there. The following example illustrates a detailed elaboration of a set of field observations related to the beginning of a school program. It is a summary and synthesis of detailed observations and recordings taken at different times during the day. Written from the perspective of the observer, it captures and links the flow of events that occurred and his thoughts about the events, encounters, and personalities involved. An “artifact,” the agenda for the meeting, was included with the original set of field notes.

**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 4,  
chapter 1, on cultural  
artifacts and their  
storage and use in  
analysis



**EXAMPLE 3.2**

FIELD NOTES FROM THE BEGINNING OF SCHOOL IN AN  
EXPERIMENTAL SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

Date: Thursday, September 26

Observer: Ricky Fortune

Location: Wadsworth School, Woodlawn Experimental School Project (WESP)

Participants: Teachers and staff from Wadsworth school, members of the Woodlawn Community Board, administrators from the Chicago Public Schools, representatives from the Woodlawn Organization (a community activist group), the Chicago Mayor’s office, and the University of Chicago School of Education (faculty consultants to WESP and participant observer researchers)

Events and Topics: The school district has just delivered “release” notices to teachers who will be laid off. A number of teachers had held a protest meeting the day before.

Prior to going to the Woodlawn Community Board meeting, I spent the latter half of the day wandering around Wadsworth. I haven’t been there in nearly two weeks and people were happy to gossip but reluctant to tell me about the Project or yesterday’s “strike.” Several expressed surprise that it happened and one told me explicitly that it was only a meeting, not a strike. The people involved in the release, according to what my several informants called “guesses, but pretty certain” are all Full Time Basis (FTB) teachers [substitute teachers who serve where needed but are employed full-time to do so] but mainly new people, the two EMH [educable mentally handicapped children’s]

teachers and Mr. Kimberly, and also Ms. Jackson and Mr. Johnson. In the lunchroom, people discussed it freely, and Mr. Johnson admitted that he had just received a release notice. But no-one was certain about the others. As far as I could tell, neither Mr. Davis or Mr. Walker was affected, but they are definitely sympathetic with the others. The releases seem to be unrelated in people's minds to participation in the Woodlawn Experimental School Project or The Woodlawn Organization, although several expressed resentment that being part of the experimental school did not exempt them from the staff cutback.

On the other hand, while gossiping with me, Officer Morrison [the school police officer] commented, "these people are doing me a favor. I'm being 'retired.'" Since he was speaking freely about his career as a rebellious "tank trouser," I pressed him further. He said that the "The Woodlawn Organization people had filed a complaint against him, charging that he was lazy, incompetent and absent from duty." This, he said, was in reference to his policy—admittedly against orders—of leaving the school to break up fights that occurred outside the grounds, but that were potentially dangerous to the school. He said that although there had been "minor incidents" this year, the total number and the severity were considerably curbed from last year at this time. While I was there with him, several boys openly greeted him and high-fived, as if his friendship were an accepted status symbol.

I ate lunch at the school with the upper grades faculty. Several young white teachers (male) joined me and Julius Nathan, who incidentally is expecting his [teacher certification] tests next week said that he would like to meet the research team sometime. One of the teachers was an 8:30 sub from Ray School who was sent down to Wadsworth to take Kelia Washington's class. He said he half expected to be released and was worried about being drafted [into the military]. Ed Norris also expected to be drafted since he was an FTB, but he was more interested in talking about his first "high" class—the fourth grade group he had today. He has been taking charge of classes regularly, which he was not needed to do two weeks ago.

A conversation I overheard was in reference to James Pearson (an FTB still): Would he be released? No, someone said, he was teaching 3rd grade and fewer lower grade teachers are being released. Someone else suggested that Johnson also should get his name on the Lower Grades books, since what you actually did, did not matter as much as where you were rostered.

I missed the first part of the Woodlawn Community Board meeting. It started at 5:00 p.m. It was held in the Wadsworth school auditorium. The place was crowded with participant observers from WESP and sitters-in and the table of participants too was full, including many who did not attend during the Summer Workshops—for example, people from the University of Chicago, the School Superintendent, the Mayor's Model Cities Program, and The Woodlawn Organization representatives. The agenda (see attached) called for reports on plans in current development for a Model Cities program in the East Woodlawn Community. Item One was presen-

tation of the official plan developed by the Model Cities Area Planning Council, and Item Two was an alternative plan developed by The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) Schools Committee and the University of Chicago Task Force.

Item three, association of the WESP with the Model Cities program, was present in an innocent seeming outline by Dr. Barton, from Model Cities. Clara Harrison, an informant from TWO, told me that the Model Cities Program run by Mayor Daley has no real education program, and that he wants the WESP to be HIS program. If the Woodlawn Community Board approves the plan for collaboration with Model Cities, the WESP will become a Chicago city school, and Redmond, the Superintendent, will assign it to Mayor Daley. The WESP is in the middle between Daley [the bad guys] and the TWO [the good guys]. If the WCB approves the collaboration, then there will be real trouble, because it will violate a memorandum of agreement between the School Board and the TWO regarding the independence of the WESP. If the WESP collaborated with Model Cities, then Mayor Daley would be able to control it. Clara told me that there had been an attempt earlier in the day to settle Item Three out of the board's oversight to prevent its appearance on the agenda. In the meeting, someone moved to table Item three, and when the vote was not unanimous, a TWO representative (Finney) explained the above described argument between Mayor Daley's Model Cities program and the TWO Woodlawn oriented plan in conjunction with the University of Chicago. He argued that until the two programs settled their differences, it would be compromising the community to permit the WCB to pass on WESP's involvement unilaterally. After hearing all of this, someone suggested tabling the motion until "TWO firms up its position and is really ready for community participation." The controversy was settled when Dr. Barton withdrew his motion to accept commitment to the Model Cities program.

Item Four passed—a set of guidelines for implementation of the Middle School Concept written by John Ryan and explained by him. It was passed as an information item or technical paper, because, as TWO personnel pointed out later in the meeting, it conflicted with another set of guidelines that the administration had passed earlier.

Item Five also was accepted. It was the personnel progress report presented by Willard Conover, and simply was a list of new teachers hired by the school and paid through the WESP funds.  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the names on the Wadsworth list are FTBs or temporaries who have been assigned to Wadsworth permanently—only a very few are truly new personnel who had not been involved at Wadsworth in some capacity previously. Jack Perry, the assistant principal, reported on the closing of four K-6 classroom divisions and 5½ upper grade divisions due to a drop in enrollment and budgetary cut backs by the board of education. He started an impassioned account of teachers' anxieties and the unfairness of cutting them after they had gone through the WESP Summer Workshop with the assurance they would not be fired unless for incompetency if they chose to remain at Wadsworth.

Morale was extremely low and it was destructive to the Project. Area Superintendent Melnick cut Perry off (he was over the time limit) and began his “two-hat” routine—member of the WCB and Area Associate School Superintendent. He made a motion, which passed, that there be a committee of district superintendent, himself, principals of Wadsworth school and Hyde Park High and a TWO appointee to look into solutions. In the meantime, Melnick “instructed” Perry to tell the released teachers “not to budge out of their classrooms!”

The last item was a series of petitions from three teachers [names deleted here] regarding the downgrading of their salaries from what was promised. The rationale for the downgrade was that to protect the integrity of the Project, salaries were fit into comparable Board of Education levels. Some of the jobs in question did fit B of E job descriptions in much lower categories and salaries were downgraded considerably. The petitions pointed out that what the teachers actually did was far greater than the B of E descriptions. TWO rep Finney rather bitterly commented that people should be paid what they were promised. The item was sent to the Personnel Committee, which Finney warned “had better come up with a favorable proposal, or else there would be serious staff problems with TWO.”

The meeting was closed at 9:00 . . . late and with sighs of relief from most present.



## RECORDING FIELD NOTES

### *Recording in the Field: “Jottings”*

It is absolutely critical to find ways to create rapid and truncated recording in the field, especially if the research plan is to attend multiple events or interview a number of different people in the course of a day or more—as occurred in the field notes taken during the WESP meetings described in Example 3.2. The brain cannot remember all of the information gleaned from multiple people in multiple locations, even over a short period of time. For this reason, the ready availability of unobtrusive notepads or small pieces of paper is virtually a necessity. Sometimes ethnographers are “caught” in the field without a notebook and make do with paper napkins or placemats, the blank insides of books, or borrowed lined legal-pad paper. These bits and pieces of paper or plastic are the living record of what transpired and form the basis for writing more formalized field note records. Like Professor Pelto, however,

we recommend using a recording system that is small, easy to carry, and unobtrusive.

*Recording Just after Leaving the Field—and Away from the Field Site*

Sometimes, as is the case with Example 3.2, background information must be filled in after leaving the field to help the field notes make sense. At other times, it is impossible to take notes of any kind while in a particular field situation. Very early in a study, researchers may fear that some people in the study site who do not know the ethnographers well may become suspicious of their motivations. In India's large cities there are many communities that are designated as "slum" areas. The term *slum* is only indirectly related to income; it actually means that these communities are temporary, constructed on land that belongs to private concerns or the municipality, and subject to destruction to make way for development and gentrification at any time. Residents worry that "new" people who enter the community might represent developers or politicians who have come to designate areas for redevelopment, which will mean eviction of the population. Researchers who are aware of these dynamics prefer not to write anything at first. In Hartford, Connecticut, researchers in a rapid-assessment project at the Hispanic Health Council conducted 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. surveillance in designated locations throughout the city. On some nights, it was too cold to write outside. In these situations, leaving the observation site, finding a warmer spot, and writing something halfway between jottings and more organized field notes helped researchers to solve the problem of recall. In Mumbai, researchers have found locations in temple grounds or small local parks or cafes. In Hartford, club and night-time surveillance researchers have written jottings in their cars, bathrooms, and all-night cafes. In such situations, using a digital recorder or a cell phone to record brief notes can be equally useful.

Certain types of field situations, such as the observation of ongoing activities in school settings, meetings, parks and playgrounds, and more may benefit from a more sturdy



system of notebooks and binders. In these situations, the ethnographer becomes part of the context and can take detailed notes over a long period of time. For this purpose, LeCompte prefers to record field observations in sturdily bound spiral stenographer's pads that have a stiff cardboard back, ideal for situations lacking a table or desk upon which to write. An indicator of the indestructibility of these steno pads was the survival of one—completely filled and therefore invaluable—after LeCompte inadvertently left it on the top of her car and drove off. By the time she noticed its absence, it had lain in the middle of a busy street for thirty minutes and was run over by innumerable cars and trucks. Although its binding was crushed and two pages were rendered illegible by dirt, the rest remained intact. Jottings on bits of paper, or even in small notebooks, might not fare so well; they might contain less or more easily recalled information so their loss might be less significant.

### WRITING UP FIELD NOTES

Field notes are a detailed representation of the activities of ethnographers and the experiences they have with others, which in turn are a reflection of life in the study community. Thus, field notes are only as illustrative of community life as the ability of the researcher to engage with the study community—to meet key people, be present in many different places, and gain access to activities in the study community. Furthermore, field notes are a reflection of the researcher as a primary data-collection instrument. Thus, they represent a complex mix of researcher observations, biases, opinions, and summarizations. The more detailed and descriptive the field notes, the easier it is for the researcher to recall the event later on and the greater the likelihood that repetitive situations such as religious rituals or annual celebrations, or the process of obtaining water or preparing breakfast, can be compared and contrasted over time and place and patterns that emerge over time can be identified and described.

Writing field notes requires discipline, and it must be done at several stages in the research enterprise. First, ethnographers must remember to jot down memory stimulus

materials as they are in the field and to collect materials and artifacts and take photographs or video whenever possible or practical. They must try to include as much information as possible while reflecting on what they might be leaving out. It would be impossible to capture everything that happens even in a brief fifteen-minute event, so there is selective recording even in this first critical step. We all recognize how easy it is to try to blend into the environment and to believe (falsely) that we are able to remember everything that transpired over a day-long period of time in the field without recording a single word. It requires both discipline and the willingness to separate from the immediacy of the situation to take notes visually or in written form while still in the field situation. Additional discipline is required to spend every evening and weekend writing up field notes as events transpire in the field.

Writing field notes is both pleasurable and lonely. It is pleasurable because one can recall visually and aurally events that have just been observed and make sense of them as they accrue, building an ever-more substantial picture of the study community and specific topics of interest. It can be lonely because writing up field notes generally is the responsibility of an individual anthropologist. Every hour of field observation requires at least two to three hours of write-up, plus any additional comments, musings, hunches, and emerging theories, so anthropologists must steel themselves to spend hours alone writing up their notes. Some write notes to themselves, others write "letters home" to parents or partners, and still others tell their field experiences to a digital recorder (sometimes using voice recognition software) with the anticipation that they or others will transcribe these materials so that they will be available when needed.

Recording field notes brings certain challenges, such as what to write about. How does a researcher KNOW what is important and what is not? It's not possible, after all, to record every single life event or activity; there are not enough hours in the day or week. One way to determine what is important is to focus on the study problem and to ask constantly, while observing or interviewing, whether and how an emergent topic is related to the study problem.



If this question is difficult to answer, perhaps the emergent topic can be set aside for later. A second important question has to do with the “level of detail” that is desired. In a study of sexual risk, just how much detail on specific sex behaviors is really important in order to understand how and why respondents have unprotected sex? A third question relates to the degree of concreteness of the description. Good field notes are based on detailed descriptions of behaviors, structures, rituals, activities, events, and event sequences. They report on the classic questions, “who, when, where, what, what for, for whom, how long, what happened next?” and other designators of event descriptions. The best field notes discuss in detail spatial arrangements, clothing styles, food and food preparation, steps in the conduct of community rituals or regular daily activities, and other minutia that represent a balance between low-level theory (selection of what to observe and why) and high-level detail (observation of detail without focus on purpose for recording). Over time, as ideas and directions emerge from observations and field notes, the balance shifts to selection based on an emerging focus that dictates what and why, and the details recorded are intended to enhance and shape the emerging focus.

For those who do not write well, or perhaps have limiting writing capability, it may be difficult or impossible to construct field notes that contain sufficient detail to be useful. This does not mean that such persons are subpar listeners, observers, and learners. It simply means that if a study is to benefit ethnographically from those whose communication skills are verbal rather than written other means of recording their observations must be found to preserve their knowledge. Two means that are relatively inexpensive and accessible are digital recordings and voice recognition software. Digital recorders can be used in the field to record the details of observations from a private location. They are now so small that they can be hidden in pockets and removed at a quiet moment or in a private spot and used to record observations, thoughts, and hunches or hypotheses. However, data recorded on digital recorders must be transcribed. Generally one hour of recording requires *at least* three to four hours of transcription, so under any circum-

stances, the collection of information via digital recording can be expensive in terms of time, cost, and personnel.

Voice recognition software is a second tool for recording observations. There are now very good voice-recognition programs that can be installed on personal or office computers and that record dictation as text. The software cannot record group discussions and requires at least some training to recognize individual voices. Training is considered successful when there is about a 98 percent accuracy rate in recording. Generally, the software is best at recognizing the trainer's voice and does not do very well at recognizing the voices of others, especially if speakers have a strongly noticeable accent when speaking English (such as a Brooklyn or Bronx accent, or an English-as-a-second-language accent). Voice-recognition software is not useful for recording interviews with people other than the trainer; thus, it cannot be used to record group discussion. However, researchers who prefer to dictate notes, or who prefer re-recording digitally recorded interviews by listening to them and dictating them to voice-recognition software, can benefit greatly from this new technology. The software makes these recordings efficient, but it still commits errors in recording (for example, unrecognized or incorrect words), which require that the text be reviewed and the errors corrected, all of which takes additional time.

At different points in the research process, many anthropologists find that it is advantageous to conduct more formalized individual or group interviews with experienced respondents, those who are extremely knowledgeable about the topics of interest to the study. These interviews may be held in the field, in a location in the community that is comfortable for the respondent, such as an office, home, automobile, park, or other setting. More often than not, they are recorded, using digital recording devices. Even with audio recording, however, it is important to jot down key points, phrases, and other important statements the participants make in order to supplement the recording. Recording equipment sometimes fails, and the notes can help reconstruct the interview. The interview "jottings" also can be transformed into interview summaries and added to the transcribed recordings. If the interview is very long, the

**Cross  
Reference:**

See chapters 6, 7,  
and 8 in this book



summary may serve as an initial step in the classification of materials because it illustrates patterns described in the summaries. Often transcriptions are carried out by external agencies that are delayed in returning them. Having the sound recordings and the summaries as backup is helpful for beginning the process of data analysis.

### MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT WHAT TO WRITE

We, and others (Bernard 2000; Miles and Huberman 1994), assume that before researchers even arrive in the field, they already have done a considerable amount of investigation, including initial trips to the field. We also assume that they have developed formative research models that guide the search for categories of behavior, speech, and events. Most ethnography today begins with a guiding theoretical framework that lends itself at least to broad-based categorization and to research questions. These theoretical frameworks or guiding formative models shape what ethnographers notice right from the first moment they are in the field. At the same time, it is important to stand back and keep an open mind so as not to miss new ideas, activities, and opportunities throughout the field experience.



#### Cross Reference:

See Book 2, chapters 4, 5, and 6, and chapter 1 in this book, for more detail on these topics



#### Key point

***Inscription, description, and transcription create much of the database with which an ethnographer works.*** We have suggested that a helpful way to think about these processes is to consider how Roger Sanjek, an urban anthropologist, classifies field notes into three categories: head notes, scratch notes, and field notes (Sanjek 1990).



#### Key point

***Head notes are the product of inscription; they can be thought of as memories or mental notes kept in the ethnographer's head or memory until such time as it is possible to actually "write things down."*** Head notes and scratch notes are turned into descriptions, which in turn, become field notes. The simple act of storing ideas, observations, and impressions *in one's head* causes them to be organized—and retrieved—according to whatever culturally determined organizational scheme the ethnographer's brain customarily uses for storage and retrieval of information. This is why we have emphasized throughout this book the need for all researchers—but especially for eth-

nographers—to be aware of their own ethnocentrism and the kinds of preconceptions and unconscious biases they bring to the field “with their body” in the form of their age, gender, ethnicity, physical size, social class, religious and cultural background, educational level, and personal style (Metz 1978). Such awareness helps to reduce the degree to which impressions written down suffer from being filtered through the mind of the ethnographer.

Some ethnographers write little down and rely mostly on their head notes; we—and most other methodologists—regard this as a poor field technique that often leads to bad research. Roger Sanjek cites some cases where experienced researchers have had to rely almost exclusively on head notes because all their other data were destroyed (Sanjek 1990). We believe that these are exceptional cases and should not be taken as guides for novice researchers. Memory is faulty and subject to constant revision as subsequent events modify initial impressions; it is important to record each impression as soon as possible after it occurs to avoid erosion, modification, and even falsification of the mental record.

Sanjek’s category of *scratch notes* consists of jottings and scribbles taken during events, in the field, or immediately after events, if taking notes in the presence of research participants is inappropriate. They are written on envelopes, file cards, small notebooks, or slips of paper. They are the mnemonics—often in shorthand or codes—that assist one in remembering complete head notes, and they are turned into description, or real field notes, as soon as the ethnographer finds the time and privacy to write everything down. Many ethnographers have written about the urgency of turning scratch notes into descriptive field notes before they get “cold”—and before the remembered detail in the head notes is lost in the onslaught of another day’s recollection. Description is the end result in transforming jottings and scratch notes into descriptive field notes. Thus, the processes of **inscription**, **transcription**, and **description** help to clarify the previous discussion regarding the interaction between what we have called “jottings” and the translation of jottings into a set of notes that provide the raw data for analysis as the study goes on, and when it is completed.



Such mental notes, which Sanjek calls “head notes,” might be made during a pause in conversation or a break in activities, as an ethnographer mentally “refers to some prior list of questions, traits or hypotheses” and then jots down a mnemonic word or phrase to help in remembering what to investigate (Clifford 1990, 51). This may seem simple enough, but in the initial stages of an ethnographic study, all ethnographers have a difficult time figuring out *what* to write down or what to write *about*. Many advisors to novice ethnographers urge them to take care to record “everything”—advice that has led to extreme frustration among many new field workers who find it impossible. To begin with, although field sites vary in their degree of confusion and complexity, they always are a whirling, buzzing maelstrom of activity. Does one look at the physical environment? the people? which specific people? or all of them? What if they are doing many different things? Imagine a carnival, a large outdoor market, a clinic waiting room, or a crowded school classroom. Where would one start?



**Cross  
Reference:**

See chapter 2 in  
this book, on entering  
the field

In addition to the impossibility of recording “everything at once” when “everything” is happening at the same time, ethnographers often face the difficult task of trying to register what actually *is* happening in a totally unfamiliar setting. Sometimes they have difficulty even finding the vocabulary to describe events and objects that they have never seen before and with which they have had no prior experience (see Clifford 1990). Making the task manageable requires some form of selective attention and translation.

All people, including all ethnographers, tend to notice first—and to write down—what they have already learned to notice. We have been trained—consciously and unconsciously—to attend to those items, domains, events, objects, animals, plants, people, and behaviors in our environment that our culture define as worthy of notice and helpful to our survival. One of the first lessons ethnographers must learn is how to get outside of their own heads, or how to go beyond their own ethnocentric frameworks for valuing, noticing, and naming so that they can begin to notice—and to write down information about—items, domains, events, objects, animals, plants, people, and behaviors that have been defined as noteworthy to other, often quite different,

people and cultures. Previous experience in the field helps to shift the lens to focus on how people in the local setting view the world, but it is always best to keep an open mind and to search for the new and different.

### *Inscription*

***The process of inscription involves learning to notice what is important to other people and what one hasn't been trained to see, and then to write it down.*** “Writing it down,” however, inevitably is done at least to some degree through the lens of the ethnographer, who writes things down or inscribes them from their own frame of reference. Even to notice something is to have some prior idea that it is worth noticing; part of the ethnographic project is first learning what is worth noticing to others and then writing it down in a way that makes sense to those others as well. Thus, while the initial stages of writing things down does in fact involve creating a “mental text,” it also involves recreating or modifying a text or set of ideas about that subject that already exists in the mind of the ethnographer. The creation of an initial conceptual or operational model early in the research process is very helpful in focusing questions, observations, social and geographic mapping operations, and the recording of event sequences. Interviews with key informants in the first stages of an ethnographic study also help to frame the exploration process through the eyes of the participants.

***Much of the mental text ethnographers create is a consequence of their past personal experiences and characteristics. However, what researchers attend to in the field, and hence, what they inscribe, also is very much influenced by the research questions they have asked or how the researcher has been trained to think about and conceptualize the world.*** Early anthropologists were trained in functional theory, which stated that the purpose of any human society was to carry out the basic functions necessary for that society to survive. These include reproduction (carried out by kinship systems and families, or sometimes by recruitment of new members), transmission of culture (carried out by families, schools, churches, and other

#### Key point



#### Definition:

Inscription is the act of making mental notes before writing things down



#### Cross

#### Reference:

See Book 1 and Book 2, chapters 4, 5, and 6, for a systematic discussion of how to formulate an initial working model



#### Key point



#### Cross

#### Reference:

See Book 6 for a discussion of how researcher characteristics and experiences affect what they do and can observe in the field



socializing institutions), distribution of resources (carried out in markets, manufacturing agencies, trade organizations, and systems of exchange), aesthetics (exemplified in the practice of the arts, handicrafts, creative activities), and many other functions. Early fieldwork—and the process of inscription—focused on identifying and describing how these various functions were carried out.

Contemporary ethnographers, by contrast, focus less often on creating theoretically informed descriptions of a whole society and more often on using theories about specific human processes to identify and explain smaller chunks or aspects of societies. Below we describe how theories about human learning and formation of gender identity helped to structure the inscription process in a study of an educational innovation. We also demonstrate how ethnographers must take care not to miss important elements of the culture under study because they simply don't think they are important.

### EXAMPLE 3.3



#### INSCRIBING INFORMATION ON ARTS INSTRUCTION IN THE ARTS FOCUS STUDY

Even before they began their study of an Arts Program at Centerline Middle School, LeCompte and Holloway were puzzling over the potential impact that education in the arts might have on the cognitive growth, self-confidence, and identity development of young adolescents. Based on her readings of the sociocultural learning theorist Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1934, 1978), LeCompte wondered about the degree to which specific strategies in arts instruction could foster higher-level thinking skills such as evaluation, hypothesis testing, and intellectual risk taking. Although LeCompte had had some musical training and Holloway had taught creative writing and was a writer herself, neither researcher had had much experience in visual or performing arts—the two strongest strands in the program. Having read the work of the developmental psychologist, Carol Gilligan (Gilligan 1982; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer 1990; Gilligan, Taylor, and Sullivan 1995) and others, Holloway was particularly interested in whether or not participating in arts education would help young women develop less traditional career goals. LeCompte tended to pay particular attention, then, to instructional activities that required students to engage in critique or to “think about unthinkable things,” imagine events or activities to be different from what they were or the way they'd always been done, or try on new ideas and identities. Holloway watched closely for differences between the reactions of boys and girls and for instances when girls took on activities usually reserved for

boys. The two researchers tended to watch for these kinds of things during regular classroom instruction because they deemed these activities to be most important. However, the calisthenics, games, and noise making that the theater class systematically engaged in at the beginning of each class period did not look very much like instruction to the researchers, except perhaps as a way to help lively eleven-to-fifteen-year-old children blow off steam and settle down before “real” instruction began. Even though they “wrote down everything” and had, in fact, made detailed notes on the vigorous preheater activities, the researchers found that their early field notes were filled with references to ways of thinking and differences between boys and girls as they existed in regular instruction—the original focus of the study and what the researchers thought to be most important. It wasn’t until they began to interview theater students and found that students viewed the “warm-ups” done at the beginning of the day to be among the most valuable things they learned that the researchers looked more closely at these calisthenics, games, and vocal exercises—to which they hadn’t paid much attention previously. The warm-ups were, in fact, activities that transformed the school experience for students. They helped students relax, reduce stress, and focus their concentration; and, most important to the study, the students argued that these activities were useful in their other, nonart classes.



LeCompte and Holloway first inscribed data that was congruent with their initial interests; however, they also tried to make careful note of things that didn’t make sense to them. In this way, they learned to attend to things that, although they weren’t originally defined as important to researchers, turned out to be very important for the people in the study. As LeCompte and Holloway learned, how researchers inscribe depends on how they conceive of the study and how they want to tell its story. The example below illustrates how a study can take a new and unpredicted turn, identifying an important emergent situation that arises from observations and conversations in the field.

**EXAMPLE 3.4****EMERGENT SUBSTUDY OF TOBACCO OUTLETS IN A STUDY OF SMOKELESS TOBACCO USE AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN MUMBAI**

Researchers at the National Institute for Research on Reproductive Health, Mumbai, and the Institute for Community Research, Hartford, joined forces to study

an important problem related to oral health of mothers and newborn health—the increasingly widespread use of smokeless tobacco products. In the proposal that they submitted for funding, they developed an initial model to guide the collection of data through in-depth interviews with key informants on norms and women’s smokeless tobacco practices and in-depth interviews and surveys with women tobacco users. The formative model was ecologically framed and included domains representing access to products, use patterns, and vulnerability to use (including household conflict, food insufficiency, and other life stresses).

In the early stages of the research, the field team was instructed by the India Principal Investigator Saritha Nair to map the community street by street as a way of introducing the project, becoming familiar with the area, and meeting potential key informants and women for the survey. As they walked through the community, the field team kept jottings on the people they met, the conversations they had, and what they observed on each street. Over a period of about three weeks, the team began to realize that there were many outlets where tobacco products were sold. The field team then began to refocus their attention to identify outlets and talk with owners about their shops. From them they learned that selling tobacco was an increasingly important source of income in a resource-poor community and that different products were preferred by different groups in the community.

Over time, they began to describe differences among outlets. The jottings reflected comparisons from one outlet to another, and eventually the classifications of general store, *paan* shop, tea shop, milk dairy, bulk tobacco outlet, and other categories emerged. In the team’s discussions with owners, they were taught about different types of tobacco products and learned to identify dimensions of comparison—strength, cost, contents, packaging, gender preferences, and preparation time. Based on this input, Nair, Schensul, and the team decided that it would be important to learn about the range of different products sold in the community. The questions and field notes then began to focus on descriptions of products, their content, price, strength, and other details based on what shop owners were telling them. The packets of tobacco were very colorful, and one enterprising team member took pictures of some packets and brought them back to the team. This led the field team to decide to take pictures of more of the products and to collect samples to see what could be learned, and to jot the information down. Over time the team concluded that they should take photographs of each and every product, front and back, including the contents. They also decided that it was important to note when the contents were not reported on the back of the packet. As gender and age differences were important in the study, they tried to find out which types of tobacco were preferred by men, women, children, or people from different parts of India. Thus, over time, aided by conversations with key informants and with shop owners, their jottings reflected deeper and more focused attention to specific aspects of the

study. The work led to the introduction of an entirely new and unanticipated study component on the availability and accessibility of smokeless tobacco products in this small, low-income community of Mumbai.

### Description

**Description** occurs after inscription. Description involves writing things down in jottings, diaries, logs, and field notes (Bernard 1995, 181) and producing “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973), or narratives of events, behaviors, conversations, activities, interpretations, and explanations, which, taken together, help to create a theoretically informed portrayal of the soul and heart of a group, community, organization, or culture. *Descriptions are the “more or less coherent representations of an observed cultural reality” (Clifford 1990, 51).* In creating them, ethnographers stop the clock; that is, they hold present time constant while they reorder the recent past that they have observed and jotted down. They then systematize what they have recorded, put it in context with prior events that they have learned about in the course of the fieldwork, and turn it into evidence to be assembled into the database from which the full ethnographic account will be created (Clifford 1990, 51–52).

*Field notes are organized around those basic conceptual frames or questions that structure the study in the first place; they become increasingly focused and “pre-coded” as the research itself progresses and hones in on the most interesting features of the cultural scene.* Field notes, as we shall see, are organized around those basic conceptual frames or questions that structure the study in the first place; they become increasingly focused and “pre-coded” as the research itself progresses and hones in on those features of the cultural scene that become most interesting. Field notes are produced in a quiet place away from the site of observation and interaction with people in the field. They include reflection, preliminary analyses, initial interpretations, and new questions and hunches to be answered and

### Definition:

Description occurs after inscription. Description involves writing things down in jottings, diaries, logs, and field notes



### Key point



### Key point



tested in the next days and weeks of observation. Semistructured data collection (structured, open-ended interviews and specifically targeted and timed observations) on selected topics related to the study help to identify and affirm preliminary hunches and associations that can later be confirmed statistically using structured ethnographic survey methods.

### *Transcription*



**Definition:**  
Transcription is writing down verbatim what people say or what they do.

**Transcription** sometimes is thought only to be the word-for-word creation of a written text from an audio-taped or videotaped account given by an informant. However, in ethnography, transcription also creates field notes. It is a rather more formal process than recording of naturalistic observations, and it occurs throughout the field-work stages of a research process. It often continues into the early stages of analysis away from the field. Clifford (1990) defines the term broadly to include any kind of elicitation from an informant, whether it be:



**Cross Reference:**  
See Book 1 and Book 3 for methods of interviewing and elicitation; see also Book 4, chapter 1, for our discussion of “transcribing” artifacts

- writing down the *verbatim* responses of informants to interviews;
- taking dictation;
- recording stories, legends, spells, ditties, chants, or songs; or
- keeping a running record of everything an individual says during a specific period of observation.

We add to this list recording the commentaries respondents make when engaged in listing and sorting exercises, mapping the location of events and activities, engaging in sentence completion activities, giving responses to photographs and other visual stimulation, and replying to surveys.

Focusing as it does on spoken language, transcription is particularly important for linguistic studies, when the objective of the research is collection of indigenous texts and stories or gaining an understanding of the meanings attributed to specific behaviors. Nonverbal behavior, however, also can be a focus of transcription. For example, school personnel often “script” the behavior of teach-

ers whom they want to evaluate; this involves keeping a detailed written record of what the teacher says and does during a given period of monitoring. Classroom- or clinic-based research also may follow this pattern of transcribing in detail what teachers and students, or receptionists, providers, and patients, may say and do. Observation of people's behaviors in enclosed spaces such as bars or meeting places often is scripted by ethnographers and may be accompanied by maps, seating plans, and other baseline indicators that can change over time. Similar scripting often is done for purposes of detailed monitoring of human behavior in situations where videotaping is not possible or is inappropriate, such as in classrooms or other situations where videotaping would be intrusive or reveal the participants' identity.

Transcription, then, involves writing down verbatim or "copying," in Clifford's terms, what informants say they know of a tradition, practice, event, custom, ritual, object, myth, or song. Or, in the case of "scripting," it is a detailed record of what is observed and said and by whom in a specific setting over a designated period of time. Below are several examples of transcripts taken from studies conducted by the authors.

One of the sources of data for the study of Arts Focus was a set of more than one hundred audiotapes of interviews that the researchers had conducted with students, teachers, and administrators in the program. These audiotapes had to be transcribed mechanically, and they looked like the excerpt below:

**EXAMPLE 3.5****TRANSCRIPT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH A SIXTH-GRADE MALE  
ARTS FOCUS STUDENT, AGED ABOUT ELEVEN**

DH: Hi. As I told you, my name is Deb, and we are working on an evaluation of the Arts Focus program. I know I've seen you in class this year, JT; I'm really happy that you agreed to talk with us because I think it's really important that we find out what students think about the program. So first I want to ask you a few background questions. Why did you choose to be in the literary arts program?

JT: I don't know. Well, I really thought I was good at, well, writing, and I thought it was fun, so my plan was that I'd do the literary arts because I'd really enjoy that.

Then I wanted to go to visual arts [next year] because I really like drawing, you know, things like that.

DH: So when you say you really like literary arts, what is it about literary arts?

JT: Well, it's the freedom we have. I don't know, it's so concentrated and it's like, you are just surrounded by writers and books.

DH: Before you came to the program, did you write a lot?

JT: Yes. Not as much creatively, but you know, in science. I don't know, it was more the case of a journal than actually writing. I decided that I enjoyed writing and also I enjoy being creative.

DH: So you just did it!

JT: Yeah.

DH: Have you taken classes in any other arts areas, other than writing?

JT: Well, when I was little, I took art classes, I think I took something in the art museum.

DH: So you did visual-oriented art?

JT: Yeah.

DH: OK.

JT: See, I'm not into, well, I think I'd be good at drama, and I think it's fun to act out, and we kind of, I think it's easier not to be yourself, actually. Because a whole bunch of people would know that you are not purposely being an idiot. Yes, but, like singing, no, that's not for me. The drawing, yes. I probably draw every other day or something.

DH: You do? Right now?

JT: Yes. Or maybe more, unless I have too much homework. Or at least I pay attention more on my homework.

DH: Than you did before?

JT: Yeah.

DH: Let me ask you a few questions about your literary arts class. Can you tell me what you do in your literary arts class?

JT: There's this five minute . . . sort of like where I don't get focused, then I'll make sure nobody's looking and I'll run to the other side of the room (Note: the class meets in the school's very large library) where we have a little place. I just write until

we (the teacher and he) have our meeting, or whatever. There's not many distractions, but I'm an easily distracted person, so I have to find a good spot.



Below are excerpts from an ethnographic interview conducted by Margaret LeCompte, who was interested in the career trajectories of very talented young musicians. LeCompte was studying a group of college- and graduate-school-aged violinists, asking them to recall their earliest contacts with instrumental music and to discuss their anticipated future goals. The interview is formatted in accordance with the conceptual framework LeCompte was using and included information about the conduct of the interview, the characteristics of the respondent, and the topics listed in the first part of the interview. This information makes it easier to search for respondents who fit a specific demographic. The transcription records the question/responses of the interviewer and respondent and marks them by first initial. The formatting includes line spacing and is typical of in-depth interviews conducted by many researchers.

**EXAMPLE 3.6**

## TRANSCRIBING IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH YOUNG VIOLINISTS

Interview # 01

Interviewer: Margaret LeCompte

Respondent:<actual name>

Age: 21

Gender: Female

Education: completed high school and conservatory; in his first year of MA studies

Ethnicity: White, born in England

Residence of respondent: Houston, Texas

Neighborhood: West University Place

Location of Interview: LeCompte's living room

Time: 3:00–5:30

Topics covered: family history, first lessons, first teachers, and inspirations

ML: I'm doing these interviews because I'm interested in how people choose a rather difficult career. I think people approach their careers from different perspectives;

at some point they decide to persist in it, and at some point they begin to think, “Gosh! I’m really a violinist!” So I’d like to talk with you about how you became a professional violinist. I’d like to start with when you first started playing the violin.

ML: How old were you and what made you choose the violin?

JC: I was six and I wanted to play the violin because my grandpa had played the violin and then nothing would dissuade me. My parents wanted me to do something easier.

ML: But your father’s a musician?

JC: Yes, he’s an oboist. Yeah, that’s why I had musical, but it was because my grandfather played the violin and I saw him and I really liked him.

ML: Now, was he a concertizing violinist?

JC: No, he was a member of the Civil Service in the War, and they lived in Edinburgh, and he taught himself. He was self-taught, and he taught himself the recorder and the harpsichord and piano and stuff, and he became a music teacher. I suppose he was sort of near retirement age, and he just left his [civil service] job and did that because he enjoyed it.

ML: Did he live near you so you saw him regularly?

JC: No, he lived out in Sussex [England], and I was out in Scotland from when I was three. But I went one time [to visit] for a holiday on my own, which was a big thing.

ML: How old were you then?

JC: About six, seven, and I stayed and he gave me little lessons and stuff.

ML: And when you came back, this is what you wanted to do.

JC: Yes, but I never did practice in those days; I was terrible.

ML: Were you also self-taught, or how did you start?

JC: I had to teach myself from scratch.

ML: How did you do that? You decided you wanted to play the violin, and your parents tried to dissuade you, but what kind of instruction did you get?

JC: Well, they sent me for lessons eventually with this lady, Dorothy Bohr, who was the wife of an orchestra concert master, and she also played the violin. She was the second violinist and a lovely lady. She was really nice and that was what got me going. She would give me candy and play with me. I didn’t understand that I was supposed to practice. My dad didn’t help me at all.

ML: Why do you suppose that you didn't understand about practicing?

JC: Well, I was so young, and nobody told me. I think people just think that you know that you have to practice and that's how it gets better. I must have been vaguely OK, because I could read notes. And then [Mrs. Bohr] was ill in the hospital or something and I didn't do much for a while. And [my parents] finally decided to send me to this woman who was like the local good violin teacher. She wasn't very good, but she made me practice, she made me register, and I used to have to write everyday what I did and I use to make some things up, but at least I did a little bit. And then what happened next was she put me into the Gospel Music Festival, which was competitive.

ML: Did she tell you what you were going to do?

JC: She told me I'd have to stand up and play. I didn't realize that it was like somebody won. So I just played my little piece. I'd never played it with a piano before. I was ten then, and we had to play the opening two bars like ten times, and suddenly, I clicked. I started to play and I won the class. So I think it was really after that that I started being a bit more interested.



Another form of transcription also was used in the Arts Focus study. Because audiotaping was considered to be too intrusive, the researchers took down verbatim records of the conversations in faculty, parent, and administrative meetings. These were maintained in several dozen stenographers' notebooks. They were, in most cases, nearly as complete as audiotaped transcriptions and served the same purposes.



### EXAMPLE 3.7

#### TRANSCRIPT FOR APRIL 2, 1997, 3:05 P.M., LARGE GROUP FOR ARTS FOCUS

The meeting is in the school library conference room. Present are LeCompte and Holloway (the two researchers), the four Arts Focus teachers, two parents, and Rita, a consultant from the local arts alliance, who came to help the teachers identify possible sources of grant funding for the program. Some problems quickly surface with the effectiveness of the current fund-raiser. (That individual, Sue, is not a staff member at the school, but she wrote the initial grant for the program, and her salary is paid from it. She is supposed to provide liaison with other arts organizations in the community.)

The teachers are talking among themselves with some dismay about how, although Sue is claiming responsibility for all grant writing, she is causing delays and problems because she won't consult with the teachers about funding proposals she's writing, and they don't know what obligations Sue's proposals might create for them if the proposals are funded.

Maureen says, "She doesn't know what the red flags are, like that art exhibit at the University which she wanted us to attend with the kids, and there were big paintings of nudes in it. Can you imagine what the kids would have done if we'd just walked in there? We can handle that—we can preview the show and plan how to prepare the kids for it—but if we don't know what we are getting into, we'll have the whole community mad at us."

Pat (the art teacher) says, "Sue is just going off on her own, writing grants and working through Jeannette Farmer (the curriculum director with the school district). Jeannette and Fran (the Centerline principal) are in contact weekly with e-mail, and they pass materials on to Sue, but nobody is talking to us, and we are the ones who will have to implement whatever they get money for. And it might not fit in with our program."

Rita: "What I hear from Sue is, she tells me that the teachers aren't coming to see her. And I'm giving Fran professional advice about what makes grant proposals stronger—I've been telling her that you won't get funded if there isn't collaboration between the teachers and all of the people involved."

Pat: "We did make a wish list of all the programs we wanted to try, and John (the music teacher) was going to type it up and give it to Fran so she would know what we were interested in getting funds for." (It is clear from Rita's response that she never saw the list, and that Fran hadn't received it from John, either).

Rita: "It'd really be good if you teachers could get your curriculum planned for the next year so we'd know how to plan for extra programs. And there are a lot of opportunities. . . . I have the procedures for applying for funds from the school district. Fran says there is no way to get around the school district procedures, since there are particular officials who have to sign off on all grants. This means that Sue is working on grants (she names two) right now, and she isn't collaborating with you . . . that's not the wisest course for you."

Pat: (sounding frustrated) "See, basically, this [she points at a grant proposal which Sue put in the Arts Focus teachers' mailboxes this morning] is out there, and we just didn't participate in it. Even though I totally agree with the concept [upon which the proposal is based].

Rita: "This is a problem. To have a successful grant, it (the proposal) needs clarity; it needs to speak directly to the questions asked. It has to be sexy, vivid, have color, catch attention. These [Sue's] proposals don't have it. You'll also need letters for support for the (local arts alliance) Council grant."

Pat: "Do you know about the Young Audiences Program?"

Rita: "It's from the state council for the arts; you have to have part of the money to hire an artist, and then they pay some of the rest of the artists' fee."

They all talk about several other grant programs, what they each might do to write their own grant proposals. They ask Rita how they could start receiving the information and newsletters on grant opportunities that have previously been going to Sue, who doesn't pass them all on to the teachers. They then discuss all the logistics needed to bring an artist to the school under the Young Audiences program—facilities, time, administrative issues.

Deb (the research assistant) gives a report on the work of the videographer whom the research team wants to hire to film the final production of *Romeo and Juliet*; the school can't find a professional videographer they could afford, but they really want to document the performance for the historical record. The husband of one of Deb's friends has volunteered to do the work. "He usually charges \$100 an hour, but he'll do the whole job for \$500–\$700, including the editing, and he'll also document the Arts Festival."

Maureen says, "Let's do it."

Rita says that they could get some publicity with the video on the public access television channel; there is general agreement that this would be a good idea. It is 4:00 p.m., and I have to leave the meeting.

**EXAMPLE 3.8**

TRANSCRIPT FROM LECOMPTE'S FIELD NOTES, OCTOBER 4, 1996; 1:10 P.M., THIRD BLOCK, THEATER ARTS CLASS, SIXTH AND SEVENTH GRADERS (AGES ELEVEN TO FOURTEEN)

Theater Arts meets in the auditorium; it's their regular classroom. The students have been planning for their annual Halloween Night theatrical production; they will perform Ray Bradbury's "The Halloween Tree," a fantasy thriller. Maurita, the teacher, chose it because there were lots of parts in it that she could assign to girls; she says that girls can play male roles in some plays, which is good, since most theater programs have too many girls, and most plays don't have very many roles for girls. I sit in the front row of the auditorium seats; the teacher is at her desk in the stage-left corner below the stage. The buzzer sounds. Two boys LEAP into the still empty auditorium, announcing in loud theatrical voices: "I am HERE!!" They leap onto the stage. One announces, "You gotta wonder about a boy who talks like a girl." He then notices a girl who just entered the room and who is nearly in tears. He runs to the back of the auditorium, puts his arm around her, and asks: "What's the matter? Are you upset?" She shrugs him off, turns away, and sits down in the back. He races back to the stage and leaps back on it. Four boys are now on stage, talking in loud voices and making theatrical gestures. They have been reading Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and they are practicing the lines. Maurita Douglas, the teacher, moves to sit on a stool on the floor just below the stage at stage center. The students

enter and sit down in a tight semicircle around her. Most of the twenty-five students are girls—I only count five boys. There is a deaf girl with a sign-language interpreter in the class; the interpreter sits just behind the teacher, signing what Maurita says to the deaf girl. Maurita begins to list the decisions they have to make today to get ready for their performance. She says: “This is a production day; we aren’t going to do much stage stuff today. And it isn’t a democracy. We can all help and take part, it isn’t a dictatorship, but we have to get organized. Now, I am going to need lots of volunteers—I need someone to take notes here.” Lots of students raise their hands to volunteer to take notes. “No, I am going to use my Assistant Director (AD) here, that’s what we use Assistant Directors for.” [Note: The assistant director was Danielle, the girl who was upset.] The AD jumps up to the stage where a blackboard is located and starts writing down the high points of the discussion. They first discuss just how many performances they should have. The AD does ballet moves on the stage behind Maurita (whose back is to her).

Maurita: “Now, if you have other activities that conflict with performing on these nights—or on any night of a performance—that’s OK; if I know right now. Now, let’s decide on the dates. We can’t have just one performance on the second week; we’ll all forget our lines. And we can’t have one on Tuesday, which is a school holiday.” The students all start talking at once with suggestions. Maurita listens.

Maurita: “OK, we’re going to vote in one minute.” The AD writes the possible dates on the blackboard, and they end up deciding to have two performances on the Thursday and Friday before Halloween.

Maurita then changes the topic. “Now we have to talk about the stage combat. The two expert instructors are coming to tomorrow’s class. You are going to practice falls, drops, body slams. You’ll need something to use for a quarterstaff [a medieval weapon]. You can use an old broom handle, so bring one in, but remember to sand it with sandpaper so that there won’t be any splinters in them—or you’ll have splinters in your hands. Come dressed for gymnastics—old clothes—tennis shoes or gym shoes. Bring water. You’ll get hot. And go to the bathroom before class. The two instructors aren’t going to want people wandering out to go to the bathroom.” Another change in topic.

“Now, let’s talk about the rehearsal schedule for the play. I know this all is boring, but we have to do this or it’ll be utter chaos.” Various students tell her about schedule conflicts they have: soccer practice, ballet lessons, baby-sitting, a doctor’s appointment. These kids have really busy schedules with many after-school commitments. It is hard to schedule rehearsals in which all the lead actors are present. She takes notes, asking each which role they have in the play and appointing a substitute. All of the girls are still sitting in the circle around Maurita, except for Danielle, the AD, still on the stage. Four of the 5 boys have moved to the center of the auditorium to join Mike, an 8th grader who is directing all the sound and light work for the play

and who just came in to inspect the light booth. Two girls get up and climb onto the stage, and begin mimicking the ballet moves which Danielle continues to make.

Maurita: “OK, now. We have to break up into groups to talk about sound effects. You are going to have to create the sound effects that will make this play live. Get out your scripts, and move into your groups.” Maurita tells them to read each page of the first act and think about all the sounds that might go with what’s happening in the play. “It’s fall, it’s sort of cold; the wind is blowing and the leaves are falling. It’s almost night. When you go up to the old house, what does it smell like? Imagine what you might hear. You’re walking down the street, with your friends. Just brainstorm together.” The kids begin to brainstorm, and it gets pretty loud. Maurita then interrupts them. “I need your attention now. I have an article I want you to use for reference. It’s all about how to make sound effects. It’s from a professional magazine, but you are old enough to read and understand it. It’ll tell you how to make the sound of rain, thunder, horses walking down the street, squeaky doors—all kinds of things—and then tape-record them so you can have a sound track for the play. Now read it, and keep working, because that’s what we’ll have to do.” Maurita does some paperwork at her desk—far stage left—and then moves around the room, listening to the discussions. The students continue their discussion until the buzzer sounds for the end of class at 2:40 p.m.



This excerpt tried to include both teacher and student activities—a somewhat daunting process in a very large room with twenty-eight people—many of whom were engaging in different, and sometimes unrelated, activities.

Full field notes are like photographs; they have a “you are there” quality (Clifford 1990, 61) that makes a custom, belief, or practice perhaps visible, and at least comprehensible, not only to the ethnographer but also to outsiders as well. As such, they go beyond both inscription and transcription—which some methodologists call “mere description” or the close-to-the-ground recording of what one sees and hears with as little interpretation added as possible. ***Full field notes, then, are kept as close to “raw” as possible, while still capturing clearly the situation within the photographic frame in all its detail at that particular point. Field notes that “go beyond mere description” have been written, rewritten, and written over, so that they***

Key point



*have ceased to be entirely “raw” data and are already at least partly “cooked”—at least to the extent that as many blanks as possible have been filled in and a tentative theoretical framework has begun to emerge.*



**Definition:**

Translation is the process by which ethnographers describe in their own words and concepts the ideas, behaviors, and words of the people observed in the study



**Key point**

It’s important to remember that both written and audiotaped or videotaped transcription always involves conscious or unconscious selection and **translation**. The Arts Focus program tended to select for recording those events, stories, and materials that seemed to be most salient to their research questions or the ideas about learning and gender that interested them. LeCompte’s “Learning to Work” scripts of teacher behavior placed special emphasis on noninstructional speech and behavior, since her interest was in the so-called hidden curriculum (Friedenberg 1970; Jackson 1968) of classroom structure and organization, rather than on what was learned in formal content instruction. *Thus, whatever the informants say and do, items from their speech and behavior still are selected for recording, and then recorded both with the researcher’s purpose in mind and with an eye toward their utility in constructing an overall argument for the study—even when the researcher is taking verbatim notes or is using a recording device.* In the interviews of Jan Chandler, the violinist, the interview followed a structured interview guide, covering topics related to the research question and the study’s formative model and analysis protocols. But the interviewer deviated from the protocol when issues related to family life and parental relationships emerged. The ethnographer’s observations and subsequent descriptions and transcriptions thus are filtered through his or her personal, professional, cultural, and theoretical lenses as well and serve the multiple agendas, including emergent interests that the researcher might have.

## ORGANIZING AND MANAGING ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA WHILE IN THE FIELD

### *Organizing Qualitative Data*

Regardless of whether the ethnographic study is an individual or a team effort—and even if the ethnographer

is the ONLY person who will review the field notes—it is still important to label, organize, and file field notes in an orderly manner. Most field notes and related materials are now filed digitally. Artifacts can be boxed and labeled and associated with field notes that describe them, how they are used, and their meanings. They also can be photographed and filed in photographic archives with descriptions attached. In a study of stimulants, field researchers collected many samples of pills, energy drinks, gum, and other products that contained legal stimulants, including caffeine. The materials were labeled and stored in a large box. A photograph was taken of each item and the field notes included the location in which each item was found as well as listed its contents, and these were filed in an Excel-based archive for retrieval later on. Field notes, digital video, and digital photographs such as these can all be filed electronically. Fliers and other paper materials, including newspaper articles, can be saved in pdf format and archived electronically as well.

The organization and management of files require constant grooming and attention. Decisions must be made as to how to file field notes, whether by date or by topic or by the persons involved, or all three. If the field notes contain information on specific “sites” or locations that are the subject of the study, they should be filed by “site” as well. Interviews should be filed by “type”—for key informant interviews, focus group interviews, or interviews with specific groups of people (*paan* shop owners, drug dealers, school administrators, students in different programs of study). Additional decisions are thus required with respect to the different “types” of interviews that are being collected. Newspaper articles generally are filed in their own subdirectory with consistent names (newspaper, topic, date).

Digital photographs of field situations, people, events and artifacts, and brief videos can be filed in external hard drives that are password protected and stored in a safe place. All such audiovisual materials should be documented and the documentation stored with the materials. Pdf files, newspaper article downloads, and other digital materials can also be stored in the same hard drive, along with audiotapes of recorded group and individual interviews



**Cross Reference:**

Information on the construction and storage of GIS databases can be found in Book 4, chapter 4

for future reference. Digital audio files should be destroyed when the study is deemed over, in accordance with the study's consent form and IRB approval. Data collected from pilesorts and other consensus activities, digital maps, and GIS data files should be maintained in separate directories and carefully labeled and described.



**Cross Reference:**

Book 5, chapter 3

Qualitative data and artifacts accumulate very rapidly, and researchers will be much happier as a study goes on if they know that the accumulated materials are safely filed in protected locations and backed up, either in a computer or in filing cabinets, so that “tidying up” becomes an exciting process of discovery rather than a nightmare.

### *Organizing Numerical or Quantitative Data*

Much of what we have discussed so far involves work with text data. But mixed-methods ethnographic research has been the norm for many years, especially in medical, educational, and urban anthropology, and has become increasingly popular in other fields. Mixed-methods research is usually defined as a mixture of focus group or in-depth interviews and survey research. The “mixed” in mixed-methods research acknowledges that the principles and conventions of “qualitative” and “quantitative survey” research are different but can be complementary. Psychologists also use mixed methods when they conduct design experiments. We use the term to refer to the collection of a mix of methods drawn from different fields used to obtain observed and perceived data on both the group or cultural level and on the individual or network level. These methods were first outlined by Pertti Pelto in his seminal 1970 text and elaborated in Pelto and Pelto, *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*, in 1978. They are reiterated in some departments and in National Science Foundation–sponsored and privately funded “research methods camps” and summer courses that teach students and faculty how to conduct many of the techniques for collecting and analyzing the types of data that are summarized in Book 1 and described in greater detail in this book and Book 4. Included in these methods are different approaches to interviewing, ethnographic

surveys, cultural consensus research, network research, spatial research, archival research, collection, and visual documentary research. The data collected through these approaches are both numerical and qualitative. Below we describe some generic ways of storing quantitative data to ensure ready use in analyses.

### STORING QUANTITATIVE DATA FOR SUBSEQUENT ANALYSIS

Surveys and coded observations should be numbered and checked as they come in from the field. If they are complete, they should be entered into a database or some sort of log-in scheme immediately, especially in a large study. A large study requires that a coordinator maintain close control over survey administration, review, completion, and entry. Sometimes, researchers like to review data intermittently while the survey phase of the study is being completed to get a sense of what stories the data are telling early on and to check the data-entry process for missing or incorrectly entered data. When survey collection is complete, the final data set should be checked for missing or incorrectly entered data. Network data connected to survey data should be stored in separate subfiles and carefully documented.

Once the data set is complete and the variables are named and labeled, the final data set should be filed in a password-protected file, and it should remain untouched. A “working data set” should be prepared that includes all final variables and scales and contains a detailed description in a separate document that is stored in a different, but available, location. Those who work on the “working data set” by creating new variables and scales for a specific purpose can then rename it using a convention (by date and user, topic, or paper). Each specific quantitative data file, regardless of the software used, should have with it a document that explains any new variables or scales, or recodes, so that others will be able to use it easily. Pile-sort and other data that are quantified can be entered and each stored in their own software directories. The data files for pile-sorting or any other form of cultural cluster analysis accumulate rapidly and should be clearly labeled. Old files should be destroyed so as to avoid future confusions.

**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 4,  
chapter 3, for a  
description of pile-sorts  
and other elicitation  
techniques





### **SUMMARY**

In this chapter we have tried to capture as many details as possible with respect to the definition, recording, writing, and storing of field notes or field data. We have included other forms of data in addition to text data under the rubric of field notes/field data, such as photographs, video, paintings and other objects or artifacts, newspaper articles and archives, books and other materials that represent important dimensions of the field enterprise. The most important point we have tried to make is that jottings, and all of the other materials gathered in field research, must be labeled, stored, and described in enough detail so that others reading the materials later, without prior knowledge of the field site, will be able to understand what the researcher observed and what it meant to members of the local community. Field notes can include some “interpretative comments,” which should be placed at the end, or in additional memos. The primary purpose of the field-note enterprise is to record as accurate an account of behaviors, events, settings, conversations, and other activities as possible so that they and others can reconstruct those moments in time and link them with other notes to construct a theoretically based interpretation of the situation. We have also described the importance of organizing and labeling data clearly, as early in the research enterprise as possible, to simplify the task of organizing data for a more elaborate interpretation when the data-gathering phase is complete.

# 4

## PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND INFORMAL INTERVIEWING IN THE FIELD


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### INTRODUCTION

**Participant observation** refers to a process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting. Participant observation represents the starting point in ethnographic research because:

- It is central to identifying and building relationships important to the future of the research endeavor.
- It gives the researcher an intuitive as well as an intellectual grasp of the way things are organized and prioritized, how people relate to one another, and the ways social and physical boundaries are defined.
- It demonstrates—and over time can confirm—patterns of etiquette, political organization and leadership, social competition and cooperation, socioeconomic status and hierarchies in practice, and other cultural patterns that are not easily addressed or about which discussions are forbidden.

*Introduction*  
*Differences between Participant and Nonparticipant Observation*  
*Observation from a Distance*  
*Deciding Where and What to Observe*  
*Deciding When to Observe*  
*Informal Interviewing in the Field*  
*Tips on Recording Observations and Informal Interviews*  
*Dynamics and Challenges in Field Observation*  
*Summary*

**Definition:** 

Participant observation is a data-collection technique that requires the researcher to be present at, involved in, and actually recording the routine daily activities with people in the field setting



- It legitimates the presence of the researcher in the community.
- It provides the researcher with cultural experiences that can be discussed with key informants or participants in the study site and treated as data.

According to Bogdewic, participant observation offers other advantages, including the opportunity to witness events that “outsiders” would not be invited to attend. It also facilitates access to situations that might otherwise be hidden from public view, such as certain religious rituals, illegal or socially stigmatized activities, or activities that groups use to maintain a special identity (Bogdewic 1992, 171).

### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND NONPARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

#### *Participation*

We begin our discussion regarding tools of observation with definitions of **participation** and observation. **Participation** refers to presence in and interaction with a site during the time that activity or event is occurring. It is always defined by researcher presence at the event being observed. Participation means near total immersion when ethnographers live in unfamiliar communities where they have little or no knowledge of local culture and where they study life in those communities through their own participation as full-time residents and members. The traditional definition of participant observation refers to this immersion experience. Even in these circumstances, however, researchers must retreat from “the field” from time to time, even if retreating is only to their room or private space to write up their notes. Otherwise, their unrecorded experiences will never be transformed into documents that can be read and interpreted by others as scientific data.

While ethnographers and other researchers still can identify opportunities for immersion experiences, for the most part, observers are not full participants in community life. In some instances, such as ethnography conducted with drug users or others engaged in illegal activity, it is not



#### **Definition:**

Participation refers to presence in and interaction with a site when an activity or event is occurring

ethically or professionally acceptable for ethnographers to become fully involved.

#### EXAMPLE 4.1

##### FROM NONPARTICIPATION TO FULL IMMERSION IN A WEAVING COOPERATIVE

Sheryl Ludwig's activities in Guatemala, where she was studying both Western and indigenous forms of teaching and learning, ranged from nonparticipant observation of activities in the market, the churches, and village square, and furtive observation from a distance of strikes and political rallies, to teaching English (and observing) in the village school to becoming an apprentice weaver in the Lopez family's cooperative of master weavers, where she worked daily, shared meals, struggled to produce acceptable weavings, and even spent a few nights. She did not, however, live full time with the Lopez family. She stayed with another family in the nearby town where she also could study Spanish at a language school, find the privacy needed to record field notes, and also have access to electricity and cleaner water and food.

The range of opportunities from “nonparticipation to active participation to complete participation” has often been expressed as a continuum (DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland 1998, 262–63; Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte 1999; Spradley 1980).

In Books 1 and 6 we describe some of the personal characteristics that influence the degree of ease with which ethnographic researchers may be accepted into a situation. These include appearance, language, class background and educational level, manner, ease of interaction style, age, physical size, gender, race, and ethnicity. Structural characteristics such as rules regulating the behavior and interaction of men and women or rules of hospitality also may affect possibilities for interaction. In rural Mexico or in Senegal it is not very acceptable for researchers, especially female researchers, to live alone or in a hotel. A researcher must live with a family and experience social life in the context of that family's position and role in the community. Families or community members may even give researchers a local “family” or “clan” name. In Mexico, Jean Schensul's Spanish name was *Juanita*. In Senegal she first was given the

#### Cross Reference:

See Book 1, chapter 2, and Book 6, chapter 3, for a discussion of personal characteristics of the researcher that influence researcher acceptance in the field





Wolof version of her first name, “Jenoba”; later, when leaders of a traditional women’s group raised the question of to which family she belonged, she was informally assigned the clan name of the family with whom she was living at the time.

Becoming incorporated into a family brings with it many personal, social, and scientific advantages. On the other hand, finding private time to work or travel alone becomes a challenge when researchers are expected to participate in family events. Furthermore, the position of the family in the community or the place where the researcher’s role requires him or her to live can influence researcher access to information and opportunities. In China, a researcher may be treated as an “official visitor” whose residence is confined to a hotel or housing for foreigners and whose contacts with local people and opportunities for learning are limited in other ways.

As O. Werner and G. M. Schoepfle note, the extent of participation possible or feasible is influenced by the setting and the research question. “Studying a Polynesian village while living in it requires full-time participation; commuting daily to a fire station to study firemen while living at home requires only part-time participation” (Werner and Schoepfle 1987, 258–59).

Participation also varies in terms of the activities in which the researcher is expected or able to participate. Sometimes researchers are present in a community or at an activity and need do nothing but accompany others, observe, and ask questions. At other times, they may be expected to participate more actively. Sometimes, researchers can find ways of making themselves useful by watching children, shopping for food, fixing a broken car, playing a game with youth or adults, running errands, or working with public health officials and teachers on a public health campaign. Traditionally, ethnographers were expected to learn by doing, that is, participating, but even in immersion settings there are some situations, such as religious ceremonies, to which outsiders are not invited or in which they are forbidden to participate.

Finally, ethnographers may be excluded from participation for a variety of reasons. These range from lack of

trust and the community's discomfort with an outsider, to community members' reluctance or inability to provide continuing support for a stranger because of their anticipation that a situation might be dangerous or because of the community's poverty or civil war. Some exclusionary techniques include:

- Rapid use of a standard language unfamiliar to the researcher
- Code-switching (changing from a language familiar to the researcher to one not understood)
- Changing the subject of a conversation when the ethnographer approaches
- Refusing to answer questions
- Positioning themselves so that the ethnographer cannot hear what is being said
- Not inviting researchers to attend social events

Every researcher can expect to experience exclusion. Recognizing whether or not one is intentionally excluded and determining what exclusion means both in terms of normal social interaction and for the success of the research is an important component of any field study, especially in the early stages. Setting the boundaries and limits around one's participation during the first months of ethnographic fieldwork, establishing a routine, and taking regular breaks from the field are ways of coping with the stresses and ambiguities of long-term immersion in a research setting.

After a period of participation and observation, researchers are likely to realize that they have become recognized and accepted in the study community. Often this occurs after an unusual incident during which they are perceived as behaving in a manner that demonstrates serious commitment (DeWalt et al. 1998, 269). LeCompte found that both the teachers and administrators, and the students themselves in the Arts Focus School she studied, were far more welcoming and willing to share confidences with her after she testified on behalf of the school's new instructional model before the school board and to the media. Not only were the data that she presented—and had collected about the program—deemed critical in the

school board's decision not to end the Arts program, but LeCompte's testimony was seen as evidence of her personal commitment to the school's philosophy and actions.



**Definition:**

Observation refers to what can be seen directly through the eyes of the ethnographer



**Cross Reference:**

See Books 1, 5, and 6 for discussions of how these frames affect data collection and field notes

*Observation*

**Observation** refers to what can be seen through the eyes of the ethnographer. Observations are always filtered through the researcher's interpretive frames. The most accurate observations are shaped by formative theoretical frameworks and supported by scrupulous attention to detail. Other influences on observation are less helpful, such as personal biases and values and the intrusion of other tacit, implicit, or unarticulated theories. Ethnographers should be meticulous in their understanding of the research problem and its formative theoretical framework and honest about their own biases. They must attempt to strengthen the effects of the former and minimize the effects of the latter. The quality and importance of the "facts" ethnographers observe and record thus depend on the observational, documentation, and interpretation skills of the observers and the opportunities they have for observing.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss how ethnographers begin to observe, what they observe, when and where they observe, what tools are available to improve observational skills and data quality, and how observational data are recorded.

**OBSERVATION FROM A DISTANCE**



**Definition:**

Observation from a distance refers to the researcher's long-distance observation of activities related to the topic of interest


**Observation from a distance** refers to the way researchers initially observe activities related to the topic of interest. This form of observation is spectator-like, not participatory, and is designed to orient the researcher at least superficially to places, people, social interaction, clothing, language, and other aspects of the community setting with which the researcher needs to become familiar. Researchers can "observe from a distance" workers on a production line, couples walking in a "lovers' lane" or park, youth interacting at a bus stop, or mothers and teachers playing with young children in an outdoor playground. Observation

from a distance is only possible when it can be conducted unobtrusively, without participants' noticing. Further, the behavior observed must occur in public settings, where observations pose no threat or consequence either to the observer or the observed.

**EXAMPLE 4.2**

## THE "WALKABOUT" IN THE EARLIEST STAGES OF A FIELD EXPERIENCE

During a capacity-building training program to build ethnographic research skills among faculty and students interested in substance use and HIV research at the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), trainees were asked to conduct a "walkabout." Twelve students divided into groups of two or three to avoid attracting attention. They traveled using local transit (autorickshaws) to a nearby community where previous IIPS students and faculty had done surveys, and they walked about the main streets and byways without talking with anyone. Each team of students generated a "mental map" of the community, which they drew and shared on their return to the classroom. Many of these students had not visited a "slum" community before, and they discussed their observations about physical infrastructure, conditions in the community, businesses and social institutions, and places where people congregated. This provided them with an orientation to the community where they were planning to do research on alcohol use among youth. Such activities also can be very useful in training researchers in how to write good descriptions using low-inference descriptors.



In a similar exercise seven years later and directly across the highway from the first, a team of female field researchers, all Indian and from different areas of the country, much like the residents of the study community, began to explore the use of smokeless tobacco among women.


**EXAMPLE 4.3**DOING A "WALKABOUT" TO MAP THE COMMUNITY  
AND MEET KEY INFORMANTS

The research team decided to do a complete mapping of the community. To start the process they did a "walkabout" in several stages. First, they walked up

and down its five main “lanes”—commercial streets where they were relatively unobtrusive. Later in a nearby project office, they produced a joint first draft of a map. Then, they returned with a community researcher who had worked in that community in the past and walked through the community with him. The fact that he was recognized meant that the women could enter more isolated areas of the community to walk about without being suspected. When the team leaders, Jean Schensul and Saritha Nair, were working together, the field team conducted additional walkabouts with them to show them points of interest with respect to tobacco shops and homes of key informants and local leaders. These walkthroughs with limited or no conversation with community residents served to orient the field staff and help them to see how the community was physically organized. It showed them where the most isolated and the most challenging conditions for doing interviews were and revealed an initial density of smokeless tobacco shops that caused them to add an entirely new component to the study on smokeless tobacco supply.

**EXAMPLE 4.4** **OBSERVING DOWNTOWN CLUBS AND BARS FROM A DISTANCE**

In a study of use of the drug Ecstasy, an Institute for Community Research (ICR) research team decided in the summer of 2008 to recruit users from downtown clubs and bars. Several members of the team were regular customers in two or three of the bars, but there were many such locations in a small geographic area of downtown. To make sure that their recruitment covered all potential recruitment sites, they walked around the entire area and identified bars and bartenders that they knew without entering any of the bars. This information provided an orientation to the area and a recording of what and who they knew and what was “missing” in their knowledge base.



These observations from a distance help researchers to gain geographic bearing and at the same time to learn about the way a community or institution is organized or physically structured, where people congregate, what organizations, clubs, and other venues or activity sites are located in the setting, modes of transportation, typi-

cal clothing styles, and how age, gender, and class differences in clothing, appearance, and use of space might be expressed. In general, these unobtrusive measures orient the researcher to the community environment and provide a backdrop to better inquiry.

### **DECIDING WHERE AND WHAT TO OBSERVE**

What ethnographers observe in the field will differ during a field stay. Researchers spend the first days and months of a field experience getting oriented. Their need to learn how to function in a new situation as well, as their curiosity about it will drive what they observe. Later on, observation will become more selective. Researchers Werner and Schoepfle describe three different approaches to observational processes, reflecting length of time in the field and knowledge level: “descriptive observation” in the early stages of exploration in which as many details as possible are recorded; “focused observation,” which begins to highlight some factors that take on greater significance in the field setting; and “selective observation,” which concentrates more deeply on the detail of specific types of events or interactions (Werner and Schoepfle 1987, 262–64).

As Werner and Schoepfle note, when they first enter the field, ethnographers will not know exactly what they are observing, especially if the setting is unfamiliar. During the early stages, it is very important to document observations accurately and in concrete detail without prematurely imposing on what is observed categories derived from an external theory or conceptual framework foreign to the community being studied. This does not mean ignoring the initial formative conceptual framework informing the study. Over time and with repeated observation and questioning, the meanings of items, articles, patterns of behavior, and social relationships and events will become clearer. At this point, it will become possible to associate behaviors observed in the field with domains in the formative theoretical model developed prior to the study’s initiation, or to create new domains with attached meanings and connections.

To make sense of the bewildering array of new visual, aural, olfactory, and social stimuli in the field, ethnographers usually start by:

- observing settings;
- observing and tracking events and event sequences;
- counting, census taking, and ethnographic mapping;
- searching for indicators of socioeconomic, gender, age, grade, and ethnic difference.

These observational activities orient researchers to the field and enable them to begin to sort out major social and cultural dimensions in the field setting.



**Definition:**

Research settings are locations where behaviors and activities relevant to a study take place

*Observing Settings*

**Research settings** are locations identified as potentially important to a study, where behaviors and activities relevant to understanding the context of the study may occur. Settings and locations can be identified either through discussions with key informants or by working with local research partners who know the research community well. When they are public or quasi-public, researchers can conduct observations in these settings in an unobtrusive manner. Identifying, locating, and mapping settings for more systematic semistructured or structured *observation* can take place early in a study and are useful in identifying important behaviors, events, and persons for further investigation through interviewing and observation.



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 2, chapters 7 and 8, for more information on these methods of data collection

**EXAMPLE 4.5**



IDENTIFYING STREET SITES WHERE TEENAGERS GATHER

To identify locations for recruitment of youth for a study of transitions to cocaine and heroin in youth in Hartford, researchers Schensul, Broomhall, and Pino conducted interviews with older adolescents familiar with the streets and neighborhoods of the city. They first asked adolescents to list the types of places where teens gathered either after school or during school when they skipped classes. They listed basketball courts, designated areas of city parks, street corners, streets, package stores, pool halls, and clubs. The young people then worked with large street maps of the city, using markers to identify the locations they knew about, the kinds of

activities that usually took place there, and the types of young people who “hung out” in those settings. This information enabled young ethnographer/outreach staff on the project to visit these sites, confirm the reports of teenagers with their own observations, and recruit them for the study.



The following example illustrates how working with local key informants or experts simplified the process of spatially situating health care locations in Lima.

**EXAMPLE 4.6**LOCATING HEALTH CARE SITES IN *PUEBLOS JOVENES*  
(NEW COMMUNITIES) IN LIMA, PERU

In a study of the relationships among health care institutions, community organizations, physical infrastructure, and pediatric diseases in Lima, ethnographers first worked with local pediatricians to identify the communities and the locations in those communities where the delivery of health care was occurring. The list included larger health clinics, health care outposts, hospitals, community dining rooms (*comedores*, locations where women prepared meals for a group of community residents who paid a minimum fee for them in advance), locations where milk was distributed, and pharmacies. The research team was able to visit each of these types of sites and to document spatial arrangements, staffing patterns, and health problems treated there; perceived problems in health care delivery; links with other health care facilities; types of patients; community health education programs; the presence of community health workers; and community ties. These data were hand-recorded and transformed into field notes.



The following example illustrates how researchers can work with health educators to identify targeted locations for exploratory observation.

**EXAMPLE 4.7**

## PLACES IN PORT LOUIS WHERE YOUNG ADULTS SOCIALIZE

A team of Mauritian and North American researchers conducted a study of sexual risk in young, unmarried women in the industrial workforce in Mauritius. In Mauritius, female virginity is still believed important, but sexual values and norms are changing. In recent years young women have joined the industrial workforce in

large numbers, gaining exposure to male companionship outside the confines of familial supervision.

One of the first steps the research team undertook was to ask younger members of the health education team of the Mauritius Family Planning Association to list and describe types of locations where young couples could meet one another and where they could go to have romantic experiences. The research team generated a list of locations based on local knowledge, which included clubs, beach parties, beach hotels, local parks, and bus stops where young workers waited for bus transportation home. Key informant interviews with taxi drivers, club managers, receptionists at beach hotels, and industrial floor managers confirmed this list and added several other locations. Members of the research team were then able to station themselves unobtrusively in these public locations to observe interactions between young men and women.



### *Events*



**Definition:**  
Events are activity sequences that can be bounded in time and space

**Events** are activity sequences that ethnographers can bound or define in time and space. Events are larger, longer, and more complex than single activities that take place in a specific location. They have a specific purpose and meaning on which most people agree, although individual renditions of the meaning of the event may differ somewhat depending on differences among informants. They usually:

- involve more than one person;
- have history and consequence;
- are repeated.

Typical events are a community meeting to discuss school reform; a gathering of community health workers to learn new information about preventing diarrhea; the opening of a gallery exhibit on Franco-Canadian wood carvings; a drive-by shooting in an urban neighborhood; a “ragging” (rough new student orientation) session at a Sri Lankan university; or a public theatrical performance given by a middle school arts program.

Each of these has time duration, some of which are formally announced and others that are variable. The community meeting may begin at 6:00 p.m. and end at 7:30 p.m.

The gallery exhibit opening reception begins at 4:00 p.m. and ends at 8:00 p.m. The ragging session begins on a weekend day and ends one week later. The event surrounding the drive-by shooting may be totally unpredictable and last only fifteen minutes.

The classic journalist's questions expressed by the interrogatory terms *who*, *what happened*, *where*, *when*, *why*, *for whom* should be answered in describing an event.

**EXAMPLE 4.8**

## TREATING FOR ABUSIVE ALCOHOL USE AT A SPIRITUALIST CENTER

For a number of years a spiritualist center [where] provided a variety of spiritual, consultative, and educational services on a main street in the heart of Hartford's Puerto Rican community [where]. Each January, around the time of Three Kings Day [when], the Center sponsored a community gathering at which the *Madrina* (godmother) or lead spiritualist healer [who] went into trance, took on the persona of the Spirit of San Lazaro, and conducted healing sessions [what happened] with members of the congregation [with whom]. The sequence of activities involved [what happened]:

- the gathering of the community;
- formal introduction of spiritualist trainees;
- a period during which they practiced entry into and exit from trance in front of the audience;
- the blessing of the food, flower, and candle offerings;
- the entrance of the spirit of San Lazaro through the *Madrina*, marked by the presence of cigar smoke.

Members of the congregation either volunteered to be blessed by San Lazaro, acting through the *Madrina*, or were identified by the spirit as in need of healing. The healing process, which took place in front of the entire community of attendees and mediums-in-training, involved a variety of strategies, ranging from a blessing alone to an interpretation of a problem and a remedy for healing that usually involved spiritual, family, and community support.

On one occasion, San Lazaro selected for attention one of the spiritualists-in-training who was known to use alcohol as an excuse to abuse his family physically [for whom]. San Lazaro described these behaviors in great detail before the audience, noting that the traditional Latino male role required providing support and income to the household and that abuse as a result of alcohol use was inconsistent with that role. The spirit told the audience of the unhappy contradiction between

the helping role of the spiritualist-in-training and that of an abusive husband. San Lazaro then extracted a public promise from the trainee to stop drinking and perform in a manner consistent with the traditional definition of “machismo”—care of self, family, and community. Following this sequence, the spiritualists-in-training went into a trance, and the spirit departed the body of the Madrina. The congregation then shifted to talking with one another, eating, and talking with the mediums.



This description illustrates how the guiding elements “who, what happened, where, when, why, for whom” can be incorporated into a description of an event. A more complete description of the event would include:

- a count of attendees by gender, age, and any other distinguishing features;
- a portrayal of the layout of the center;
- a description of the furnishings of the center;
- a description of how people were arranged in space over time;
- a description of the mediums-in-training and their activities;
- a full description of the Madrina’s behavior from before taking on the spirit of San Lazaro to the end of the healing session;
- the details of each healing event.

Eventually this description of a single event would be supplemented with accounts of other events taking place at the center, a history of the spiritual center, a full exploration of the material items in the center, a schedule of activities taking place there, and an explanation for each activity.

### *Counting and Census Taking*

Counting, census taking, and mapping are all ways of obtaining a more accurate picture of the presence of persons, places, and things in a setting or event series in the early stages of fieldwork when the ethnographers’ capacity in the local language is limited and translators are not


always available. These data can be collected **cross sectionally** (at one point in time) or **longitudinally** (at several time points) to show change over time.

*Counting* refers to listing and enumerating types of persons, material items, locations, or other “things” that are important in situating the event, location, or activity more accurately in the context of the community. Accurately reporting that “the block between Hillside and McDonough streets” includes seven three-story flats, one twenty-five-unit brick apartment building with three vacancies, a 150-bed nursing home, and a small corner grocery on the northwest corner allows researchers to compare structures on this block with those on other blocks along the same avenue and to document more specifically changes over time on that block.

One of the first things experienced ethnographers do whenever they enter a social event is to identify and count the social categories of people attending the event (such as artists, students, young people, couples). They also estimate how many people are there and where they are sitting or standing in relation to one another. When ethnicity, gender, and age are important dimensions of social difference, as they often are, well-trained ethnographers scan the setting to count:

- numbers of men and women;
- their approximate ages;
- whether the event is ethnically mixed (obtaining an approximate count of those whose appearance suggests specific ethnic membership).

Ethnographers observing at bars, beach hotels, and parks in Mauritius counted the number of “young” couples who entered and left on a Saturday evening over a designated (usually two-hour) period of time, compared with “older” couples. By repeating their observations over a month-long period they were able to enhance their observations with actual numbers of couples and to determine consistency of use over time. Similarly, experienced ethnographers in Hartford counted the number of heroin addicts

**Definition:**  The term *cross sectional* refers to the collection of data at a single point in time. *Longitudinal* refers to the collection of the same data from the same population at two or more points in time



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 6, on conducting research with hidden and hard-to-reach populations



**Definition:**

A census is a complete listing of a specific unit of interest to the researcher in the research setting



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 4, for a detailed discussion on the uses of spatial mapping and of GIS in ethnographic research



**Definition:**

Social differences are recognized patterns of differences in appearance, income, or lifestyle that set people apart from one another and often rank them in relation to one another



**Definition:**

An indicator is an element that researchers select from among the universe of possible behaviors, beliefs, or materials to represent a concept important in their research

on two main avenues on several occasions at three points during the day—morning, noon, and evening. By doing so, they were able to judge the best times for distributing bleach kits and recruiting injection drug users into intervention studies.

**Census taking** consists of listing every person, household unit, or other unit of interest to the researcher (reindeer, latrines, water pumps, public telephone booths, garbage dump sites, churches, bus stops) in the research setting. Conducting a census is a useful activity in any setting, although in large, urban areas, where taking a complete census is usually neither possible nor cost effective, census enumeration is conducted only in the designated areas of the city where the research will take place. Census enumeration provides ethnographers with a general picture of how a population or material items are distributed and an accurate count of research units for sampling purposes later on. Thus, only a small amount of information is collected in a census.

Where street addresses are known, household census data are generally collected with a brief survey form or enumeration sheet. Where there are no street addresses (such as in constantly growing unplanned migrant communities ringing urban areas in developing countries or in rural areas of Brazil, Sri Lanka, or Senegal), census enumerations may be conducted by placing households on a geographic map. Maps are also useful tools for enumerating other infrastructural or environmental characteristics.

### *Socioeconomic or Other Indicators of Social Difference*

**Social differences** are an important component of any study. **Indicators** of the concept “social difference” can be readily observed in any community or other social setting. Socioeconomic differences, referring to differences among individuals, families, or groups by a combination of educational level, type of employment, and income, are easy to observe and are important in most ethnographic studies. Differences in socioeconomic status among indi-

viduals and groups can be inferred through observation by a respondent's:

- choice of clothing;
- hair style;
- type and amount of jewelry;
- leisure-time activities;
- speech and language patterns;
- television program preferences;
- choice of car;
- place of residence.

Another way to observe socioeconomic differences at the community level is to look for differences in the structure of houses or homesteads or in the number and type of material items purchased with cash.



#### EXAMPLE 4.9

##### OBSERVING DIFFERENCES IN HOMESTEADS IN A RURAL RICE-GROWING AREA OF SRI LANKA

A group of researchers including the authors visited Division C of the Mahaveli Development Scheme, an internationally funded effort to move large numbers of people from their overpopulated highland villages to a newly irrigated dry zone in eastern Sri Lanka. Immigrants were given some resources to relocate and a lot for homesteading. Homesteads were arrayed along long irrigation ditches, the use of which required cooperation among homesteaders to dig the ditches and to ensure that people at both the end and the beginning of the ditch had access to water. The prosperity of households depended on cooperation over water and other factors such as alternative sources of income in addition to rice agriculture, number of workers in the household, and the health of the household.

The research team visited and walked the length of several ditches, noting the size of the house, the composition of the walls (cinder block versus mud and sticks), the materials used for roofing (palm fronds versus tin sheets), the size of the clearing around the house, the presence of fruit-bearing trees, evidence of chickens and other cash animals, and visibility of store-bought cooking utensils. These and other items were used to create a scale included in a survey instrument, which measured socioeconomic status of the household (Silva et al. 1997).



A similar procedure was used in new towns of Lima. A walk through several communities at various stages of development showed variations in household structures, including:

- straw versus cinderblock house walls;
- presence and type of roofing;
- presence and use of latrine on premises versus outside on the ground;
- presence of wooden front door;
- presence and number of windows;
- presence of a water storage tank, nearby street tap, or piped-in water;
- method of garbage disposal (dumping near the house, burning, or pickup);
- legal or illegal (wire tapped or “stolen”) source of electrical power.

These indicators were not noticeable to the inexperienced eye but quickly became obvious to researchers when community physicians pointed them out.

A visit to a small number of households often reveals the presence of a range of items purchased with disposable cash. These items will vary with the context. In developing countries, items that signify important social differences are generally those that are manufactured and represent a modernized or urban lifestyle, such as electrical appliances, television sets, motorcycles, and indoor toilets. In more affluent countries where it is common to own many such material items, some handmade goods (such as handwoven imported carpets, works of art, or finely handcrafted wooden furniture) have a similar symbolic value.



#### Key point

***It is necessary to discover beforehand which items are indicators of status differences.***



#### Cross Reference:

See chapter 3 in this book and Book 5 on the organization and management of quantitative data

Observers usually have many opportunities to ask about these items, including their cost, location of purchase, use, and importance in the life of the household. The items can be summed into quantitative indices or scales measuring wealth or level of development of the household. The qualitative data obtained through observation and interviewing help both to determine which items should be

included in the scales and to interpret the meaning of the associations between scale or index scores and other variables later on in the study.

Many other domains can be explored and clarified through observation. Formative theories will help to define what these are. However, observation in the field will always reveal new individual behaviors, social relations, material items, and other social “things” or “facts” whose meanings must be discovered through repeated observation and interviewing before they find their place in coding and conceptual taxonomies.

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 5,  
chapter 8, on the  
construction of scales  
and indices

**DECIDING WHEN TO OBSERVE**

Decisions regarding when to observe are based on many considerations. They include:

- the positionality of the observer;
- the nature of the activities being observed;
- the purposes of the observations;
- how participatory the study is;
- how rigorously structured the observations need to be;
- whether or not the observer is accompanied by a gatekeeper or key informant familiar with the setting who can smooth and explain the researcher’s presence in the study location.

In the early stages of a study, the observer may appear to be different from others in the setting and may not be known to them. Becoming a more frequent presence will make people in the research site feel more comfortable with the new person on the scene. Attending public events such as markets, parades, business or school board meetings, health fairs, and semipublic events such as pickup basketball games in local parks and on local ball courts provides opportunities to observe and be seen and should be repeated often to see whether attendance varies, new issues emerge, and new sectors of the community are represented. Observations in homes and other private settings have to be negotiated and usually are conducted in accordance with

study sampling and data-collection protocols. If the study involves a high degree of participant observation, researchers frequently may be in the field with one or another key informant, or guide. In such cases, limiting observation periods to two or three hours, or to two or three days of the week, is necessary to provide time for writing field notes and reflection. Too much information gathered in too short a time can only lead to information overload and learning/writing inefficiencies. Finally, events such as festivals or elections take place only once or twice during a fieldwork experience and should not be missed. The following example describes a large festival in Sri Lanka that occurs only once a year.

**EXAMPLE 4.10****OBSERVATION OF AN ANNUAL EVENT, THE ESALA PERAHERA**

The Esala Perahera (the Festival of the Tooth) is a magnificent festival and parade held in Kandy, Sri Lanka, each year in July or August. The festival and accompanying parade reiterates the relationship between the people and four guardian gods. The organization of the Perahera parade replicates the structure of traditional Kandian political units and caste hierarchies. Attending the parade illuminates the historical relationship between Buddhism (the celebration honors the Buddha by virtue of carrying a tooth relic through the public streets in a casket on the back of an elephant) and Hinduism in Sri Lanka (the gods are Hindu gods). The performers are positioned in accordance with old caste hierarchies, but they are actually hired cultural workers, and the attendees represent a mix of domestic and international tourists, Kandy residents, religious devotees, and contemporary performance groups. The event represents historical reconstruction, cultural reinstatement, and cultural commodification. The festival and the activities carried out to prepare for it can only be observed once a year at the scheduled times.

Many other researchers have observed and written about such annual festivals, which represent various forms of cultural contestation (Cohen 1998; Guss 1993).

### INFORMAL INTERVIEWING IN THE FIELD

Informal interviews occur all the time during participant observation. They may take place with individuals or with groups. Individuals may be those people who researchers encounter during the course of observing events and activities. Each meeting offers the ethnographer an opportunity to introduce the project, if it is in the early stages, and to ask a few questions. Over time, information compiled from the responses to these questions begins to add up to a larger picture that may form the basis for or complement other sources of information.

The informal group interview has a long history in qualitative/ethnographic research. Most field researchers who gather information in naturalistic settings find themselves at one time or another talking informally with a group about one or more topics of mutual interest. These discussions can occur in the most informal settings, or they can occur in more formalized settings that begin as an individual interview and expand to more casual conversations about related topics. Field situations provide many occasions where people gather casually, and opportunities to discuss topics of mutual interest arise. In rural areas of Sri Lanka, women gather several times a day to bathe or to wash clothing on the rocks by the side of a river. Similarly, in Lima, Peru, family members gather around a common water tap. In Kenya, Masai women walk together for four or five miles each morning and evening to obtain much needed water. Each of these gatherings provides opportunities to conduct an informal group interview. Similarly, in parts of the American South, people may gather to assist in the construction of a house or join in a softball game. In small-town Mexico in the 1970s, teachers gathered after school every Friday to drink soda and brandy and discuss the affairs of the week. In an action research program for girls nine to twelve years of age, driving them home two nights a week in a van offered the research staff an opportunity to talk with them about their lives, school, their relationships, and popular culture. In Chicago, office staff in a school change program met once a week for

**Definition:**  Informal interviews are interactive conversations that take place between researchers and others in the field settings in the course of daily activities, the general direction of which is set by the researcher

administrative purposes and generally spent fifteen minutes waiting for all of the members of the group to gather. During this time, they chatted about topics of common interest. These “interludes” or “transitions” were opportunities for both researchers and study participants to relax and let their guard down. At the same time, researchers could use them as opportunities to gather information from small groups already in conversation with each other in natural settings that could not be obtained in any other way.

In field settings participant observers or other observers sometimes can watch members of the community or institution gathered together to engage in discussions and debate that reveal differences of opinion and perspective, as well as ways in which that group deals with conflict. As informative as these occasions are, such debates or discussions do not occur very often, and if they do, the researcher may not observe them, or the topics chosen for debate by ordinary people in the course of ordinary discussion may not be those in which the researcher is interested. If this is the case, other more formalized means of collecting data are required. Below we give several examples of informal group interviews that arose spontaneously in field situations.

#### EXAMPLE 4.11

##### AN INFORMAL GROUP INTERVIEW IN A CLINIC SETTING


A group of American social scientists, including Stephen and Jean Schensul, visited a clinic in Kandy, Sri Lanka, where they expected to watch a team of Western and Ayurveda-trained physicians administer a combination of Ayurvedic *decoctions*, the liquid mixes of herbs used by Ayurvedic physicians as medicines for healing, to juvenile diabetics to reduce their dependence on injected insulin. As they were observing and learning about the record-keeping system that patients were requested to keep for physicians, a second Ayurvedic physician joined the conversation, followed by a clinic nurse and two more patients. Suddenly what was intended to be a straightforward demonstration followed by discussion with the two physicians turned into a group discussion of Ayurveda versus Western medicine, ways of working together, and ways of preparing and storing decoctions.

In this instance, the social scientists drew upon their knowledge of similar circumstances as well as their own intuitive curiosity to maximize the opportunities for discussion and debate. Each group member—there were four social scientists, three medical anthropologists, and a sociologist—had a series of questions that had to be negotiated in the context of this informal group interview.

**EXAMPLE 4.12**

## INTERVIEWING A GROUP OF VILLAGE PHYSICIANS IN RURAL CHINA

On another occasion, Jean Schensul accompanied Chinese colleagues on a field visit to a village doctor and pharmacy in a rural area of Hunan to determine the degree to which materials and information on the prevention of pneumonia had penetrated the everyday practice of physicians. The project principal investigator, a Chinese physician familiar with both Chinese and Western medicine and from that geographic area, conducted the interview. Within fifteen minutes, the pharmacy was surrounded by several hundred people. They in turn invited several other village physicians to participate in the interview. The principal investigator took advantage of the opportunity to question the other village physicians and discovered that their approaches to instruction and early symptom identification and use of nationally distributed health education materials were quite different and not necessarily consistent with the nationally promoted intervention program.



A third such example involved a member of an Institute for Community Research team who was working on a project involving older adults living in senior housing.

**EXAMPLE 4.13**TAKING ADVANTAGE OF AN OPPORTUNITY TO INTERVIEW A GROUP OF RESIDENTS  
IN SENIOR HOUSING ABOUT ORAL HEALTH CONCERNS

While setting up for a formal presentation in one senior residence, researcher Jean Schensul walked into the hallway to try to recruit residents for a presentation on oral health. She was not a Latina, but she spoke Spanish relatively fluently. Several Puerto Rican men and women were standing about in the hallway waiting or undecided about whether to join the discussion. Schensul started to chat with the residents, introducing herself and asking them about the building and who usually came to such events. Eventually one of the men described himself as an experienced

oral health educator with a former wife who had been a dentist. He began to talk with others about care of their teeth, at which point one of the women began to speak about her own oral health concerns. A third joined in with comments about difficulties in gaining access to a periodontist. This allowed the researcher to enter informally into the discussion with questions about both the concerns and reasons for access difficulties.

Most field research experiences are filled with similar opportunities in which people gather informally around an event, often stimulated by the presence of the researcher. In such situations, researchers can take advantage of the moment by asking the key members of the group a series of questions designed to

- explore a theme;
- identify differences of opinion or action across individuals (i.e., to capture the range of variation in the group);
- define terminology; and
- obtain a history of a situation or event.

When more than one field researcher is involved in the informal interview, as in the case of the first vignette, interviewers should try to be aware of one another's interests and perspectives and leave time for others to ask questions. Interviewers must always be conscious of the potential status and gender differences in the overall group and make sure that each interviewer has an opportunity to ask questions. It is important to keep in mind that these opportunities arise in the course of other activities in the field, and it is not appropriate to extend an informal interview for too long or to dominate the conversation. The idea is to retain the character of an informal discussion among friends without dominating the conversation or transforming it into an interviewer-controlled question/response session.

The best way to prepare for informal group interviews is to maintain a constant state of alertness in relation to the data to be collected in the field and to carry a small notebook or electronic device in which new ideas, questions,

hunches, and concepts can be listed. Vigilance during participant observation is the way to “find” informal individual and group interviews or to enhance the possibility that they will emerge. If researchers are continuously aware of the purpose of their research, what kinds of information are missing or need to be expanded upon, and which hunches, hypotheses, or conceptual models are emerging from field data that need to be tested or confirmed, then informal interviews can be valuable adjuncts to more formalized data collection. However, because informal opportunities to talk with groups of people occur in unpredictable ways, and at unpredictable times, ethnographers never really can be “off duty.”

### **TIPS ON RECORDING OBSERVATIONS AND INFORMAL INTERVIEWS**

We have seen that observation is critical to the conduct of good ethnographic research. The challenge for the researcher lies in the transformation of observations into field notes, which then constitute a scientific record of the experience for future reference. The more complete and accurate the field notes the easier it is for researchers to catalogue, code, and use them as data.

Writing good field notes, as we have shown in the previous chapter, involves detailed and concrete observation and recording on a regular basis. When the researcher comes from the community in which the research is taking place, or after months in the field have produced familiarity with the field environment, detailed observations seem unnecessary as “everyone knows what is going on here.” But ethnographers must remember that their field notes may not be only for themselves and that detailed notes taken over a long period of time may reveal patterns that are not obvious in episodic observations.

Some important points to remember about keeping field notes:

- It is best to stick to low-inference description. Behaviors should be defined in terms of what people actually do, rather than simply describing a group of



people as “bored” or “hostile.” These terms may be interpreted differently by different readers. Rather, researchers should write that the people were fidgeting with a pencil, tapping their fingers on a table, and keeping their eyes downcast in a meeting. Or that they were frowning, avoiding the researcher’s gaze and shaking their walking sticks at the researcher. Whether or not the people are showing boredom, disagreement, anger, frustration, or disinterest is a matter of inference, not something that can be directly observed. Researchers should describe the behavior and avoid attributing meaning to it in the field notes until they discover what the behavior communicates to others in the setting.

- Descriptions of individuals should include details of appearance, clothing, shoes, carriage, items carried by the person, and indicators of the status of the material items. Thus, rather than describing a person in the train station as “poor and disheveled,” it would be more accurate to describe the person as “dressed in blue jeans with shredded edges, an army jacket with dirt spots on the back and a torn collar, no belt, a white T-shirt with red smudges around the collar and shoes with ripped edges, carrying a grease-covered bulging backpack and a paper bag full of newspapers.” People at the farewell party for the local newspaper editor might be elegantly dressed, but unless the ethnographer described what they were wearing, we would have no idea of the meaning of elegance in that environment.
- The physical state of the environment also should be described as if through the lens of a camera. A classroom might be described as bright and warm with a great deal of visual stimulation, but the readers would understand the description better if it noted that “the walls are painted in warm shades of yellow and orange. Three of the four walls have collections of between ten and twenty photographs, posters, children’s drawings, and writing samples. Some of the writing samples are on colored construction



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 5,  
chapter 5, on low-  
inference descriptors

paper. Others are accompanied by colorful outlines, frames or drawings.”

Pelto and Pelto offer the following good advice: “In every case the fieldworker should describe the observations themselves rather than the low level inferences derived from the observations” (Pelto and Pelto 1978, 71). *Inferences, and personal observations, reflections, hunches, and emotional reactions of the field researcher, can be recorded separately from the stream of field notes that describes the event or situation.*

Observers can note their observations using whatever short-hand mnemonic devices they prefer. We generally do not advise using computers in the field for recording observations because the sound of the keyboard is intrusive and in some settings new technology may be distracting. We also caution against carrying portable computers in vehicles used for transportation to and from field sites, despite their convenience for typing field notes in between site visits. Portable computers and the field notes stored in them are readily stolen, a situation that can violate confidentiality and place both researchers and residents at risk. While memory and recall improve with practice, no ethnographer should depend on memory alone for reconstructing field notes, especially as memory is selective and easily biased, and recall diminishes notably after twenty-four hours even on important topics.

Readers should note the following typical features of good field notes:

- Exact quotes are included with selected words to convey to the readers a sense of being there and meeting the actors in the scene.
- Pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.
- The observation notes describe the activities in the sequence in which they happened.
- Researchers avoid high-inference description; they describe appearance of the people and places without making any low-level inferences about the meaning of the appearance.

#### Key point



#### Cross Reference:



See this book, previous chapters and Book 5, chapter 2, for a discussion of inscription, description, and transcription as ways of organizing and recording observational data

#### Cross Reference:



See Book 5, chapter 2, on data recording and memory loss



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 5,  
chapters 4, 5, and 6, for  
approaches to coding  
qualitative data

- The notes included relevant history related to incidents or individuals to situate the event.
- Researchers have differentiated their own summary of the events and conversation from the direct quotes of the speakers.
- The date, place, time, and name of the researcher are recorded at the top of the set of notes.

These notes are compiled along with others into a database of observations and informal interviews with respondents in inside and outside locations. The notes have been content coded by domains, factors, and variables as well as themes and other conceptual codes. They will be analyzed by seeking associations among units, patterns, and structures.



**Cross  
Reference:**  
Book 5, chapters  
7, 10, and 11

### DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES IN FIELD OBSERVATIONS

The buzz and complexity of most settings in which ethnographers engage in participatory or other forms of observation call for a number of skills and techniques to ensure focus, direction, and proper recording for later analysis. Researchers should always keep in mind where they are in the evolution of their field experience. In the early weeks and months, much information will be collected that serves mainly to orient the researcher and will not be helpful later in deepening understanding of the study topic. As the study moves on, observations will be more directed toward pertinent contextual factors and individual actors, scripts, and events that are more specifically related to the study topic. Careful note taking, recording, and rereading of field notes, maps, and other materials collected in the field will be helpful in identifying important themes and trends to follow over time. Participant observation and informal interviewing in the field requires good social skills, local language capacity if possible, or a good coresearcher/translator, regular documentation, and, most of all, immersion in the study experience and regular reflection and note taking on the patterns that appear to be emerging from the research.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter we have reviewed techniques and approaches to open-ended observations and informal interviewing in field settings. To summarize, participant observation and informal interviewing are useful:

- to document the first stages of entry into a new field situation;
- to gather information on as-yet-undefined concepts or cultural domains identified as important in the formative theoretical model or set of research questions and hypotheses guiding the study;
- to identify new cultural domains that can be added to enrich the formative theoretical model;
- to provide descriptive information that can enrich and complement the interpretation of any quantitative data gathered by the study.

In-depth interviewing fulfills some of the same purposes. However, the interviewing and recording techniques used for in-depth or exploratory interviewing and the circumstances under which these interviews take place are often different. In the next chapter we turn to the techniques and uses of in-depth exploratory interviewing.

*Introduction  
Social and  
Other Forms  
of Mapping  
Eliciting  
Information  
through Objects,  
Drawings,  
Materials, and  
Photographs  
Timelines  
Organizational  
Charts  
Summary*

# 5

## ADDITIONAL METHODS FOR COLLECTING EXPLORATORY DATA

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### INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter we described some basic concepts, techniques, and approaches to open-ended observations in field settings through participant observation. We have said that participant observation and informal interviewing and counting and tracing events are important in documenting the first stages of entry into a new field situation. These activities help to gather information on new and unformulated concepts or cultural domains that are important in initial theoretical models and research questions. In this chapter, we describe some additional data-collection tools and approaches that can be useful in the initial states of research and also can be used for tracking purposes in evaluative studies or over the course of a long period of time in the field. These include various forms of mapping, using material culture to elicit responses, and organizational charts and timelines.

### SOCIAL AND OTHER FORMS OF MAPPING

In 1978, Pelto and Pelto noted that “it is a source of constant surprise that many ethnographic reports do not contain maps of the physical setting within which social

behavior takes place. Such maps should locate major action settings (e.g., ball fields, religious places, marketplaces), social divisions of the community, agricultural areas, directions and distances of neighboring communities and major natural features such as rivers, mountains and swamps” (Pelto and Pelto 1978, 193). Ethnographic mapping is still underused and constitutes an important first activity in getting to know a city neighborhood, a rural community, or any other sociogeographic area. There are several forms of mapping and combinations of mapping plus interviewing that are very useful in the initial stages of a field study, as well as later on to confirm identified spatial-social patterns. These may include interactive forms of social mapping; the use of hand-drawn maps of streets, parks, schools, classrooms, and other locations; or **Geographic Information System (GIS)–based spatial mapping**.

### *Interactive Social Mapping*

Social mapping involves talking with individuals or a small group to discover locations of importance to the study topic and how residents connect to and think about these locations and the geosocial or activity spaces that connect them (Chirowodza et al. 2009). The following example of a social mapping interview with village health nurses (VHN) in India produced a substantial amount of information about abortions in the local population. The following excerpts from Lakshmi Ramachandran’s field notes give the flavor of how this data-gathering technique was used to map the village health nurses’ area. The names of village health nurses, doctors, and villages have been changed to pseudonyms. Her own comments are differentiated from her field notes, as indicated in parentheses.

#### **Cross**

#### **Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 4, for a discussion of how to use mapping and GIS in ethnographic research



#### **Definition:**

GIS refers to Geographic Information System, a computerized means of organizing quantitative data in space



#### **EXAMPLE 5.1**

#### USING SOCIAL MAPPING TO OBTAIN INFORMATION ABOUT ACCESSIBILITY TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE

Lakshmi: Tell me all about your villages and how they are distributed. (I took out my big sheet of paper and started drawing a circle.) This is for my own understanding, and to help me visualize the community. We will draw the map together. I will

draw the map, of course roughly, but you help me in putting the information in the right place; OK?

Prabha: I have 6 villages (Note: I drew six circles) so you draw 6 circles and then I will give you the names of the villages and you fill in those circles. The villages are the following: Tirukampatti (3,200 population); the subcentre is located in this village. The government has given me the building.

(I filled in this information in one of the circles I had drawn in the centre. After recording this information I asked Prabha what I should write next.)

Prabha: Write Kendaipalyam. (She pointed to one circle and asked me to write Devannapuram. She next pointed with her finger and asked me to write Nanja, Koundan, Pudur, Dhorkatha, and finally Palayur. I completed filling the circles, recording the information, that is, writing in the names of the villages.)

(Then Prabha started telling me the distances from the subcentre to each of the 6 villages. She told me that the distance between Kendaipalyam and the subcenter was 2 kms; between Palayur and subcenter 4 kms. The other 3 villages were between one and a half to 2 kilometers from the center.)

Lakshmi: Could you please show me the places or locations where there are private practitioners or nursing homes doing MTP (i.e., abortions).

Prabha: (Pointing to the half-drawn map; she began to give me information about all the private doctors and nursing homes surrounding in her area. She pointed towards Palayur.) It is 10 kms from Pattaupalyam Taluka hospital; then in the same direction there are a cluster of private (pvt) nursing homes. She said: Write Dr. Girija, Dr. Subha, Dr. Purushothaman, Dr. Hariharan, private nursing home physicians. After this string was completed, she then shifted the pointer to the East of Palayur. Another big cluster of private doctors surrounded this area. She gave me the names of those doctors. Tenmozi a private gynecologist, 15 kms from Palayur Taramadai PHC, and Dr. Jayaram, Dr. Rangaraj, Dr. Malarkodi, all private physicians and Linnama, a private unlicensed practitioner. Coimbatore Medical College is 50 KMS away from her area.

Lakshmi: Do you know anything about Linnama?

Prabha: Yes I know her; she is an unqualified provider. She does illegal abortions and many women go to her. Knowing she is unqualified, I do not refer any of my clients to her. I have not met her either. But many people in the surrounding area have reported to me about her.

(At this point in the interview I was writing in my notebook. The map remained in front of them, as an orienting system. At any time, I could return to the map; but at this point, I was writing everything into the small notepad.)

Lakshmi: Have you come across any post abortion complication cases in the last two years?

Prabha: No, I have not come across any such cases.

Lakshmi: OK, now do you have any other episodes or interesting stories to narrate which are recent ones?

Prabha: Yes, just two weeks ago, one of my clients from the subcentre area came to me looking for help. The client is around 25 years old. She was pregnant and wanted a termination. I asked her, how this could happen? Because I know her family very well. She is poor and a construction worker. Her husband is also a construction worker but not here, but works in Ooty. He comes and meets her once in three or four months. My client did not hide [her condition] and she narrated this story to me. As usual she had gone to her construction site. She had to stay over night in the construction site area. She said that she got her payment very late and it was raining and was getting dark. She told me that she had sex with her male co worker that night. When she approached me she was 10 weeks pregnant and she wanted a termination.

I referred to the camp schedule [i.e., laparoscopic sterilization camps] to see if there were any site close by I could take her to. The camp dates were not suitable for us to wait because that would cause unnecessary delay. I had no other choice except to take her to the Coimbatore Medical College, where women are routinely sterilized after a pregnancy termination. I advised my client to get back to me and I informed her I now had to find out other places. She agreed and went home. The client went home and informed her mother that she was pregnant and that she would go for a termination and also get sterilized afterwards. The mother did not know that the pregnancy was caused by her daughter's co-worker. The mother did not give consent for sterilization. The client already has two children, but the mother did not like the idea of sterilization.

Prabha said that the client did not have any choice. If I take her to Coimbatore Medical College she had to undergo sterilization. She was not ready to have a sterilization. I could not take her to the private doctors because they are very expensive and she cannot afford the cost. The client was in trauma because she did not want her mother to find out that her pregnancy was illegitimate. I was equally worried and was thinking what possibilities there were for helping her.

The client had heard about Linnama, whose business is only handling such illegal terminations. Linnama has her private practice away from the main city of

Coimbatore. She is quite well-known in the surrounding area. Many poor women who cannot afford the cost of going to big nursing homes or private clinics go to Linnama. [The story ends with the woman going to Linnama for abortion, without consulting Prabha.]

Lakshmi summarizes with this description of her work area, based on the mapping interview.

The map of the village health nurse has a population of 3200 spread out unevenly in 6 villages. There are two government facilities located in opposite directions; one is an intermediate referral facility—Taluka—10 kms away, and the other—the Community Ministry Center—is a tertiary facility 55 kms from the subcentre. The Primary Health Care Center is 15 kms from the SC. According to village health nurse, there are no qualified private doctors or clinics in the subcentre area/villages. There is one unqualified provider, Linnama, who is accessible to all the villages. The village health nurse said people from her villages go to Linnama on their own. But she does not refer any of her clients to her, even though she has come across no post abortion complication cases [from this provider] in the last two years.



Ramachandran initially began the mapping technique to get a clear picture of the microlevel data about abortion services seen from the village and village health nurse perspective. However, she found that the nurses' conceptual maps reached beyond their microlevel concerns at the individual and village levels—and linked to broader referral systems at the intermediate and macrolevels—that of the region and general health care facilities. Furthermore, these conceptual mappings showed complex intermingling of the private and government sectors. Thus, the technique of mapping plus interviewing provides a powerful analytic device for understanding the linkages and networking between the microlevel and macrolevel of the abortion services. The techniques used by Lakshmi to stimulate discussion about the location and provision of clinical, abortion, and sterilization services to women in southern India can be used with other sorts of elicitation materials for open-ended interviews with adults and children.

*Use of Hand-drawn Maps, Prepared Maps to Scale, and GIS Maps*

Other commonly used mapping strategies include hand-drawn maps of locations important to the study; the use of prepared maps to scale on which to record specific sites, buildings, activity centers, and other locations; and GIS-based maps, which are generally used with more complex databases to show the spatial distribution of social or environmental “problems” such as areas of concentrated poverty, toxic waste, or groups of high-risk activities (Brennan-Horley and Gibson 2009; Cromley and Lafferty 2002; Matthews, Detwiler, and Burton 2005).

Figure 5.1 shows a street map. Any observer can construct such a map by walking down a main or residential street in a neighborhood and noting the location and approximate size of buildings, their function, appearance, whether or not they appear to be residences or businesses, and anything else about them seemingly relevant to the research topic. An easy way to do this is to number the buildings on the drawing itself and to keep a set of observations for each of the buildings.

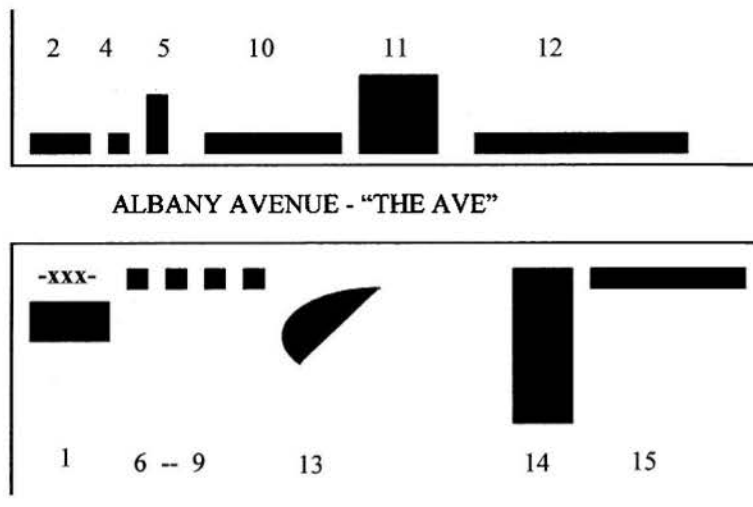


FIGURE 5.1 Map of One Block in Hartford’s North End



Ethnographers walking down the main avenue (the “Ave”) in North Hartford, Connecticut, would note that the map in Figure 5.1 refers to the block between Blue Hills and Homestead. The first building on the left (1) is an office building that houses the Urban League of Greater Hartford and some other businesses. Opposite is an elementary school (2). Beside the elementary school is a branch of the public library (4), and beside it is a three-story flat (5). Buildings 6 through 9 are single-family homes; residents of 6 and 7 are small groups of three and four men who know each other. Buildings 10 through 12 are the three buildings that together constitute North Hartford’s middle school complex; building 13 is a small park where male teens gather in the back to shoot baskets and mothers bring their small children to play on the swings on the street side. The remainder of the buildings on the block are boarded up and may be marked for demolition by the city.

The symbol “-XXX-” on the map marks the location where a car, chased by the police, bounced into and wrapped itself around a telephone pole. A crowd gathered while the driver and passenger extricated themselves and ran down a side street chased by the police, leaving observers to wonder what was happening. This map records the context of the event. The event occurred as ethnographers were observing the block, so both were recorded on the ethnographers’ map. These data constitute an important descriptive backdrop to additional events that may eventually be observed on the street.

We could go on to indicate sites where young mothers shop or stop to talk with their babies, where empty syringes can be found, locations where teenagers “hang out” and shoot basketball, places where alcohol is purchased by underage teens, locations where members of the diverse ethnic groups that reside in this part of the city gather (for example, West Indian/Caribbeans, Haitians, African Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans, routes taken by mothers accompanying their children to school, and other people, places and things that can be located in space. All of these bits of data, collected and accumulated over time, provide the building blocks for a constructed history

and description of life on one of the fifteen blocks that constitute the heart of the North End's commercial strip.

The hand-drawn maps in Figures 5.2 and 5.3 show how the ethnographer located groupings of individuals in clusters in a community park where a health fair was occurring. The clusters are numbered by group (GP) and number (1–5). Each grouping consists of a booth or table, with people gathered around it. Readers can note a dramatic increase in the number of participants attending the fair from the time at which the map in Figure 5.2 was drawn—9:30 a.m.—to the point at which the map in Figure 5.3 was drawn at 1:30 p.m. The maps also give a rough indication of which booths were most “popular” at each point, as suggested by the relative number of X’s from one time point to another and from one booth to another. The field notes associated with this map identify the possible reasons for the groupings;

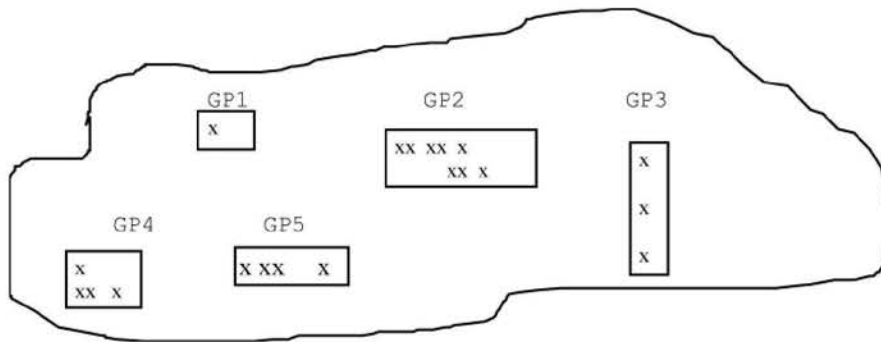


FIGURE 5.2 Community Health Fair, 9:30 a.m.

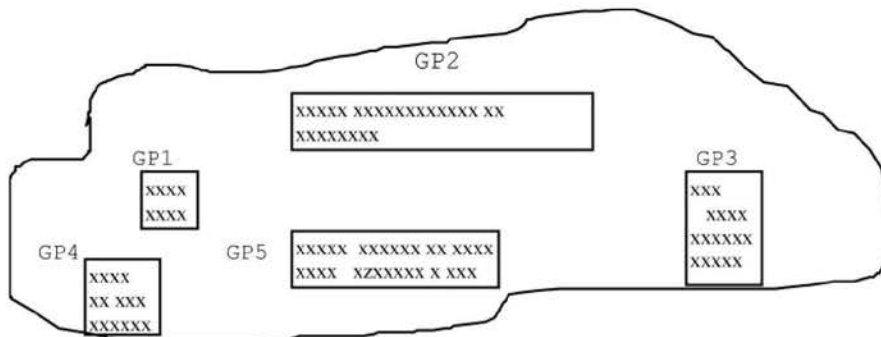


FIGURE 5.3 Community Health Fair, 1:30 p.m.

what, if anything, differentiates the members of each cluster; how many people altogether are present; and any observed relationships between individuals in clusters and among the clusters themselves.

**EXAMPLE 5.2****MAPPING BARS AND RESTAURANTS IN A CENTRAL DOWNTOWN AREA**

The same researchers who were preparing to recruit customers who were using Ecstasy, a mind-altering drug, from downtown clubs and bars in Hartford were instructed to draw their own street map. They located every bar, restaurant, club, and other possible entertainment site on a large map that they drew together, and with others on the study team, on newsprint. The entire team discussed the locations and anything anyone knew about each of them. The master map allowed them to make decisions about which locations to tackle on each field night and to consider the possible ways in which sites were related through management, bouncers, customers, or planning for special nights. They could then test their hunches by observing the flow of customers from one location to another on weekday and weekend nights, by talking with bouncers and bartenders about “regulars,” and by determining whether there was competition and/or cooperation among entertainment sites.

Classrooms also can be mapped. Different arrangements of desks and chairs and blackboards; the type, array, location, and accessibility of educational materials; and the placement of a teacher’s desk are all important pieces of evidence in interpreting the story of social relations in the classroom, the teacher’s choice of instructional techniques, and the degree to which multiple learning styles are considered.

**EXAMPLE 5.3****COMBINING THE MAPPING OF SMOKELESS TOBACCO OUTLETS IN MUMBAI WITH INTERVIEWS**

A team of researchers from the National Institute of Reproductive Health in Mumbai working with the Institute for Community Research in Mumbai were in the initial stages of collecting community data for their study of smokeless tobacco use among women of reproductive age. They used their own detailed hand-drawn map of the study community in Mumbai as the basis upon which to locate local landmarks and smokeless tobacco outlets—places where residents could purchase a vari-

ety of smokeless tobacco products. At first they placed a dot on the map representing every location they could see that sold smokeless tobacco products. Sometimes tobacco-selling stores were obvious because packets of tobacco were displayed in strips above or on the counter tops. At other times, loose tobacco was stored within and was not obvious from the street, so they had to converse with the shop sellers and owners. As they continued to map, to describe the outlets in their field notes, and to talk with shop owners, they found that there was considerable variation among different types of outlets. They identified five main types of outlets—*paan* shops (selling betel leaves with areca nut, slaked lime, and tobacco), general stores selling packaged and bulk tobacco, wholesale outlets selling bulk tobacco in larger amounts as well as other forms of tobacco, and tea shops and dairy bars (places where residents stopped for a milk drink) that also sold tobacco. They devised different symbols to represent each of these types of distributors and a legend for the map. The map thus showed the location of different types of points of sale of smokeless tobacco products, and from that map it was possible to calculate the density of these locations in relation to space and to population in different subcommunities in the study area (Figure 5.4).

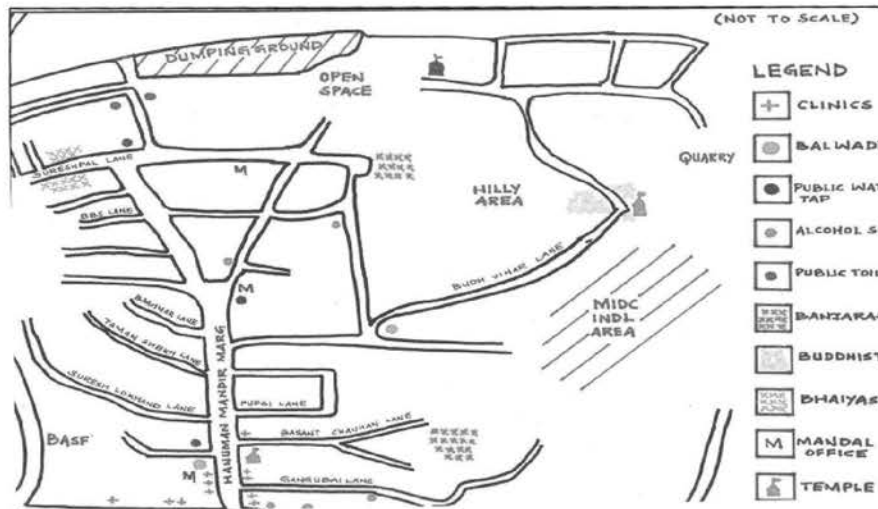


FIGURE 5.4 Hand-drawn Map of an Urban Low-income Area of Mumbai

EXAMPLE 5.4

USING A GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEM (GIS) TO INTRODUCE CHILDREN TO SOCIAL MAPPING

In an interesting experiment designed to introduce children to social mapping and the use of GIS systems, fourth graders working on an action research project with the Institute for Community Research decided to consider the interaction of ethnicity

and gender among classrooms on their floor of the school building. First, they created hand-drawn maps of the location of the classrooms on their floor. They then transposed the classroom maps into a computerized data file. Next they collected information on the ethnicity and gender of teachers and students in each classroom and entered these data into an additional database. Using ARCGIS software, a desktop software program for mapping environmental, demographic, and social variables, they then were able to link the databases to demonstrate variations across classrooms



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 4, on GIS use in ethnography

by gender and ethnicity of children and teachers. This visual display allowed them to make inferences about the degree to which teacher/student matching on these variables was occurring in their school and to discuss whether or not mismatch made a difference in the quality of education.

Mapping can be combined with other activities in the field including photography, interviewing, or the use of brief surveys to provide more insight into the location of specific activities, sites, or associations on a map.

**EXAMPLE 5.5**

**MAPPING THE HUSTLING OF PRODUCTS IN A NORTHEASTERN CITY**

In another study carried out by young people in the Youth Action Research Institute of the Institute for Community Research, Hartford, Connecticut, trained high-school-aged youth used interviews to find out what types of products were “hustled” (that is, pirated, diverted, or illegally sold) and where they were sold. First the youth listed the items they knew were hustled. Then they located places on a Hartford street map where they thought hustling took place. Finally, using a street map, they interviewed a convenience sample of youth from different parts of the city to find out what items these youth knew were being sold, either from direct sources or personal observation, and in which specific locations they were sold. The items were color coded, and respondents used stickers to mark the locations on the map where each type of item was sold. The data were amalgamated, and the ensuing consolidated map showed “hot spots” where specific types of goods were hustled in many neighborhoods in the city (Morgan et al. 2004).

Mapping activities are more intrusive than they may seem at first glance, especially if they take place in more private places or in places where illegal or semilegal activities may be going on. Counting house sites while walking from one residential hamlet to another in rural hill country, Sri Lanka, is highly visible, and it is likely to appear suspicious or even threatening to villagers who have not met the researcher and do not know what he or she is doing. The following example illustrates a circumstance in which mapping was not only not possible but also dangerous.

#### EXAMPLE 5.6

##### WHEN MAPPING THROUGH OBSERVATION WAS TOO DANGEROUS TO UNDERTAKE

One of the first tasks LeCompte wanted to carry out in Pinnacle, the town where she did a five-year study of the school district, was to create a map of major institutions in the community. Many public places were easily accessible. From driving through the town, LeCompte learned that most commercial enterprises such as hotels, the grocery store, a trading post, and several restaurants were located along the highways that intersected in a “T” in the middle of town, along with the post office, offices of the tribal polices, the state highway department, the offices for subsidized housing, a large field where the weekly flea market was held, and the clinic. Located in a large, fenced compound on the north-south highway were the compound of the Indian boarding school and all the public school buildings and its district headquarters, with the exception of the elementary school, which was down a main side road next to the Indian Health Services office and hospital compound. Other features, such as the water plant and the city dump, also were accessible.

However, housing in Pinnacle was exceedingly segregated, by ethnicity and by occupation. Only Navajo people from the Pinnacle area could own land in the town, so the major employers provided housing in compounds for their non-Navajo staff and for Indian staff not from the area. This housing was arranged in large, walled compounds, one next to the education buildings for teachers and educational staff, another across the highway from the public school complex for the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school staff, one attached to the hospital for their staff, and one adjacent to the public school complex for employees of the nearby coal mine. A fifth small complex was located within the compound of the elementary school.

Mapping the location of these areas was fairly easy, but adding any details encountered hostility. Most local Navajo lived on “the hill,” an area west of the main highway. This also was where most churches, some small stores, and the community gardens were located, as well as an area where local Indian men gathered to

drink illegally. Nonlocals were welcome only in the public areas and in housing compounds related to their employment. LeCompte could “hang out” around the schools and the teacher housing, and in any of the public areas, including the flea market on the east side of the highway. However, even going by car onto the “hill” was greeted with suspicion, although LeCompte had been working in the community as a consultant to the school district for several years. Rocks were thrown, and feedback from local people made it clear that nonlocals should not venture out of their designated areas. Doing house-to-house mapping was out of the question, even in the compounds where many non-Indians lived; a map including major roads and institutions such as churches was assembled only after many months of talking to local teachers and making forays through town by car in the company of a Navajo teacher aide. Fortunately, a detailed map of the community was not necessary data for LeCompte’s study of district instructional practices.

The research team of Schensul, Schensul, and Velazquez encountered similar problems while they were conducting health surveys among contracted laborers living in migrant labor encampments in Homestead, Florida. Resident camps were privately owned, and researchers entering them to map and enumerate households without owners’ permission exposed themselves and their respondents to the threat of violence from owners’ security patrols.

Yet, counting and mapping the number of vendors’ stands and the range of products available in a public market in rural Mexico is very unobtrusive, as many people purchase items at the market and the vendors come from all over the central part of the country and are accustomed to strangers. The same would be true of researchers wishing to map formal and street-vendor activities in downtown New York City flea markets.

### **ELICITING INFORMATION THROUGH OBJECTS, DRAWINGS, MATERIALS, AND PHOTOGRAPHS**

Ethnographers who are new in the field often find it difficult to develop initial appropriate questions. Similarly, people who are encountered in the course of participant observation may be unable to quickly devise answers to questions about the reasons for their behaviors, what oth-

ers are doing, or what is going on around them. Making use of everyday materials and objects as a spur to conversation is a tactic ethnographers can readily use to ease such situations and gain information about bits and pieces of local culture. The mapping situation we described earlier, in which student researchers walked through a marketplace in central Mexico and asked the vendors where their products came from, was an entry point to conversation that allowed them to learn quite a lot about the products. By asking about each product, they could find out where the product was grown, if it was seasonal, how much it cost to purchase in bulk, where the product was purchased, how much the vendor made on the product on a typical Sunday, and what the vendor did with perishable products after packing them up. After asking the same questions about several different products, the researchers could use the conversation as a platform to talk about a typical week, vendor routes, and the circumstances of the family. The items constituted the basis for learning about market economies, market routes, vendor routines, and family practices.

Drawings are another way to find out how people think or feel about a topic. In 2010, National Public Radio broadcast a story about how Vietnamese shrimpers in the United States suffered from the aftermath of the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The second-generation bilingual Vietnamese American lawyer who was advocating on behalf of the shrimpers found that many of them were unable to articulate their anger about how their lives and health had been changed because of their inability to continue fishing in Gulf waters. Given a chance, however, they were able to draw pictures that clearly expressed their feelings and opinions; the pictures allowed the reporter to elicit answers to her questions (see <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126863820>).

In the following example, we describe how young people portray their experiences with a new drug, Ecstasy (or MDMA) in their community. In this example, researchers asked participants individually and in group discussions to portray in graphics and then to describe orally what they believe have been typical experiences with the use of this drug.

**EXAMPLE 5.7**

## ELICITING CULTURAL-LEVEL EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE USE OF MDMA (ECSTASY)

In Jean Schensul's National Institute on Drug Abuse–funded study of MDMA in Hartford, the study team asked everyone in a focus group setting to take a piece of paper and draw stories of a situation they had heard about that involved the use of Ecstasy. Some story-drawings were very elaborate and included words, and others were simpler and did not. The participants' own stories then formed the basis for sharing information with the rest of the group about situations in which Ecstasy was used. The strategy avoided the tendency to embellish narratives and helped participants to think more deeply about what they knew. Two kinds of situations emerged from these discussions: those with unhappy or disastrous endings, and those in which participants enjoyed and benefited from their use of the drug.


**EXAMPLE 5.8**

## USING AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL FOR TEACHING RISK-AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES TO SIXTH GRADERS

In an Institute for Community Research NIDA–funded study in cooperation with the New Haven School System and Yale University that introduced social development skills and substance abuse prevention and cooperative learning strategies to sixth graders in New Haven, Connecticut, Jean Schensul and her team used an “ecological model”—concentric circles in which the students were asked to place themselves in the center. The next circle out from the center represented family, the next peers, the next school, the next community, and the farthest circle out represented the media. They were asked to identify people or resources that helped them to avoid “trouble” and supported them and those who encouraged them to “get into trouble” and to write the reasons why and how each group influenced them. These materials formed the basis for class discussion and for analysis of risk-avoidance and risk-oriented elements in students' lives. An example of ecological modeling can be found in Morgan et al. (2004).

Social mapping is a form of elicitation that uses a group drawing exercise to invite people to draw their community, school, or clinic from the point of view of a particular process or set of activities. The process results in a symbolic portrayal of a story that follows a spatial route. It could be described as the creation of a cultural level **activity space** (Witten, Hiscock, Pearce, and Blakely 2008). Thus it is not technically a geographic mapping process

and is not intended to produce a technically accurate map. Lakshmi Ramachandran used this technique, however, as described in Example 5.1, to determine the routes that women took through the community (and beyond) when seeking voluntary pregnancy termination in south India. They drew a map that showed a pathway from the first source of information through various service agencies to the camps where voluntary terminations were being conducted. During the discussion the women had different opinions about which sources of information were better, where the camps were held, and what steps needed to be taken when they arrived. The discussion produced a great deal of information about how women made decisions about seeking voluntary pregnancy terminations, whom they spoke to, and what resources were available to assist them. It also provided information on which of the women might be better informed and might be willing to act as key informants later on.

**Definition:**  An activity space at the cultural level is defined as the area in which community or group activities take place. At the individual level it is the geographic area in which an individual in the study conducts activities related to the specific topic of the study

#### EXAMPLE 5.9

##### USING SOCIAL-MAPPING STRATEGIES IN A STUDY OF YOUNG WOMEN'S EVENING ACTIVITIES

Jean Schensul and Rey Bermudez also used informal social mapping when interviewing young adults in a youth and drug study conducted in 2001 to 2005 in Hartford about what they did when they went out on a weekend night. The interviewing process combined a timeline with social mapping. The researchers asked when they first thought about going out with their friends. They differentiated going to someone's house from going "out" to a bar or club. Pursuing the bar-club route, Schensul asked what the young women did first, then what they did at each step until they went home. As they responded Schensul was able to ask additional questions about whom they interacted with, how much the activities cost, how long they stayed in a specific place, what substances they used, how they got them, and what they did/where they went after the club closed.

Through these preliminary interviewing strategies, the researchers discovered three typical types of social events: going to someone's house, going to a less expensive club or bar once a week or so, and going out to a more expensive club once a month or less for special events. For the first type of activity, they discovered that a typical pathway was to call a friend, meet the friend at either of their houses, call other friends, go to purchase alcohol, purchase or obtain weed or marijuana, and finally end up at someone's house for the evening. The typical pathway to the second type of evening began in the same way with the purchase

of alcohol, but not marijuana. If the decision was to go to a bar or club, the group would drink more before arriving at the destination. Arriving with “their high on,” they would typically purchase one drink and nurse it through the evening to keep their “high” up and the cost low.


### TIMELINES

Personal and community timelines are another excellent strategy for collecting individual- and community-level data and learning about their interaction. Personal timelines ask the respondent to identify key events in their lives overall, or in the past thirty days or twenty-four hours. Community timelines are often negotiated within community groups and reflect the history of the community that is shared among respondents. The tools for eliciting timelines can be very simple, as simple as a line with years demarcated on it that may (or may not) be relevant to the study.

Personal/individual timelines invite individuals to situate important events in their lives on a timeline. The timeline can be demarcated in decades or other artificially imposed periods, or it may be demarcated in accordance with critical events that mark important moments or transitions in a life. To operationalize the personal timeline, the ethnographer will ask the respondent to identify by year the major events that demarcate important life transitions and events. The specific events and transitions can either be chosen by the participants based on their own preferences or imposed by the researcher in accordance with the conceptual framework informing the study, or both. In a general life history, the events might cover a wide spectrum. In a more focused investigation, the respondent might be asked to focus on a particular condition or situation and the events and contributing factors that were associated with it, either before, during, or after. Ethnographers can amalgamate these individual timelines into a group history, or group members can present and discuss their own timelines, see the patterns and commonalities of experience that emerge, and work with the ethnographer to create their own group narrative.

 **EXAMPLE 5.10****USING PERSONAL TIMELINES TO DETERMINE TURNING POINTS  
IN THE DEVELOPING CAREER OF MUSICIANS**

LeCompte was interested in how and when talented young violinists decided to “turn professional.” It seemed to her that raw talent was only part of the decision, but LeCompte did not know what other factors might be contributors. She did personal interviews with a group of college students in an international class for advanced violin performance, asking each of them to discuss such things as when they began lessons, whether or not they received training through public- or private-sector venues, what their initial career aspirations were and at what stage in life they occurred, and what they thought were the key points in their musical development so far. LeCompte also asked them what distinguished an amateur from a professional musician, whether or not they “felt like professionals,” and if so, what made them feel that way. The students drew timelines, locating key events on them, and by comparing across these timelines and associated data, LeCompte was able to determine that at least for these young people, getting paid for their work, being accepted into the studio of a good teacher, engaging in solo performance, and winning a competition were key determining factors in whether or not they decided to “turn pro.”



It is always possible to ask participants to use photographs, images, dates, and artifacts to represent important periods in their life histories. When members of the same cultural, national, or geographically identified group are asked to create their own timelines, they, along with the ethnographer, often quickly find that they have shared many experiences. These shared experiences and patterns are of interest both to the ethnographer and the group, especially if the group is new or does not have a shared written history.

Individual timelines can be matched with community timelines. Community timelines are constructed by individuals or groups specifically to record the history of the community. They provide community-level, rather than individual-level, data. Researchers may start the community timeline process by asking when the group arrived in the study location. This will generally provoke much discussion of ethnographic interest including immigration/migration



and arrival stories that can be reflected in or matched against a community timeline. Next, major community-level events are positioned on the community timeline. These might involve evictions of large numbers of people from housing, the establishment of a political presence, the election of a member of the community to a political position, the removal of a mural of great community symbolic interest, or the death or firing of a key community spokesperson. It is advantageous to talk with different sectors of the community in question about community timelines because historical observations, experiences, and recorded events may differ. These differences offer important ethnographic data as well as historical documentation for the community itself.

More elaborate timelines can be used to collect quite specific data about patterns of dietary intake, alcohol or drug consumption, participation in political activities, or other behaviors that occur repeatedly in a relatively short period of time. These timelines are considered important in assisting respondents to reflect on the frequency and amount or intensity of the practice or use and to situate their behavior in a context that includes other people, locations, and other activities. Alcohol studies that document “critical events,” times when alcohol is drunk during a thirty-day period, use a timeline follow-back technique. Respondents are asked to locate important events and milestones on a thirty-day calendar and are then asked when, where, why, how often, how much, and what they drank in relation to these events or milestones. When the “calendar” is filled in, both have a fairly clear idea of how important drinking, sexual or drug use, the presence of important cultural symbols, or political activity is in their lives by virtue of the frequency with which it appears in interviews and the other elements that are associated with it. These data can even be quantified to answer questions about the mean amount of use or activity that occurs within a period of time, for one or more respondents. And they can be sequenced over the thirty-day period to identify patterns of regularity/irregularity, increase to decrease, how often a condom or needle is used and with how many people, and so on. Learning the ethnographic context before conducting a timeline follow-back exercise is not mandatory; how-

ever, without doing so, the ethnographer cannot ask good contextual questions about these critical events.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL CHARTS**

Every formal institution or organization has an organizational chart. These organizational charts represent the formal organization of the entity. They are very useful for researchers because they identify formal offices, individuals that occupy them, and relationships among departments and sectors of the organization. This may apply to entities such as cities, too. It is important to understand that what is formalized on paper is not necessarily what is operationalized on the ground. If ethnographers really want to understand how organizations function, they must use organizational charts to observe how people relate, and when, and they must ask people in key positions in the chart what they do, how they do it, and how they relate to others within the organization. City and state governments and other institutions also generate organizational charts.

We believe that organizational charts, like kinship charts that represent the organization of relationships in family networks, can be of great help to ethnographers who wish to learn about the formal and informal structures and relationships within an organization. It is helpful to remember that these charts are in constant flux, and that power relationships, and the responsibilities and duties implied by the formal chart may not resemble what actually occurs in practice. Often people such as secretaries and assistants to directors, whose formal status seems low as denoted by the organizational chart, actually have critical power as gatekeepers. Thus, once ethnographers acquire organizational charts and diagrams and other materials that delineate hierarchy as well as lateral relationships, it then behooves them to use observation and in-depth interviewing to understand how relationships among levels and across individuals actually function and to learn how decisions within an organization are actually made. Ethnographers can then draw their own “grounded” organizational charts and hierarchies that reflect their own consolidated observations and elicited insights with respect to organizational (or kinship/family) structure.



There are many other techniques that ethnographers can use to obtain structured information from individuals and groups. Several common techniques include:

- Displaying collections of objects (e.g., types of potatoes in Peru; smokeless tobacco packets in Mumbai; photographs of musical instruments with different meanings and uses; plastic heroin bags with logos on them)
- Eliciting sayings or proverbs and asking respondents to tell what they mean
- Creating network diagrams that ask people to identify their relatives, friends, and important others and describe their associations with them and what they do
- Drawing cognitive or mental maps that allow structuring of respondents' free-listed associations

Finally, we remind ethnographers that ethnographic research lends itself to innovation. We encourage readers to do just that. Some researchers, for example, have adapted and used for data-collection purposes games played in local settings. Others have invented new timelines or ways of collecting social network data. Just about any tool that is interactive, culturally meaningful, and locally understood and that can be administered systematically can be used to collect data, especially in the early phases of a study when respondents may be bored, untrusting, and less than willing to provide information through linear interviewing processes. The journal *Field Methods* has as one of its primary purposes the recording and publication of field-based innovations in data collection and analysis. We encourage readers to create new data-collection tools, develop and use them systematically, and then publish the results in this journal or others like them.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter we have examined how alternative means of collecting data during the earlier phases of an ethnographic study are or could be carried out. We have discussed various

forms of community mapping, informal interviews, observation and elicitation, and other semiorganized means of collecting data. These approaches are often overlooked as researchers make their way into the field. We recommend that they be reviewed and used early upon field entry and whenever researchers find themselves in a new, though interconnected, field situation. New tools can be engaging and interactive and often call for a great deal of conversation and exchange between the local residents and nonlocal researchers. Thus, they have the capacity to build trust and create a sense of community and ownership of the data.

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# 6

## IN-DEPTH, OPEN- ENDED EXPLORATORY INTERVIEWING

### INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS


The goal of ethnography is to be able to describe one or more cultural domains and their relationships in terms understandable both to other social scientists and to the people who are represented by the description. That is, the ethnography creates a local “theory” of culture that not only corresponds to ones held by most actors in the situation but that also can also be interpreted in cosmopolitan or disciplinary terms. Exploratory observation and interviewing are two critical activities that allow researchers to enrich formative ethnographic theory by asking interpretive questions and by observing behaviors that are habitual or “out of consciousness” for participants and thus cannot easily be described by their actors in words.

In-depth, open-ended interviewing is among the most technically challenging and, at the same time, the most innovative and exciting form of ethnographic interviewing. By **in-depth**, we mean exploration of any and all facts of a topic in considerable detail during the course of an interview so as to deepen the interviewer’s knowledge of the topic. **Open-ended** refers to the fact that the interviewee is not asked to select from a series of alternative choices and that the interviewer is not only free to ask



**Definition:**  
In-depth  
interviewing  
refers to the  
exploration of any and  
all facets of a topic in  
detail


further questions beyond those used to begin the interview but also is open to any and all relevant responses. There are no correct answers to in-depth questions. They are exploratory, which means that they are intended to explore domains believed to be important to the study, about which little is yet known, and to identify new domains or areas of investigation. Thus, the open-ended exploratory interview format allows researchers maximum flexibility in exploring any topic in depth and covering new topics as they arise and the interview expands.

**Definition:**  An open-ended question leaves the response open to the discretion of the interviewee and is not bounded by alternatives provided by the interviewer or constraints on length of the response

### PURPOSES OF IN-DEPTH, EXPLORATORY, OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWING

The main purposes of in-depth open-ended interviewing are:

- to explore undefined cultural domains in a formative conceptual model;
- to identify new cultural domains;
- to obtain information that can orient the researcher to the context and history of the study site;
- to learn new information about the study site;
- to build understanding and positive relationships between the interviewer and the person being interviewed.

**Cross Reference:**  See Books 1 and 2 for discussion of formative conceptual models

A good exploratory in-depth interview calls for an alert mind, logical thinking, and excellent communication skills. At every point, the interviewer must:

- keep in mind how the topic relates to and illuminates the larger questions asked in the study;
- assure that the person being interviewed stays on topic, and know how to reintroduce the topic if the interviewee strays from it;
- determine the logical connections the interviewee is making in the discussion even if those connections are quite different from those the interviewer makes;
- decide whether or not to pursue new ideas and directions;

- recognize when the interviewee's ideas are clearly expressed and also when they need to be elaborated to be understood by everyone who reads the notes or transcripts.

These, taken together, constitute a formidable task and require considerable practice.



**Definition:**

Key informants are people who have expert knowledge about the local community and/or the subject of the study and who can be returned to repeatedly for information

In-depth, open-ended exploratory interviews are usually conducted with **key informants**. Key informants are local residents who are known to have expert knowledge and experience about the local community and/or the subject of the study and who can be returned to repeatedly for information and validity checking. Such individuals are chosen for their ability to provide good information about the community; typically, they have been identified by researchers or community members as “cultural experts” who are knowledgeable about the topics targeted for exploration. Key informants may also tell researchers quite a bit about themselves and their own involvement in the communities in the process of their interviews.



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 3, chapter 2, for a more detailed discussion of key informants

In-depth exploratory interviews also can be conducted with a small group of individuals who can speak in detail about a topic through their own personal experience in relation to it. Lorie Broomhall, an ethnographer with the Institute for Community Research, conducted a small number of exploratory, in-depth, open-ended interviews with young male drug dealers to learn about the structure of the drug trade in Hartford, Connecticut. Cristina Huebner did the same with two young drug dealers who had very different experiences connecting with their suppliers and selling drugs while keeping themselves officially employed and safe from arrest. Similarly, youth in a recent action research study at the Institute for Community Research interviewed a young hustler to obtain his story as a way of portraying how hustling or selling copied, pirated, or stolen or illegal goods “worked” in Hartford (Morgan et al. 2004). In another case, researchers in a joint study of female condom acceptability among young women in the service industry in southern China conducted exploratory in-depth interviews to learn more about their lives and the lives of other women with whom they were living and working (Weeks et al. 2007).

### SELECTING AND SAMPLING: WHEN AND WHOM TO INTERVIEW

*Exploratory interviews are intended to expand the researcher's knowledge of areas about which little is known.* In-depth exploratory interviews are based on and elicit information elaborating upon research questions derived from the first formative model that frames the study. They explore its main domains, initial hypotheses, and contextual factors. Usually, such interviews are initially conducted with key informants. While it is not necessary to interview *many* key informants or cultural experts to obtain sufficient initial information about a subject, at this stage of the research, it *is* necessary to find key informants who are well informed. The following example shows how exploratory interviews were used to identify different ways that young people start to use drugs and become increasingly involved in hard drug use. The interviews helped to shape a formative model for a subsequent survey to explore alternative pathways to hard drug use. They also provided the framework for implementing semistructured interviews with a larger group of young drug users.

#### Key point



#### Cross Reference:



See Book 2, chapters 4, 5, and 6, on the creation of formative models, and this book, chapter 1, for more discussion of exploratory interviews

#### EXAMPLE 6.1

##### EXPLORING PATHWAYS TO HARD DRUG USE AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

A study of the progression from marijuana and alcohol use to cocaine, heroin, and other drugs among young adults in Hartford, Connecticut, explored the idea that young drug users followed multiple and alternative pathways, rather than a single trajectory, to hard drug use. The research team conducted interviews with several youth who were already using cocaine or injecting heroin and also with adults providing counseling or treatment with drug-using youth aged sixteen to twenty-four. The interviews explored how the young people started to use different kinds of drugs and then moved on to injecting them. Their stories illustrated different pathways to injection drug use and suggested that gender and ethnicity, relationships between youth and older adults, relatives and friends, and the availability of drugs in the geographic vicinity were important factors associated with pathways to hard drug use. These data formed the basis for a survey that measured these associations in a larger sample of youth.

The next example demonstrates how in-depth interviewing provided information about major domains that had been identified as influential in changing male-female relationships among young adults on the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.

### EXAMPLE 6.2

#### EXPLORING THE CONTEXT OF MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS IN MAURITIUS


Mauritius is a multicultural island country that includes three major ethnic-religious groups: indigenous Mauritians, Christian-Creoles of African-French descent, and Indo-Mauritians of Hindu and Muslim background. Mauritius is experiencing significant industrialization, which is altering relationships between men and women. Researchers wished to explore the dynamics of these changes. A formative model developed for a study of sexual risk among young, unmarried women in the Mauritius industrial workforce was based on conversations with staff of the Mauritius Family Planning Association. These conversations suggested that the cultural domains of family, peers, and work were important in shaping attitudes and behaviors with respect to male-female relationships. However, even experienced staff members in this organization were uncertain about how these domains were structured and which of the changes actually taking place might create opportunities for interaction and intimacy between young women and men. To explore these domains and to identify subdomains within each domain related to the research topic, the research team decided to interview people knowledgeable about family life, work situations, and relationships among youth.


The research team was made up of research-trained staff of the organization, mostly young Indo-Mauritian and Creole women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. They decided to interview family service providers from agencies serving each of the ethnic-religious groups on the island, as well as a small sample of parents. Their goal was to find out what behaviors were perceived to be appropriate for young men and women, what leisure-time activities and relationships youth were involved in, and what opportunities they had to interact.

To explore the role of peers as part of the “youth” domain, the research team decided to interview a small sample of approximately twenty males and females proportionate to each of the three ethnic-religious groups. The interviews focused on the kinds of activities youth engaged in with same-sex and opposite-sex peers, where they went separately and together, when males and females met and in what circumstances, and the range of relationships considered appropriate for this age group of unmarried young adults.

To understand what opportunities for social interaction existed in the workplace between young women and men, the researchers decided to interview shop supervisors in several of the larger industrial complexes in the general vicinity of the capital city of Port Louis. Floor supervisors were responsible for the whereabouts of workers; they could tell researchers where men and women congregated both during and after the workday, whether they had observed any friendships or intimate relationships among workers or workers and supervisors, and if there were social activities during the work week where men and women could socialize together.

These interviews produced information about changing aspects of social life for young Mauritians and supplied important subdomains for further investigation. For example, under the domain “family,” in-depth interviews produced factors such as “family relationships,” “family activities,” “family economic status and work situation,” and “family health status.” All of these factors seemed associated with whether or not a young woman had economic resources, free time, and opportunities to relate to men outside the household. Under the domain “peers,” interviews produced the following factors: “social activities” (compartmentalized into same-sex/opposite-sex activities), “types of relationships,” “locations where intimate encounters take place,” and “types of intimate behaviors.” Interviews about the work setting revealed other important areas for consideration as factors, including “social settings where male-female interaction occurs,” “relationships,” and “requirements for upward mobility” (Schensul, Oodit, Schensul, Ragobur, and Bhowon 1994).

**Cross Reference:**   
 Book 2, chapters  
 4–6, for model  
 formation



Exploratory interviews are not conducted exclusively at the beginning of an ethnographic study. They can be used any time a domain or a concept at any level of abstraction calls for additional investigation or clarification. Their intent is to expose new information, expand on existing understanding, and identify the range of variation rather than to show how representative a particular set of data are of a particular population. Researchers generally identify the domains in which new information is needed and then interview local experts on topics associated with these domains. Thus, when selecting key informants, researchers should consider how the perspective of the informant or local expert might be biased or affected by factors such as ethnicity, class, age, or level of experience. In the Mauritius case, the initial formative theoretical model determined which three domains would guide the in-depth interviewing strategy.



To understand the parental domain, we chose to interview a family service provider and at least one parent of a young, unmarried woman between sixteen and twenty-four working in the industrial sector from each of the three major ethnic groups. Family ethnicity was important in the Mauritian case because rules of protection and propriety with respect to female sexuality were different across groups.

### **PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW**

Spradley (1979) outlines a series of different types of questions that are useful in preparing for exploratory interviews (Spradley 1979). These include:

- Grand tour questions: Could you walk me through a typical weekday? Start with the first thing people do when they get up in the morning.
- Specific grand tour questions: Tell me about what you did yesterday.
- Guided grand tour questions: Show me where you do your housework and where you go during the day to get water, food, take children to school, meet friends.
- Task-related grand tour questions: I'd like to ask you to draw me a map that shows where people go and what they do when they want to obtain food in the community.
- Minitour questions: You mentioned that people purchase smokeless tobacco. Can you give me an example of when you or someone you know bought any type of smokeless tobacco product?
- Specific minitour questions: When was the last time you bought a smokeless tobacco product? Can you tell me about that specific time, where, what you purchased, why, how much it cost?
- Task-related minitour question: Why don't we walk to that shop and you can show me what products are sold there and which one you purchased?
- Example question: Can you give me an example of a time when you went to bed hungry?

- Experience question: Can you tell me how you felt about that when it happened? What else was happening in your household at that time?
- Hypothetical-interaction question: If you were worried about getting an HIV infection, how would you tell your boyfriend about it?
- Domain verification question: You said that there are different types of leisure-time activities that women are involved in in this community. You mentioned (list), can you tell me if there are any other activities you might have missed?
- Included term verification question: Is X a part of Y—is shopping a leisure-time activity?
- Semantic relationship verification question: Is X because of Y—are you saying that you walk with other women because they ask you to? Or is it for some other reason unrelated to your women friends?
- Native language verification question: Would you use that term for dating with everyone, or just with your friends?
- Cover term question: You said that there are many leisure-time activities. How do you participate in them?
- Included term question: Are running, shopping, and going to the movies the same kinds of leisure-time activities for you? If they are, why? If they are not, explain.
- Contrast verification question: How are running, shopping, and going to the movies different from each other?
- Directed contrast question: How is running different from making dinner?
- Dyadic contrast questions: Can you tell me the difference between running and going to the movies? Can you think of any other reasons why going to the movies would be different from running? So running and going to the movies are different—are all the ways they are different listed? Or are there more?
- Triadic contrast question: Is shopping related to running or going to the movies in your experience, or

are running and going to the movies more like each other than shopping?

- Rating question: How would you rate the ability of the activities we have just listed to affect the quality of your daily life?

In addition to reviewing and thinking about the utility of these different types of questions, we recommend taking some specific steps in preparing for an exploratory interview. These include:

- revisit the study questions and the formative theoretical model;
- develop some general questions and probes for use in the interview;
- make an appointment to conduct the interview and identify a proper location for it;
- have recording supplies and devices ready.

### *Preparing Questions and Probes*



#### **Key point**

*An exploratory interview may be “unstructured,” but it is not unplanned.* It includes a set of open-ended questions, each of which has associated with it a set of probes. A



#### **Definition:**

A probe is a neutral question that encourages the interviewee to think more deeply, clearly, or broadly about an issue

**probe** is a neutral question that encourages the interviewee to think more deeply, clearly, or broadly about an issue. Some typical probes to encourage production of additional information include:

- Neutral agreement or acknowledgment of the statement (“Oh yes, I see; um-hum”)
- Repeating what the person has said in a questioning way (“You sent your brother to seek money for hospital payment before you took your two-year-old son to the emergency room?”)
- Asking for more information (“Could you tell me a little more about why Henry called for a curriculum revision?”)
- Asking for clarification of internal contradictions in what the person has said (“You said earlier that you

were under twenty-one, but now you told me that you went to a club that cards people” (asks for identification from clients under the legal age). “How old are you really?”)

- Asking for an opinion (“Just now you have said that the girls in that town all work in the textile industry. What do *you* think about that?”)

A set of questions for an exploratory interview with a curriculum director about the introduction of a new curriculum might look like the next example, in which each general question is followed by appropriate probes.

#### **SAMPLE QUESTIONS USED IN AN EXPLORATORY INTERVIEW**

- Interviewer: “So you’ve just begun to implement a new social development curriculum in Hillside school. How is it going?” (Probes: Who is using it? Who is not using it? How is it different from the old curriculum? What kinds of advantages does the new curriculum have over the old one? What problems have been encountered?)
- Interviewer: “How are you introducing the new curriculum to the teachers?” (Probes: How about the training process? What technical assistance is being provided? What monitoring is occurring in the classroom? What special help do teachers need?)
- Interviewer: “Does the curriculum address some of the main social and health problems children face in this school system?” (Probes: What are the main problems children face? How are the problems being incorporated into the curriculum? Compared with the previous curriculum, how will this curriculum improve children’s behavior or circumstances?)
- Interviewer: “Has the introduction of the curriculum resulted in any changes in your department?”



(Probes: Has it caused changes in staffing, organization, time to do other things, tension level, other activities, etc.?)

- Interviewer: “Has the introduction of the curriculum resulted in any changes in the schools?” (Probes: Describe any changes in school activities, teacher cooperation, spillover into other aspects of the curriculum, new programs, etc.)

Another example of a set of exploratory interview questions was used in Mauritius to interview youth about their social activities with their peers. These questions are displayed here.

### **EXPLORATORY INTERVIEW GUIDE**

#### *Interviewing Youth about Activities with Peers*

- Interviewer: “Do you have any free time either at work, after work, or any other time to do things with your friends?” (Probes: When, what does free time mean? Do they have family obligations that reduce their free time? Do they have different groups of friends, and if so, what are they?)
- Interviewer: “What kinds of activities do you do with your friends?” (Probes: Get a list of activities and ask in detail what each of them involves, where it takes place, and how long and how often they do it; ask with which friends. Do they do the activities with same-sex or opposite-sex friends? )
- Interviewer: “Do any of these activities involve couples? Boyfriends and girlfriends?” (Probes: Which ones? Why these and not others?)
- Interviewer: “Are there any activities your parents do not permit you to do?” (Probes: Which ones? Why? Do they do them anyway? If so, how?)

Preparation for conducting in-depth interviews in a team setting benefits from the questions that each team member offers. In an ongoing study of smokeless tobacco use and pregnancy in Mumbai, the research team from the National Institute of Research on Reproductive Health discovered that tobacco shop owners were an unanticipated source of information for three main areas related to the study: tobacco products, the evolution of the tobacco business, and customer preferences. Though the original study design had not included interviews with tobacco shop owners, the team prepared to interview them by drawing up a list of fifty questions. As these questions evolved, the team was able to think through, organize, and synthesize their main lines of inquiry; they also learned how to avoid asking questions that were likely to produce only brief or yes/no responses rather than conversation. They practiced on one another in a “mock interview,” using a shorter set of open-ended questions. Next, they used the questions and probes to interview several tobacco shop owners in teams of two. Below is the initial set of questions that members of the team generated together through brainstorming. The purpose of the exercise was to help the team members think about and identify all possible dimensions of an interview in advance. Subsequently the team subsumed most of these questions under major topical open-ended exploratory questions with probes. At the same time, they retained the master list as a checklist and a reminder of topics to cover in their interview.

### **INITIAL QUESTIONS**

#### *Observation—Shop, Size Product*

1. General information about him and community, product, *paan* shop, or general store.
2. Name of the product?
3. What is the price of the product?
4. What is the quantity?
5. What are the contents?



6. What is *gutkha*? Can you show me all the *gutkha* products? What is the difference? Are there some that do not contain tobacco?
7. What is tobacco?
8. What is *mishri*? Can you show me all the tobacco products from which *mishri* are made? Where can *mishri* be purchased? Where can the raw products be purchased?
9. What are the different types of *paan*?
10. Any differences for men and women? (different how?)
11. Sale of product—which products get sold more? In your shop?
12. Which product preferred by whom? Male or female?
13. Why do they prefer it?
14. How many people come in a day/in a week?
15. How many men?
16. How many women?
17. How many people came today?
18. Is smokeless tobacco, *mishri*, *gutkha*, *paan* product sold in your store?
19. Who uses it?
20. How do you prepare/purchase it?
21. Do people in this community practice the same tradition/culture?
22. If yes, who follows it—male/female, children girls/boys?
23. People from which lane follow it?
24. Do the customers come from the community? Are they people you know?
25. Do they come regularly?
26. Do you have customers who don't come regularly? Whom you don't know?
27. Where do you purchase the tobacco products that you are selling?

28. Does the dealer come to you or do you buy it from the dealer at another location?
29. What does the dealer bring?
30. Do you/the shop owner choose differently or always the same?
31. If there is any new product that comes, then how does it come?
32. How often do you get new stock?
33. Do you get any concession from a wholesale shop if selling and buying price is the same or not?
34. Has the number of shops increased?
35. Does it vary from lane to lane?
36. Similar product containing gutkha/tobacco?
37. Similar not containing gutkha/tobacco?
38. How do people choose products?
39. Who purchases (for whom)?

#### *Pregnancy and Women Reproductive Health*

1. Have you seen that women come to buy these products—mishri, gutkha, tobacco, paan?
2. Have you seen that they use it in or near your shop?
3. Have you seen that pregnant woman come to your shop to purchase the product?
4. From which area? Or from which lane?
5. Which product do pregnant women prefer?
6. How much do they buy?
7. Age of the women who eat smokeless tobacco product?
8. Why do you think that women who are pregnant use these products? Is there some special product that they prefer during pregnancy? Have they ever said that the use prevents discomforts during pregnancy?



The final questions were as follows:

### FINAL QUESTIONS

1. What are the smokeless tobacco products sold in this shop, and where do you obtain them? Are there promotions or incentives for purchasing in bulk? How do you decide to sell new products?
2. Who are the customers who buy smokeless tobacco from your shop (probes: gender, age, areas of the community, native place), and what are their preferences for smokeless tobacco and for smoked tobacco?
3. Have there been changes in the number and type of smokeless tobacco shops in this community (probe: in this area), since you have been here?
4. Do pregnant women or children buy smokeless tobacco products from you? What are the benefits of using smokeless tobacco products during pregnancy? Are there any negative effects?
5. Do you think people's smokeless tobacco habits have changed over the time that you have been here?

Such a process of moving from a detailed list of questions for an exploratory interview into broader, open-ended questions is a useful activity both for individual preparation and team training.

Most respondents are asked to volunteer their time for in-depth interviews, although increasingly in larger projects, key informants may be paid for their time. However, many things can interfere with the timing and conduct of an interview, including that respondents have other priorities in their lives, they may forget about the interview, or they may plan something else at the time of the interview. It is always wise to reconfirm the interview appointment if possible, either by telephone, by stopping by the interview site, by e-mail, or other appropriate contact medium.

**Researchers should never take personally the inability of a key informant to meet a scheduled interview appointment.** Assume that the lapse is unintended unless it happens several times without explanation.

**Key point**

### *Aids to In-Depth Interviews*

Maps, organizational charts, and material items can be useful elicitation tools in the very early stages of a study or when obtaining standardized responses from a sample of participants. The social scientist Robert Chambers popularized the concept of “social mapping” as a prologue to community development, agricultural innovation, and other programs (Chambers 1992). It is a way to obtain direct participation from community people in the early data-gathering process. In social mapping, community people, children, or any group capable of envisioning their community as a social space is asked to create a map of their village or neighborhood on a flat (dirt) surface, usually by using locally available materials such as colored powders (such as pangolin powder in India). Social mapping usually is carried out as a group process, sometimes with considerable numbers of participants. Chambers describes how the staff of a development agency in India involved villagers in placing small models of houses and other constructions in their proper positions in relation to one another in a replica of the village. Using this as a base, villagers participated in marking the roofs of houses in the model with names of household heads and information about the presence of adult literates, the educational and immunization status of children, the number of pregnant women, and cattle ownership. New information could be added to the model as it emerged. The product provided a permanent mapped record of data that was easy to interpret and available to every villager (Chambers 1992, 301). ***As we already have indicated, it is important to remember that ethnographers should not engage in mapping activities until they have determined whether, and in what ways, the mapping they plan could reveal sensitive information, disclose private identities, or be offensive to members of the community.***

**Cross****Reference:**See chapter 5 in  
this book**Key point**



Involving individuals in creating and responding to maps is also a useful technique for interviewing individual informants. As we described in chapter 5 of this book, anthropologist Lakshmi Ramachandran has made effective use of a mapping technique in which she draws a rough-and-ready map based on instructions from her informants. This technique is effective in motivating and focusing the informant on key data while avoiding the painful preliminaries that informants experience if they are expected to draw the maps themselves. The mapping was especially productive in Lakshmi's interviews with village health nurses concerning abortions in the local population. The techniques used by Lakshmi to stimulate discussion about the location and provision of clinical, abortion, and sterilization services to women in southern India can be used with other sorts of elicitation materials for open-ended interviews with adults and children.

Nitza Diaz, a researcher studying perceptions of body image among Puerto Rican adult women and young girls in Hartford, Connecticut, found that women were not comfortable when asked directly about their own bodies. She was able to initiate interviews by asking women to talk about their views of female body types as represented by line drawings depicting a range of women's bodies in different shapes, heights, and sizes. Similarly, researchers Mariajose Romero and Marlene Berg at the Institute for Community Research discovered that it was easier to do in-depth interviews with preadolescent girls about their attitudes toward alcohol use if they were allowed to draw a picture about the topic while they were talking about it. The children's reservations about talking about this sensitive topic were allayed when they used the picture as a point of discussion (Romero and Berg 1997).

All of these tools offer ways to help people feel comfortable in interviews and to encourage them to talk about things of interest both to them and to the interviewers.

## STARTING AN UNSTRUCTURED EXPLORATORY INTERVIEW

### STEPS IN BEGINNING AN EXPLORATORY INTERVIEW

- Conduct introductions and explain the project, including the organizations sponsoring it; a “cover story” may be used.
- Make interviewees comfortable by asking how they are, how their day went, how their family is, or some other culturally appropriate small talk.
- Assure confidentiality and explain how privacy will be protected.
- Tell interviewees that their views are very important both to the researcher and to the project and why.
- Ask permission to record interviews by tape and in writing.

In addition to following these guidelines, researchers should assess the interview surroundings. Notes may need to be taken instead of recording or the location of the interview may need to be changed if noise levels are too high to record. If the interview is in someone’s home, other family members or visitors may be present. It may be socially inappropriate for the ethnographer to ask them to leave, but researchers need to recognize that the views of those who are not the intended focus of the interview will become incorporated into, and will alter, the interview. If the interviewee might be uncomfortable sharing opinions in front of others, the interview will need to be rescheduled for another time and place to ensure privacy.

### EXAMPLE 6.3

#### CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH MINA’S GRANDMOTHER

Angela Johnson, a graduate student in education, planned to do a life history of Mrs. Chavez, the grandmother of Angela’s friend Mina. Mrs. Chavez was in her late

seventies. She and her husband had been teachers in the mountains of New Mexico long before Anglo settlers set up white schools. Upon arriving at Mrs. Chavez's house with Mina, Angela found that another of Mrs. Chavez's daughters and her preteen son and daughter were visiting as well and were working with Mrs. Chavez in the kitchen to prepare a meal. Both women were chatting and cooking. Mina joined in, while the two children ran in and out of the house constantly, necessitating a running disciplinary commentary from all the women. Angela did not have another opportunity to interview Mrs. Chavez, so she set up her tape recorder near the kitchen stove and began asking questions. She soon discovered that Mrs. Chavez often forgot critical words in English that she needed to answer the questions. Her daughter and granddaughter joined in, translating, adding words, amplifying Mrs. Chavez's descriptions of life in the old days, and even contesting some of her recollections. Meanwhile, the tape recorder picked up the sounds of food cooking, children running in and out, doors banging, the dog barking, and all of the overlapping conversations among the three women and the interviewer. In order to make sense of the interview, Angela had to transcribe all of the conversations, but doing so left her wondering how much of the story she recorded was that of Mrs. Chavez and how much had been contributed by her daughter and granddaughter.



**Key point** *Remember to be sensitive to the time constraints and life situations of interviewees.* Interviewees may be taking time away from work or another personal commitment to speak with the researcher; they may have family problems that affect their emotional status and which they do not wish to reveal; or family members may be waiting for them to fulfill an obligation. They may need advice or support with a personal problem that the ethnographer might or might not be able to help them solve. These factors influence the quality and tone of the interview. If ethnographers think that circumstances are impeding their ability to conduct a quality interview, they would be wise to reschedule it.

### STRUCTURING OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWS

Open-ended exploratory interviews can be long and seem unfocused. This is because when interviewers give respondents undivided attention and an opportunity to speak about something important to them, they may run on and on, reflecting on a variety of additional topics of great inter-

est to them but of lesser interest to the researcher! However, the apparent looseness of a good open-ended interview is deceptive because a good ethnographer does extensive preparation for such data collection and develops a set of general questions to guide the interview before beginning. Below are some hints to guide and focus open-ended interviews, including how to keep informants on topic while not interrupting the natural flow of the interview.

Before using these hints, remember that an in-depth interview is a special kind of conversation. It requires a reciprocal relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, one that honors not only the rules people normally follow for good conversation in the given cultural setting but also the rules for good interviewing. This means, of course, that the interviewer must know enough about the local culture to avoid violating principles of polite conversation. In some settings, for example, interruptions are not only acceptable but also expected; in others they signify disrespect for the speaker. Some cultures require good listeners to acknowledge a speaker's points in midsentence with a nod, "mm-hm," "yes" (or equivalent in other languages); doing so ensures a smooth flow of thought. Ignorance of such conventions may result in an ethnographic interview that goes awry.

Keeping an interviewee "on track" when an interviewee digresses requires ethnographers to memorize the question sequences they are interested in and to return to them after a respectful wait for the interviewee to finish his or her digression. Phrases in English that help to return the speaker to the topic include, "As you were saying about X . . .," or "Remember what we were talking about a few minutes ago?" or "A little while ago, you told me that [something occurred]. Can you tell me more about it?" These reminders help to distract the speaker and refocus on the topic at hand.

### *How to Return to Unclear or Incomplete Information*

Researchers should keep track of terms, points, and ideas that they do not understand by taking their own personal notes during the interview. These areas of confusion can be noted in the margins of the interview guide, in a

small notepad, on a separate piece of paper, or even on one's hand, so they can be returned to during the interview. If researchers are returning to clarify a subject discussed earlier in the interview or even in a previous interview, they must preface the request for clarity with either a direct quote or a paraphrase from the interview so that the respondent can recall the context properly. With such a preface or explanation, the following phrases can be used to elaborate on a topic or clear up a confusion.

- What did you *mean by* the word *comadre*?
- Would you *explain chena* agriculture for me?
- What *kind* of rice is that?
- Tell me again what is *gul*, and how is it used?
- What is the *difference between* line skating and ice skating?
- Is the *municipio* the same as the village?
- Would you mind *repeating that sequence* again? I missed your *explanation about how* you make milk rice and for what occasions.
- You mentioned that there were more names for *relationships between young men and women besides boyfriend/girlfriend*. What are they? Can you explain each one?

The last of these questions is a “listing question,” which we describe more fully below.

### *Define Domains of Culture by Asking for Lists of Things*

Interviewers can ask for informants to create lists as one excellent way to obtain detailed information on important domains of culture. Listing should always be accompanied by the respondents' definitions of and explanations for why each of the items are on the list, as these ethnographic data are central to understanding the domain.

Some examples of listing questions might include:

- What games do teens play in this neighborhood?
- In what locations do adults get together around here?



#### **Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 3, for uses of listing

- Where are all the places to buy musical instruments in this town?
- What kinds of youth groups are there in this community?
- What issues are people concerned with in this town?
- Who are the people with power in Cleveland?
- What are the main sources of employment in Peradeniya?
- What are the names of the most common children's sicknesses in this town?
- Which kinds of native wildflowers grow best in this area?
- In the past three years, what school reform initiatives have been tried in this district?

Questions such as these produce lists that can be the basis for probing questions about meaning, locations, participation patterns, duration, and other characteristics of each of the items on the list.

### *Ask for Narratives of Experience*

Narratives and storytelling permit interviewees to speak from experience about situations that illustrate points important for the researcher's study. Researchers use narratives to obtain information from the respondent's perspective about episodes from beginning to end. Narratives begin with questions such as: "How was the gay pride parade organized last month? First, how did it begin? And then what happened?" or "What was your last experience with a health problem? What happened first? And then?" The narrative is continued or sustained as the researcher probes with questions such as, "What happened then? And after that?" Additional probes encourage the speaker to remember dimensions of the context such as who was there, what kinds of activities took place, who did what, what was the structure of the event, what the respondent or anyone else might have done to address the specific problem or any problem that arose. Targeted health narratives or life history narratives use the same technique to obtain information about the history of specific behaviors

of research interest. The following example shows how an experienced ethnographic interviewer obtains information in a first interview with a young drug user about his early exposure to drugs and his initiation into drug use.

#### EXAMPLE 6.4

##### A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF ENTRY INTO DRUG USE

The interviewer begins with questions about where the person was born, migration, family history, whether the family moved around, who was important in the person's early life, and whether anyone in the family used drugs. The interviewer discovered that a beloved grandfather died of a heroin overdose and, at that time, two of his uncles died of drug use. Several others were imprisoned for thefts related to supporting their drug use. The interviewer goes on to ask about parents. The interview reveals that both parents, as well as brothers and sisters, are habitual drug users. The interviewer then asks about growing up.

I. All right, so what was it like growing up as a kid?

R. It was fun, tell you the truth 'cause I was very spoiled . . . yeah, I was a spoiled little kid. I was, I usually stayed over my grandmother, my grandfather, yeah, 'cause since my uncle died and stuff and he wanted to be my godfather so my grandmother and my grandfather always kept me 'cause I reminded them of him. So I—my grandmother and my grandfather—I had called them mom and dad, they raised me, you know, pretty much he bought me anything I wanted. . . . I had a beautiful childhood, I used to go to Puerto Rico every year sometimes two, three times a year . . . oh and then when I was born my mother had left my father as soon as I was born; then she got this guy, that he raised me. I loved him too, but he was a big time drug dealer and he also used to shoot up heroin and he had me spoiled too. He used to buy me anything I wanted.

I. Did they, did any of these people ever shoot up in front of you?

R. No.

I. Did you ever see drugs in the house?

R. No, I didn't even know what was drugs until I was old about, probably after I was ten years old, ten, twelve, or so. But when I was, probably like six or seven, I knew that my uncle was selling drugs.

I. How did you know that?

R. 'Cause, 'cause I knew, everybody used to talk about it, so. My uncle used to have cars and everything. He went to Puerto Rico and bought a house by selling drugs

and he used to sell numbers, like he'll sell numbers in the street. Do a list of numbers and he used to sell them . . . so he used to sell numbers, sell drugs. He hit numbers, he hit the numbers, thirty-seven weeks in a row . . . thirty-seven weeks in a row, for every dollar you play, it's five hundred dollars. He used to play them for forty dollars, forty times. . . . he made big bucks. He went to Puerto Rico and bought a hundred thousand dollar house.

I. So, tell me, how were you in school?

R. I was great in school, I was great until I went to junior high. When I started, went to junior high, that's when I started smoking weed, and all that. My grandparents, they were proud of me 'cause my teacher used to call them and then tell them Danny's doing good, you know, he's one of my best students. I always used to get straight A's. I was a straight A student all the way up to junior high. When I got to junior high, that's when I started hanging with the wrong crowd, smoking weed, drinking. Started at an early age.

I. Think about eleven?

R. Between eleven, twelve. No, my grandparents didn't know nobody really. And then I started smoking weed in junior high, that's when I dropped out. I used to go to school, tell my grandparents I used to go to school and never made it to school. I started smoking weed for about one or two years.

I. When you wouldn't go to school, where would you go?

R. I used to go to my cousin's house. We just started doing drugs with her, you know.

I. So, you would leave your grandparents' place and then you'd go over to your cousin's house and you'd stay in that place all day, just smoking pot and hanging out?

R. Smoking pot, yeah, and 'cause, and then like a couple of years after that probably I was like 14, 15 we started messing around me and her with drugs and, we started, I started, I was curious so I opened a bag of cocaine 'cause I used to sell it.

I. When did you start selling drugs?

R. I started selling when I was probably like 14. Just around the time I started doing it.

I. Did you make a lot of money?

R. It's not a lot of money, it's just to get by. And then I used to give her, give her bags and I used to see her sniff them. . . . (L. Broomhall, field notes, Interview 1 with "Danny," pseudonym, 1998)



This interview illustrates how the interviewer moves from the early years to the point where the respondent, who comes from a heavily drug-using family, begins to use drugs, continues, and eventually shifts to drug selling. It also illustrates what became an important theme in this study and future research—the role of drug selling in the initiation of a new drug, especially one that can be injected.

The following example illustrates the events that play a role in moving a musician from student to career violinist. The interviewee is from Scotland and is now studying for a master's degree in performance violin in the United States. The interviewer has already determined that the interviewee, Jan Chandler, was influenced by her grandfather, who played the violin, to start with the instrument at age six, despite the discouragement of her parents, who thought it too difficult for her. After Jan persisted in playing and tried to teach herself, her parents gave up and sent her to a teacher who entered her in a competition, which she won.

#### EXAMPLE 6.5

##### TRANSITION FROM STUDENT TO CAREER VIOLINIST

ML: So after you won the class, you were a bit more interested [in music]. Did that change the way you thought about the violin?

JC: I don't really remember. I think it probably has to do with the fact that my mother was pleased that I won. When I was about 12 or 13, I think my father must have felt, well, I'd better get her a good teacher, and he asked the concert master of the orchestra if he would teach me. That's when I started becoming a bit better because he was a good teacher.

ML: What is a good teacher in your mind? You talked earlier about this one lady who was lovely and you wouldn't have kept going if it hadn't been for her, but she wasn't a good teacher, and then this other lady who made you practice, but she wasn't so good either. . . .

JC: Well, she was all right, that lady, I suppose. But this teacher, he made me do scales and he taught me how to play them in tune; he made some explanation as to what that meant, and taught me how to do legato, and he didn't just say, "do legato," but he said "practice it like this!" and showed me some exercises with rhythm . . . and looking back I think he gave me good pieces to learn. Like he made me learn Bach, and he made me do a Mozart Concerto, which I was quite young to do. A lot of the other kids were trying pieces that were really too hard for them, and he wouldn't

let me do that, which was good, I think. I never thought I was any good. Then my mother said I must audition for the National Youth Orchestra School. It was a new thing. It was a big thing and I said, "I'm not going into that. I won't get in." But she made me do it, and I was in! I was about 14 then, so that was quite good.

ML: Why'd you think you wouldn't get in?

JC: I don't know; I just had a bit of a thing about it. I used to think that it was always brilliant people around that got better than me.

ML: But, how come you didn't think that you were that good? I mean you won some competitions. . . .

JC: Well, they were only little teeny things. I don't know. I don't know why. But then I got into the Glasgow Schools' Orchestra, which was the best one, and I was put into the second violins.

ML: You were how old then?

JC: Well, when I first went, I was ten. They had three orchestras, and that was the little one, and I was the principal second violin. Then I was the leader of that [orchestra], and then I went up to the first orchestra the next year, and I think I was principal second, I was 13 then. And then when I got to be concert master of these, there were a couple of them, and I started thinking I was OK.

ML: Jan, do you have any brothers and sisters?

JC: Yes, I have a younger brother and sister.

ML: And are they musical also?

JC: No, no, they tried various things, my sister, the youngest of the two, was more consistent, she played the cello, but she just didn't take to it. Though she was encouraged to do it, she just didn't really like it. And my brother wanted to do all sorts of things; he played the trombone, oboe, flute, [unclear]; he took up the bassoon when he was nine and he was quite good at it, but I think he thought it was sissy, you know, like lots of boys do.

ML: You said that your father played the oboe. Is your mother a musician?

JC: No. But she used to play the piano and the clarinet when she was young, so she does know a bit about music.

ML: You said that your mother was pleased when you won those competitions, and that your father didn't really take much interest in what you were doing until it was clear that you were going to teach yourself [the violin].

JC: That's exactly right, yeah.



ML: Was it your mother who more or less kept after you? Or did anybody keep after you?

JC: Nobody kept after me, really. My mother did, after she realized that I was sort of OK, then, or maybe it was the first time she'd really heard me play.

ML: You mean in your competition when you were ten?

JC: Yeah. With the piano, so it sounded like real music. I suppose when I was just screeching around somewhere in the house, I mean they didn't supervise me or anything. I realize now that some people's parents did, you know.

ML: So you're, in that sense, do you feel that the way you approached the violin as a child was similar or different from other kids?

JC: I don't know, really. It's not something I've talked to people about. I know that J's mother went with her to Suzuki and then helped her practice. I don't think that's very good. On the other hand, I also feel that I'm very self-sufficient in my playing because I had to do it myself. There's a good and bad side to that.

ML: You've talked a lot about the teachers you had. I know that the English system's quite different from the American system. Was yours public school or publically supported training or private training?

JC: No, it was all private. My teaching. Lots of people did have teaching at school but it was very evident who had private tuition and who had learned at school. Because you only got 14 minutes in the middle of the day and you had to skip math to go. I usually had an hour or more per lesson.

ML: Did you have lessons every week?

JC: Usually, yes. The reason I left the concert master guy was because my father said I was getting off of lessons because he was always busy. So although he was very good, I left him and went to this other guy.

ML: Who was?

JC: A cat called T.B. who used to be like the concert master of an orchestra in England. He was teacher in one of the schools, but he taught me privately. He was a player that my father very much admired.

ML: Was he a good teacher also?

JC: No, not really. He couldn't play because he'd had a stroke and was paralyzed on one side. He would give me pieces that were way too hard for me, like the Tchaikovsky Concerto. I can't remember what he said to me about it, but looking back now, most of the teachers I had, I think it's amazing that they were teachers because

they didn't really say much. Just "play it like this" and I had to copy them or something. And he couldn't play so I just had to go tackle it on my own.

ML: You mentioned before we started taping that you'd been sent away at one point to a special school. What was that?

JC: They started this new music school and it was the sort of scholarship thing where they paid for all your tuition, lessons, piano and violin, and you got art and history and and practice time during the school day. You lived in during the week and just went home on weekends. I auditioned and I got in. There were about 13 of us, and I quite liked it. I wanted to get away from home, and I had a different teacher again who taught at the Scottish Academy of Music, so he was quite well respected. He was OK. Not brilliant.

ML: So you went through regular public school for your academic part, and had private lessons and went to summer courses and youth orchestras and things like that?

JC: Yeah.

ML: You said that in the regular school you felt a bit odd, singled out along with the other music students because you played music.

JC: Yeah. A little bit. They thought it was strange I played the violin. I didn't really like it; I got teased a bit by some of the boys like on orchestra day when I'd bring [the violin] in. I don't know. I was embarrassed about everything. [My old school] was in a good area, but the people there who had any money sent their kids to private school, so my school had whoever was left. My friends all played instruments and stuff, and I was the oldest person among them. But as I got older, and then had these summer music courses, that's what really got me going in what I wanted to do in music from that point on. I kind of just switched my friends. Some of my friends from the summer course were in the orchestra and at my school, and they were a bit older, and so we just had our own little crowd, really.

ML: And then you switched to that special school for the last year. How did you feel about changing schools?

JC: I was sad to leave my friends. I wasn't heavily into school. And I had a hard time once I got there because I had to take four higher exams, and one of them was in chemistry. I had been good in chemistry. But I came in in the middle of the session and I couldn't understand what they were talking about. I freaked out and did history instead . . . so it all worked out in the end.

ML: You took the exams and you did OK.

JC: Yeah, I did fine.

ML: So you took your exams and graduated. Then what did you do?

JC: I auditioned for several academies of music and I got in but without scholarships. I was just determined to go anyway. So I was just 17 and I went down to London, I was just too young.

ML: Why do you think you were too young?

JC: I was miserable. There's lots of background factors to why I was miserable. My parents had split up and my dad was on his own. I thought he would die if I wasn't there to feed him everyday. He lost his job; he wouldn't eat . . . he had a very, very big house and I felt guilty about leaving him.

ML: Where was your mother at this time?

JC: She just lived up the road from my dad; she moved to go live with this young man and my sister went to live with her. I don't know; I wouldn't want my seventeen-year-old child to go away and live in London. I didn't get taken care of or anything and when I see people like J [another student in her class], and her parents take such good care of her, and I feel that she's very well-balanced in herself because of it. She knows what's what. On the other hand, then, she's not very self-sufficient, so who knows?

ML: So you just sort of got on a train at 17 and went to the Academy in London.

JC: I went with my boyfriend; he was a year older because he'd stayed on that extra year at school. So we went together. We literally got off the train and nobody had told me how to get there [to the Academy] on the cheap train, so we just got into a taxi and said take us there because we didn't know where it was; I don't know; I liked it a bit, I suppose, a certain freedom from being away from home.

ML: Was it in a school dormitory that you stayed?

JC: Yeah. It was better in the dorm because you got to know people. I met people outside the Academy, so I think that was good. I didn't get the teacher I wanted. [She had wanted a famous male teacher whose reputation was as a hard taskmaster and an often mean person.] I got some woman who was like a new young teacher. I didn't like her at all.

ML: Why didn't you like her?

JC: I didn't think she was any good I think it was partly because she was a woman as well. I didn't respect her. I had all men teachers for quite a long time, and older, they all had jobs and they'd all seemed to have been good players, whereas she was just like a young girl like me, really. Or maybe she was 35 or something and she was married with children, and I just thought, "She's not a violinist," which was probably unreasonable; she was probably OK, but . . .

ML: So at that time, you defined a violinist as an older man with an orchestra job, right?

JC: Or a soloist.

ML: A soloist?

JC: Yes. Basically.

Jan goes on to talk about how she had to work hard to accept that women also can be good teachers, soloists, and orchestra leaders, and that a teacher who is kind to her—as her new teacher was—isn't necessarily a bad teacher.

### SELF-MANAGEMENT DURING INTERVIEWING

*The quality of interview data can be greatly improved if interviewers take care not to interrupt or alter the flow of the interviewee's story, if they manage the personal relationship between themselves and the interviewee appropriately, and if they avoid introducing bias into the interview.*

Key point



#### *Maintaining the Flow of the Interviewee's Narrative*

Interviewers can inadvertently alter the flow of a respondent's story in ways that change or restrict what the informant is trying to say. Three of the most common such alterations are:

- Phrasing a question as a statement, as, for example, when the interviewer repeats as a fact what an informant has stated only tentatively:

Informant: So we live sort of on the edge of town.

Interviewer: So you live in a rural area, correct?

Informant: Well, um, that's correct.

In this case, it's not possible to tell whether the informant really lives in a rural area or is simply agreeing with the interviewer to avoid a conflict. Nor does it provide any new information on what it means to live "on the edge of town."



- Failing to notice that the informant has provided an alternative meaning to the one asked for by the interviewer. For example, interviewers may not really hear that an alternative has been offered; alternatively, they may ignore the alternative, or reformulate it.

Informant: We were trying to figure out how to assess the arts students, so . . .

Interviewer: You were using some tests, right?

Informant: No, we were looking at portfolios.

Interviewer: What kinds of tests did you use?

- Finishing sentences for the interviewee, even when the interviewer is fairly certain that he or she knows what the interviewee will say:

Informant: I was about to begin graduate school . . .

Interviewer: when your mother died.

Informant: Yes, and the problem then was . . .

Interviewer: that you had to take care of your siblings.

- Failing to clarify the referents for indexical terms such as “stuff” or “things” or “junk,” which have meaning only in context.

Interviewer: What kinds of drugs have you used?

Informant: I got all messed up using junk and that stuff; I just got messed up or

Interviewer: Why is it difficult to hang out with Josh [a younger, biracial boy]

Informant: Oh, he’s just . . . it’s like he’s sort of weird.

Interviewer: What do you mean by “weird”?

Informant: You know, just weird. Different.

- Failing to elicit the meanings of slang or local language.
- Prematurely determining the beginnings and endings of episodes in the narrative in ways that cut short what the informant is saying.
- Asking questions that the informant does not understand or in such a way that the informant stops talking.

Interviewer: What kind of language immersion program do you use in your school?  
Informant: Language what???

It's important for the researcher to try to figure out how informants themselves pace their stories and string together episodes in them. The researcher can then help, rather than hinder, the respondents' efforts to create a coherent whole in their own words. In the case of Jan Chandler, the violinist, it was helpful that the interviewer knew her and her classmates at the university and could understand clearly some of the comparisons Jan made with other teachers and students.

### *Maintaining the Relationship with the Interviewee*

The use of general cultural etiquette is as important as the kinds of conversational etiquette we have just outlined. We have already alluded to some behaviors interviewers need to use to keep the conversation flowing—such as proper responses, appropriate questioning behavior, physical gestures, and paying attention to respondents' needs and personal situations. Ethnographers should also take the following precautions to ensure open flow of communication:

- Avoid offering opinions or making judgments about what the interviewee says, even if you have strong feelings about it. Researcher judgments (regardless of whether they are positive or negative) will influence respondents' ideas and answers.
- Avoid showing surprise, disgust, or other strong emotions, regardless of what the interviewee says and no matter what opinion you hold on a topic.
- Accept hospitality when offered. Most people in most cultures offer food or drink to interviewers when they are interviewed, and refusing may insult your host. Unless the safety factor is critical, accept and eat whatever food and drink are offered.



- Be aware of the general condition of informants. If they are ill, intoxicated, mentally unstable, or emotionally upset, the information they provide may not be of the highest quality.

### *Avoiding Interviewer Bias*

The rules listed here help to keep a conversation flowing. Avoiding interviewer bias requires attention to different considerations. In-depth interviews are designed to obtain the perspective of the interviewee, so anything that interferes with this purpose is detrimental to the process. Perhaps the most serious source of bias comes from interviewers themselves; fortunately, interviewer bias is the most manageable of problems ethnographers face. Among the principal ways that interviewers can bias what interviewees say are by:

- Asking leading questions
- Failing to follow up on or omitting topics the interviewee introduces
- Redirecting the story or interrupting it
- Failing to recognize reactions of the interviewee to the interviewer's personal characteristics, including dress, age, race, gender, body size, apparent social status, or way of speaking
- Asking questions that suggest the desired responses (for example, asking questions that begin with "Don't you think that . . . ?" or "Don't people always . . .")
- Using nonverbal cues (such as head, face, and body movements) to indicate the "right answer" to a question, or the response with which the researcher agrees
- Stating opinions on an issue. Even when asked, researchers should avoid volunteering opinions at all; if forced to do so, they should wait until after the interview is over

### **RECORDING RESEARCH INTERVIEWS**

Interviews can be recorded in three ways: written, digitally recorded, and videoed. Writing brief notes that include

reminders of the questions asked as well as the answers given is the most typical way of recording an interview. It is inexpensive, does not depend on electronic equipment that might fail, and gives the researcher control over the transcription process. The primary disadvantage of note taking is that it distracts the interviewer from direct and continuous communication with the interviewee; it also is difficult to write quickly and legibly enough to record everything an informant says.

Interviews are often audiotaped. Because they require functioning tape recorders, enough blank tapes, working batteries, or an available electrical outlet and time or money for transcription, they are more costly and require advance preparation. Tape-recorded interviews often are lengthy, requiring as much as three or four hours of transcription time—either from the researcher or a paid transcriber—for every hour of taped interview. Additionally, if the interview takes place in a noisy environment, the quality of the recording may be poor. The obvious advantage of taping interviews is accuracy of recall. The primary disadvantages are problems with equipment during the interview, costs associated with equipment and transcription, and the length of time required to obtain the results.

Videotaping usually is not used for in-depth interviewing because of its cost and the inconvenience of transcribing videotaped interviews. ***Videotaping interviews also requires that informants sign a release form in which researchers give assurances that the interview will only be used for research purposes and that the identity of the interviewee will not be revealed.*** This usually requires technically “fuzzing” or disguising the interviewee’s face. We do not recommend the use of videotaping for in-depth interviews unless the interviews are to be used in a video production on the research topic or the research requires a fine attention to movement, proxemics, and body language.

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 7, on audiovisual recording

**Key point****SUMMARY**

In chapters 4, 5, and 6 we have discussed two fundamental approaches to ethnographic data collection: exploratory observation and exploratory unstructured or in-depth



interviewing and related data-collection tools and strategies. We refer to these techniques as *exploratory* because they:

- are relatively unstructured in advance;
- are designed to permit an open exchange between the researcher and participants in the study;
- allow the researcher to explore areas, cultural domains, or topics of interest in great depth without presupposing any specific responses or conclusions;
- are likely to reveal new points, directions, and ideas for further exploration.

Although we define them as “unstructured,” exploratory unstructured interviewing and exploratory observation are planned. Effective exploratory interviewing and observation are guided by the design of the research and the primary research questions, the formative research model, and some general questions the researcher has about the specific topic to be explored. The process of interviewing and observation is further guided by the formulation of preliminary hypotheses or hunches about cultural patterns, social relationships, and why certain things happen as they do. Thus, while engaged in both types of data collection activities, the researcher also is involved in low-level theoretical formulations that will be tested again and again against the formative theoretical model, its subsequent revisions, and new data emerging from the field.

We have mentioned two purposes for exploratory data collection in this chapter: 1) constructing meanings, interpretations, and associations (theories) that correspond to, are recognizable by, and have meaning to participants *in the setting* or research site; and 2) constructing meanings, interpretations, and associations (theories) that relate to discipline-based or interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks *outside of* the research site. To do both of these things, researchers must be as detailed as possible in their descriptions of events, relationships, linguistic terms, and activities and their meaning to participants in the setting. These are the building blocks of the emerging

cultural portrayal. At the same time, researchers must be able to organize these building blocks into larger units, patterns, and structures that make sense of what they have seen in relation to similar research conducted elsewhere. This dual purpose has different implications for observation and interviewing. During observation, researchers try to capture important aspects of what they see in concrete detail. At first, they may not be sure of what they are seeing since they cannot attribute local meaning to it. Thus, they try to describe as much as possible in rich and concrete detail without yet knowing exactly what these details mean, or which details are important. Later, they will know enough to be able to select observational settings more systematically and to focus observations on units of behavior or events, or relationships that they know from previous experience and discussions with participants that have meaning directly related to the topic of study.

In interviewing, researchers use a similar sequence but with the added advantage of being able to capture in participants' own words what they see, believe, and report doing with respect to a specific topic. Of course, their descriptions or reports are influenced to some degree by our questions and the way researchers pursue sequences of questions in their quest for knowledge. At the same time, participants or informants make active or passive decisions about how to "frame their story" and why. For this reason we have pointed to the variety of techniques that researchers can use to produce more valid and reliable information when interviewing. In Book 5, we review both qualitative and quantitative data-reduction and analysis techniques. The ultimate ethnographic objective is to reduce reality to ethnographic data that are further organized and reduced to produce a coherent description of a social situation. By helping us to learn more about the range of factors that bear on an issue, exploratory or in-depth interviews and unstructured observations are the first step in the process of data selection and reduction.

This chapter has provided readers with the tools needed to conduct in-depth open-ended interviews and observations for exploratory purposes in field settings. As



mentioned, in-depth interviews are challenging because they are unpredictable. But it is exactly their unpredictability that makes them an exciting tool for exploration in the early stages of a study, and in the end, when the first results appear and call for verification in the community. In the next chapter we turn our attention to semistructured interviews, which focus on open-ended exploration of a much more narrow range of topics with a larger and more representative sample of respondents.

# 7

## SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATIONS

### WHAT ARE SEMISTRUCTURED FORMS OF DATA COLLECTION?

In the previous chapters, we have described procedures for exploring and expanding study questions, domains, and different levels of the study’s operational model. These include exploratory, open-ended strategies for obtaining new information that

- adds domains to the model,
- helps to unpack the domains, and
- offers important details on the context of the study, the external dynamics that affect it, or other factors that impact the study problem.

In this chapter, we focus on techniques for data collection that we refer to as “semistructured.” They are indeed **structured**, but still remain open ended. In a semistructured interview, the questions are the same, but the responses are expected to vary.

Semistructured data collection techniques can be used for two main purposes:

- To explain and provide the variables and items for survey question construction in the development of

*What Are Semistructured Forms of Data Collection?*

*Conducting Semistructured Interviews*

*Constructing a Semistructured Interview Schedule*

*Analysis of Semistructured Interview Data*

*Conducting Semistructured Observations*

*Sampling Semistructured Data Collection*

*Identifying and Resolving Challenges in Semistructured Data Collection*

*Summary*

### **Definition:**

By structured, we mean that the same open-ended questions are asked of everyone in the sample, but the way they are explored and the way the responses evolve is flexible and depends on the respondent’s unique set of circumstances



an ethnographically derived survey. In this instance, the goal is to ensure maximum variation as well as redundancy to ensure that all variables and items are identified.

- To find *patterns* within *cases* (individual respondents or events) and *themes* (factors and variables that cut across multiple cases) in a qualitative data set.

Like exploratory, open-ended interviews and observations, semistructured data collection techniques also are open ended, but they differ in several main ways:

- They focus on specific instances rather than on the cultural level. Interviews highlight the personal experiences and thoughts of the respondent (the individual level), rather than what respondents do or think in general (the cultural level).
- The questions in the interview schedule are predetermined and relate specifically to the study questions and domains and factors (main components of domains) that emerge from the study model. Semistructured interviewing is generally not used to identify new domains for the study model or new dimensions of the study population, although new domains could emerge from the data. It is designed as a focused and carefully crafted interview strategy to explore systematically areas that already have been deemed of importance in the study.
- Responses to the questions are intended to identify and unpack the main subdomains, factors, and variables of interest to the study by searching for similarities and differences across study “cases.”

Semistructured data collection can be applied to settings/venues, individuals, and even reoccurring activities so long as the observations and interviews are both guided with a “checklist” (structure) *and* allow for extensive probing for detail (flexibility). It is important for researchers to determine just how structured the responses need to be by considering which classes of data are required for every person, place, or event in a semistructured sample.

Some approaches to data analysis, especially those that look for common “themes” or trends across all cases, do not require that a specific class of information be collected across or appear in every single case. A dominant theme can be identified and described if it appears in most cases, and alternatives that deviate from that dominant theme can be noted if they appear in “some” or “a few of the cases.” However, certain types of analyses, especially those that use data matrices (Miles and Huberman 1994), require that the same types of data be collected from each “case.” In these instances, interviewers must give specific attention to ensuring that these specific data are collected.

#### EXAMPLE 7.1

##### A DATA MATRIX SUMMARIZING NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS ON THE USE OF THE DRUG ECSTASY

A large, funded ethnographic study of Ecstasy use and sexual risk behavior was carried out in Hartford, Connecticut (Moonzwe, Schensul, and Kostick 2011; Singer and Schensul 2011), from 2007 to 2011. The main component of the study involved the collection of 120 life narratives including family history, relationships, substance use, and sexuality. Stories of recent experiences involving sex with and without Ecstasy, which we termed *critical events*, were also collected as part of the narrative. To summarize the data, the study team created an Excel matrix with the main variables in the study for each person interviewed; for example, age, gender, relationship status, parental status, experience of abuse, experience of incarceration, age of initiation of Ecstasy, use of other drugs, age of sexual debut, and five characteristics of each critical event. This matrix served as the basis for describing the study sample in each published paper. Authors then created their own, more abstract matrices, following Miles and Huberman, in which they identified main variables related to their topics. For example, Singer and Schensul (2011) created a matrix with ratings of theoretically central variables including risk, benefit, risk-benefit ratio, control, and level of drug used and coded the interviews for qualitative content related to these main variables. Moonzwe, Schensul, and Kostick followed the same strategy with a summary matrix for types of negative life situations (abuse, loss of a loved one, situational problems, and others), mental health diagnosis and/or treatment, level of Ecstasy use and other drug use, and coded the data set to obtain examples of each of these variable domains (Moonzwe et al. 2011). Each analysis, interpretation, and write-up drew upon all three matrices.



Many larger qualitative data sets are quantified minimally or “clumped” by using categorical (presence or absence of an item or theme) or nominal scales (degrees of presence from “zero” or “absence” to “a great many”) to enable comparisons across cases. These cases are often individual interviewees, but they might represent samples of schools, classrooms, service establishments, or other sites. These simple forms of summarization through quantification can even be coded in most text-management/analysis programs. For these purposes, it is important to decide in advance which data must be collected consistently across all cases and in what form these data will be tabulated. Tabulation takes many forms. These include:

- Using a text data management program to code and output these data
- Entering data into computerized quantitative data analysis programs such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)
- Collecting any data to be quantified in a numerical data collection form and matching it with the qualitative interview guide and recordings
- Using matrices such as Excel or Word to compare cases across qualitative text outputs



**Definition:** Semistructured interviews consist of predetermined questions related to domains of interest, administered to a representative sample of respondents. They confirm study domains and identify factors, variables, and items or attributes of variables for analysis or use in a survey

## CONDUCTING SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

### *Reasons for Conducting Semistructured Interviews*

**Semistructured interviews** combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument. The result produces focused, qualitative, textual data illustrating variation at the variable level. The questions on a semistructured interview guide are preformulated, but the answers to those questions are open ended. They can be both fully expanded at the discretion of the interviewer and the interviewee and enhanced by probes.

Some researchers differentiate only between unstructured and structured interviews (Fontana and Frey 1994). Others recognize that semistructured interviews play an

important role in the development of exploratory models and the preparation for more systematic forms of investigation (Weller 1998). Johnson makes a useful distinction between *exploratory* and *explanatory* research, suggesting that “exploratory approaches are used to develop hypotheses and more generally to make probes for circumscription, description and interpretation of less well understood topics.” Johnson’s approach to ethnographic research suggests that “exploratory research can be the primary focus of a given design or just one of many components” (Johnson and Sackett 1998, 139). Exploratory research that includes both unstructured and semistructured interviewing also provides the basis for survey and other forms of research that can test theoretical hunches or propositions (Boster and Johnson 1989; Goldin 1996; Koester 1996; Koester, Booth, and Zhang 1996). Research that tests theories or propositions seeks to explain or predict what happens in a general population or group; it is built upon the results of a previous less-structured or exploratory study. In the schema we propose here, semistructured interviews are best suited for exploring and delineating factors and subfactors and their association; while ethnographic surveys—discussed in chapter 8 of this book—“test” theory by assessing the relationships among domains and factors as specified in a more elaborated theoretical model.

In summary, then, semistructured interviews are used for:

- Further clarifying the central domains and factors in the study
- Operationalizing factors or items into variables
- Developing and expanding preliminary hypotheses or hunches
- Developing a qualitative base for the construction of an ethnographic survey

### *Further Clarifying the Central Domains and Factors in the Study*

Formative ethnographic theory building and modeling are based on the identification of hypothesized

#### **Cross**

#### **Reference:**

See Book 2 for a discussion of formative, elaborated, and summative theoretical models



relationships among major independent and dependent domains. The initial identification of these domains initially comes from previous research related to the topic, informant knowledge, and researcher experience. Exploratory interviewing and observation in the study site then provide new insights and confirmation of domains and factors. Semistructured interviewing further confirms or disconfirms the validity of domains hypothesized to exist in the study and permits researchers to add new domains as they arise in the course of data collection.

#### EXAMPLE 7.2

##### CONFIRMING DOMAINS AND IDENTIFYING FACTORS IN A STUDY OF AIDS RISK IN MAURITIUS AND SRI LANKA

The primary domains in the Schensuls' studies of AIDS risk in Mauritius and Sri Lanka are family, work, and peers (independent domains), and sex behavior and sex risk (dependent domains). Semistructured interviews based on questions related to each of these domains provided important information regarding whether the list of domains needed expansion or reduction (it did not) and which factors identified within these domains were likely to be related to one another. We learned that in both locations family and work domains were linked in complex ways. While families—mainly parents—were reluctant to allow young women to work in the industrial center, they also were anxious to benefit from the income. Interviews also informed us that families were protective of young women, assigning brothers and cousins as chaperones, but at the same time, women were also able to find spaces and times when they could meet men alone on the way to work, at work, or even in tuition classes after school. This information allowed us to deconstruct the main domains of work and family but did not add additional domains to the model.

#### *Operationalizing Factors into Variables*

One of the primary objectives of semistructured interviewing is to identify the variables that are the component parts of the factors and subfactors within the domains in the formative model. To achieve this objective, questions in a semistructured interview are framed at the factor level. In our study of exposure to AIDS risk in Mauritius we were interested in the ways in which the domain "FAMILY" was

associated with the domain "SEXUAL RISK." Through in-depth interviews with a small number of female respondents we explored the domain of family. One important factor that emerged through these interviews was "discipline in the family." In a semistructured interview schedule administered to ninety young women, this factor was phrased as a question designed to elicit more information about family discipline: "Tell me about the ways in which discipline occurs in your family." The responses included discussion and negotiation, physical forms of discipline, restricting activity to the household, and several other categories. "Physical discipline" became a variable, and the semistructured interviews produced the elements or attributes of physical discipline, finding an array of different "types of physical discipline" such as speaking, arguing, hitting, beating, restricting mobility, locking girls into the home, and preventing them from participating in leisure-time activities with friends.

#### *Developing Preliminary Hypotheses*

By the time researchers decide to use semistructured interviewing, they will already have generated a series of hypotheses-linking domains. Semistructured interview data can produce information that further links factors and variables. Some of the women who responded to the semistructured interviews administered in Mauritius reported that parental discipline became stricter once they entered the industrial workforce. The researchers then generated Hypothesis 1:

*Hypothesis 1: There is a relationship between discipline, a factor under the independent domain family, and the factor "employment in the industrial sector."*

Respondents also said that the more they worked by increasing their hours of overtime, the greater the level of family discipline they encountered. This generated a second hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: There is a relationship between level of discipline, a variable within the factor "family discipline," and*

*number of hours of worked, a variable within the factor “employment in the industrial sector.”*

Generation of these and other hypotheses then provided guidance for questions that could be asked in a confirmatory ethnographic survey.

### *Developing a Qualitative Base for the Construction of the Ethnographic Survey*

Semistructured interviewing thus establishes a firm, qualitative foundation for the construction of a valid ethnographic survey by creating the conceptual taxonomy of interrelated domains, factors, variables, and variable attributes that can be transformed into the items on a survey instrument. In doing so, it also establishes the coding system for both the text and survey data—as is depicted in the list below.



**Cross Reference:**  
See chapter 8 in this book

The first step in developing a semistructured interview guide involves working from the domain code categories identified in unstructured interviews and the observation phase of ethnographic research. These domains and categories form the basis for questions in the semistructured interview. The qualitative data resulting from responses to questions in the semistructured interview are then the primary source for the variables that form the basis of the ethnographic survey.

In the Mauritius research, analysis of the “WORK DOMAIN” identified the following factors:

- *Work impact on lifestyle*
- *Work impact on social and familial relationships*
- *Reasons for working in the EPZ economic zone*
- *Attitudes about work*
- *Nature of the work unit*
- *Relationships with men at work*
- *Relationships with women at work*
- *Travel to work*
- *Participation in industry or union social (after-work) activities*
- *Relationships with supervisors at work*
- *Health and family planning services at the work site*

Each of the italicized phrases in this list can serve as the content for generating options or item-level responses to questions; those item-level responses constitute the beginnings of a coding system.

The researchers then formulated between one to five questions for each of the “WORK DOMAIN” factors listed. Of course, researchers in other studies can use more than five questions if there are subfactors that must be explored before identifying the variable level. See Table 7.1.

## CONSTRUCTING A SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### *Steps in Building the Questions for the Interview*

Semistructured interviews are built in the following way. The transcribed in-depth interviews and observational data obtained from the unstructured data collection observations are first analyzed by “domain.” Factors,

**TABLE 7.1** Work Section of Semistructured Interview Schedule Used in Mauritius Study

---

|  |  |
|--|--|
| PART II: RESPONDENT’S OPINIONS ABOUT WORKING WOMEN |  |
| 2.1  | What is your opinion about working women in Mauritius?   |
| 2.2  | According to you, what type of work is better suited to women?   |
| 2.3  | What major changes do you perceive in the lifestyle of working women of Mauritius?                                       |
| 2.4  | What in your view is the basic difference in the lifestyle of a working woman and a nonworking woman today?              |
| 2.5  | How would you describe a working woman’s relationship with (a) her family, (b) her boyfriend/husband, (c) female friend? |
| 2.6  | How does your family feel about your work?   |
| PART III: QUESTIONS ON RESPONDENT’S WORK           |  |
| 3.1  | For what reasons did you take up employment? (probe reasons for working—for money or other reasons)                      |
| 3.2  | Did you have any previous work experience or training for your present job?  |
| 3.3  | What were you doing prior to taking up your present job? (probe reasons for quitting previous job)                       |
| 3.4  | What are your feelings about your work?  |
| 3.5  | Could you please describe to me one of your typical working days?  |
| 3.6  | Do you work overtime? How often? What are your views concerning overtime?  |
| 3.7  | Do you have “night shifts” in your present work? What are your views on night work?                                      |
| 3.8  | How many people work in your section (of the factory), male and female?  |
| 3.9  | How much do you earn in a month? (Ask about mode of payment, i.e., paid on piece rate; monthly or weekly basis?)         |
| 3.10   | Could you tell me what positive/negative impacts your work has had on your life?   |

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which can be identified because they appear repeatedly as the researcher pores over the text data, exist within the domains. The domains of “teacher” and “competitions” appeared frequently in the interview of Jan Chandler, the violinist, as it did in the interviews with all the other violin students in this study. Initial data do not provide enough information to know in advance exactly how important these factors are, how widespread they are in the population, or exactly what they mean. Semistructured interviews, however, will help to answer these questions. That is why such interviews must be constructed around these factors, subfactors, or concepts. Social science researchers have devoted considerable time and energy to describing ways of formulating good questions for different types of interviews (Babbie 2007; Fink 1995; Sudman and Bradburn 1982). Semistructured interview questions are created following guidelines outlined in the following box.

#### **GUIDELINES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF GOOD SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- Make sure that questions use terms and phrases that are understandable to respondents.
- Keep the questions short; remember that probes play a key role in further operationalizing subfactors and variables.
- Use terminology appropriate to the respondents’ command of language, cultural background, age, gender, level of knowledge, and any other relevant characteristics.
- Avoid questions that “lead the witness” or are biased, such as “Don’t you think you would have learned more quickly if your teacher had provided you with more structure?”
- Avoid questions that make use of either a positive or negative association; for example, “How similar are your views on birth control to those of Mother Theresa?” “What do you think of the Nazi-like

practices of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo province of the former Yugoslavia?”

- Avoid “double barreled” questions that really are two questions in one; for example, “How often do you drink soda and coffee?” or “When did you last attend a concert or a ballet performance?”
- Avoid negatively worded questions; for example, “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: ‘Teachers should not use language proficiency tests to group students for ability.’”
- Avoid asking people to rank order information in a semistructured interview unless it’s absolutely necessary. Rank orderings require complex instructions, which informants frequently misunderstand.
- Avoid asking questions that require performing several tasks; for example, “From this list of ten reading programs, first circle the names of the three reading programs you use most often, and then put an ‘X’ next to the name of the one you prefer.”
- Don’t ask questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” when you really want as lengthy a description as possible. For example, say, “Describe for me the difference between performance assessment and value-added assessment” instead of “Is there a difference between performance assessment and value-added assessment?”
- Be sensitive to the cultural context or social meanings involved in the questions asked in the interview.

### *Ordering Questions in an Interview*

Researchers need to consider how to order and sequence questions in both semistructured and structured interviews. In general, questions should be ordered as follows:

- Temporally: From earlier events to more recent events
- According to complexity: From simpler topics to more complex ones

- According to topics or domains: Group all questions on the same or similar topics together
- By level of abstraction within domains: From the most concrete to the most abstract issues
- In accordance with the threat level: From the least sensitive or personal to the most sensitive or personal; place the most sensitive topics last

Some methodologists argue that researchers should “warm respondents up” by beginning with interesting but nonthreatening questions, and then follow with more challenging material. Other researchers argue that the most important information should be asked for first, so that if informants weary of the interview, the researcher has at least covered the most important issues before the informant stops talking. Most researchers arrive at a compromise, balancing sensitivity and expedience. Further, there is considerable disagreement as to what constitutes a threatening or sensitive question. In the United States, demographic questions often are defined as nonthreatening; interviewers often begin by asking for this information. However, some kinds of demographic information, including age and income, can be very sensitive to many respondents. Further, what’s *not* sensitive in one culture may be extremely sensitive in another. In repressive societies, revealing information about ethnic or religious affiliation can be dangerous; where population controls are enforced, telling an interviewer how many children a family has can result in reprisals. In yet other societies, even revealing one’s own name or the names of one’s kinfolk is taboo. A cautious interviewer pays attention to cues and the results of pilot or test interviews and learns to adapt the pace and sequencing of the interview or interviews to the respondent in order to cover all required topic areas.

### EXAMPLE 7.3

#### ADMINISTRATION OF A SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW

In the Mauritius study of work and workplace risks, a total of 120 workers—ninety women and thirty men—were selected to participate in semistructured interviews. Both men and women were divided evenly among the three ethno-religious groups:

Indo-Hindu, Creole-Catholic, and Indo-Muslim. Researchers conducted interviews in the cafeterias of the five largest industries on the island. Personnel managers arranged for the workers to take time off; the average length of the interviews was forty-five minutes. Seven interviewers were trained in conducting interviews and recording field notes and given a set of instructions typical of most training materials:


- Explain the nature of the research and receive oral consent from participants.
- Ask the demographic questions first.
- Ask questions about work after the demographic questions.
- Avoid repetition by recording answers interviewees give to questions you have not yet asked *when interviewees give them*, even if the answer was included as a part of an earlier question.
- As much as possible, sequence the topics or domains of the semistructured interview guide so that they flow naturally with the conversation.
- Avoid getting too far away from the main study topics or domains.
- With the time allotment set at one hour, do not feel that all questions need to be asked; rather, emphasize those factors about which the respondent most wants to talk.

With these instructions and practice with feedback, interviewers were able to conduct detailed interviews with women with few refusals.

### ANALYSIS OF SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW DATA

The text data generated by the semistructured interview in Mauritius were entered into the computer program **ETHNOGRAPH** and coded. We created code names for the domains, factors, subfactors, and associated codes, then applied the codes to the data (some of which are illustrated in the italicized blocks below), by the Domain (**WORK**) and the Factor (**WEFFECT**, that is, the effect of work on lifestyle). The boldfaced segments of text illustrate how, and which, variables emerged for **WEFFECT**:

*“Working has also helped her in **being independent financially** and helping her family out. From **her working experience** she has met all kinds of people, and she has encountered different problems or conflicts with them. Now **she feels more comfortable** in dealing with them.”*

**Definition:**  **ETHNOGRAPH** is one of several computerized data-management and analysis programs specifically designed for use by ethnographers in the organization and analysis of text/qualitative data



FACTOR      Variable

Work Effect    **Comfort and experience in dealing with a  
wide diversity of people  
Financial independence**

*“Now that she works, she finds it easier to **make friends with boys . . .**”*

FACTOR      Variable

Work Effect    **Male friends**

*“She gets **money** and she now has a **boyfriend in the factory** itself. She says now she finds it more interesting to work. Especially that her boyfriend works in the same factory. Ooma says that now [that] she **works**, she feels free and is **not stupid**. She can talk with people and she feels she is happy.”*

FACTOR      Variable

Work Effect    **Knowledge  
Money  
Boyfriend in factory  
Sense of freedom  
Happiness**

*“According to Faeza, women who **work neglect their family**. On the other side, the **working women are financially independent**. They can buy things and add to the needs of the house. She can dress well and buy clothes for herself. She is of the opinion that the lifestyle of women has changed radically, and she thought that first noticeable change is independence. Long ago, nonworking women stayed at home, they were housewives and knew only the four walls of their homes and their neighbors. Today, they are more free, self-sufficient, they have friends, and are open-minded. The relationship of a working woman with her family is more open.”*

**FACTOR      Variables**

**Work Effect**    **More money**  
                   **Less involvement with family**  
                   **Financial independence**  
                   **More open relationship with family**  
                   **More friends**

*“She considers it a positive impact that work has had on her life the fact that she can have all the [material] things she wants.”*

**DOMAIN FACTOR**

**Work            Material possessions**

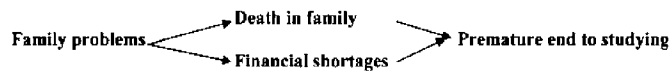
A similar procedure was developed in the Sri Lanka study. Unstructured interviewing and observation had identified the following factors as part of the FAMILY DOMAIN:

- Mother
- Father
- Siblings
- Household composition
- Economics
- Material possessions
- Family relationships
- Shared family activities
- Parental discipline
- **Family problems**
- Extended family
- Middle East employment

Questions were formulated for each of these factors (as well as factors included in other domains in the formative theoretical model) and used to interview a total of 156 young adult males and females in two sites in Sri Lanka: the University of Peradeniya and in an urban, low-income community in the capital, Kandy.

Analysis of the segments coded as **family problems** revealed the following:

*“He studied up to year nine at Punga Sanipadhara Vidyalaya [a public high school] in Kandy and he had to put a stop to his studies due to four **deaths** in the family within that year and **as money problems** in the family started increasing.”*



*“Her main reason for her sorrow is **that another family is living with them**. When I asked whether there are problems at home she said that she **doesn't like to live at home**.”*



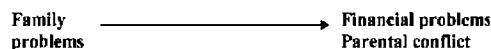
*“Due to **terrorism** they have **abandoned their lands** and home and have come to live at a rented house. Her mother suffers from **joint pains**. Most of the members of the family are living in their house, and the space is limited.”*



*“Every Friday they fast (Viratham). Her parents are very strict on religious activities. **They are very strict in selecting partners for their children**. They do not allow her go to night parties. Sometimes they refuse to allow visiting friends in the house. She obeys her parents very much. Restriction is important, and she feels her parents are doing their duty for the children. But sometimes children have **to break their rules in selecting a partner** and like (meaning ‘similar’) things.”*



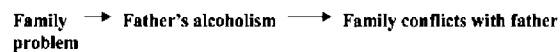
*“My **parents quarrel** quite often and they don't eat when they get any problem. I think **understanding between father and mother** is poor and the **financial situation** brings these problems.”*



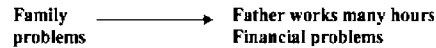
*“They [her parents] had a lot of **financial problems** at home which led her **mother to go to the Middle East** to work as a housemaid.”*



*“Her **father is an alcoholic** and comes home with his friends and drinks. He  **fights with the family** when he’s not given money he needs to drink.”*



*“Talking about her family problems she said her father won’t take alcohol or eat pork. But most of the time he is away from home. **He is so busy** that he gets **little time to spend with the family**. And also her father’s two younger sisters are widows. So according to their religion [Islam] it’s the duty of an elder brother to look after them after their parents’ death. So she tells that her father had to earn for all of them, and they have **financial problems**.”*



This analysis leads to a list of family problems, each of which could be treated as a variable, or an item or attribute of a variable.

- financial problems
- health problems
- poor housing conditions
- refugee status
- problems related to care of extended family members
- missing parents
- alcohol and drug use
- family conflicts
- parent-daughter conflicts

These procedures for identifying variables and items or attributes should be followed with respect to all of the questions in each of the domains included in the semistructured interview schedule.



## CONDUCTING SEMISTRUCTURED OBSERVATIONS

Semistructured observation schedules are important for investigating behaviors that are observable by researchers but which, because people are not aware or conscious of them, are difficult to obtain data on by means of interviews. Conducting observational research follows the same pattern as the collection of ethnographic data through interviewing—that is, it involves a continuum from:

- open ended and exploratory (as described in chapter 5 of this book); to
- more carefully defined and systematic but open ended; to
- structured observational schedules designed to quantify observations and test hypotheses using statistical analytical techniques.

Observation schedules focus on observable behaviors. Semistructured observational schedules focus on observable behaviors that occur regularly. The objectives of semistructured observation are similar to those for semistructured interviewing:

- to identify factors associated with domains;
- to identify variables associated with factors; and
- to identify items or attributes of variables that can be recorded systematically by virtue of their presence/absence or degree.

Physicians, epidemiologists, and medical social scientists have conducted semistructured observations to help them learn how mothers care for children with diarrhea or upper respiratory illnesses or when they wish to understand dietary inputs by watching how people purchase, prepare, distribute, and eat food. Social scientists use semistructured observations to document the nonverbal behavior of people engaged in argumentation, courtship, and deciding what to purchase. Semistructured observation requires an observational protocol similar to that used in semistructured interviewing, in which the major domains and factors believed

important in the study are listed and partially defined but the observer is required to identify and record in detail the specific behaviors believed to be important in each domain or factor. Semistructured observations also can be conducted in schools and classrooms where patterns of behavior tend to be somewhat regularized, and researchers can observe both pattern repetition and deviation. Deviation is particularly important, since one objective of research is to capture the range of variation in behavioral responses to the designated situation.

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 7, for the use of audiovisual recording techniques for recording human behavior *in situ*

**EXAMPLE 7.4****HEALTHY FOOD: THE MORAL REALM OF KINDERGARTEN SCHOOL LUNCH BOXES**

For her master's degree research, New Zealand graduate student Carla Rey-Vasquez did an exploratory study of the culture of a middle-class and very multiethnic kindergarten class. Beginning by simply observing the students in an unstructured way, she soon noticed that a preoccupation with food—specifically, what children brought for their lunches—emerged during the course of her initial observations. Food was divided into good food and bad food, and badness was associated with behavioral consequences. Semistructured interviews about the moral quality and behavioral consequences of particular foods yielded categories: Eating sugar made children “act silly.” “Eating junk food would rot your teeth.” “Lollies were bad food.” “Bad food made you weak.” Children compared what they had in their own lunch boxes and criticized those that were “weird” or “bad.” The teacher frequently discussed the value—or lack thereof—of different kinds of food.

The Ministry of Education had sent home strict rules to parents about what should be in the children's lunch boxes; children who showed up to school without lunches were taken to the auditorium and fed white bread sandwiches by the librarian. Sandwiches, indeed, were the mandated “good” lunch; ideally, they had to consist of some nutritious filling between pieces of organic bread. Semistructured interviews with teachers revealed the rationale behind these dictates. Sandwiches could be eaten quickly and didn't require eating utensils, so children had more time to play at recess. Deviations from the sandwich rule were viewed askance by teachers and students alike. But this ruling proved problematic for African, Japanese, and Indian children for whom sandwiches were a foreign item and for whom rice balls and curries or sushi were more common. Semistructured protocols guided Carla's careful examination of lunch boxes, which showed that to avoid embarrassment, some students made “sandwiches” from native flatbreads or pita bread, using curry and African stews as a filling.

To get a clearer idea of what was happening, Carla developed semistructured interviews and observations to more specifically determine what actually was in the lunch boxes and how children and teachers felt about them, and asked a number of teachers the same open-ended questions about food quality and expectations about children's food habits. She also asked individual children the same open-ended questions about what they ate, how they ate, how they felt about their food, and what they did with their lunches. She found that teachers invoked parental preferences for "good foods" and sent home requests for particular kinds of food in the school lunches. Natural or organic foods and fruits were "good"; processed foods and sweets were "bad." Charts and tables decorating the walls extolled the differences between good (nutritional, natural, healthful) and bad (containing sugars, food dyes, and fats) foods. Candy and sweets were considered "bad" food, while fruit was "good," as were vegetables and meat or fish. Junk food was bad food. Children were discouraged from trading or sharing their food: "Your mother intended for YOU to eat your lunch, and she knows what's good for you. So don't share." But children would trade, share, or barter anyway, trading "good" carrots and apples for "bad" and parentally forbidden fried chicken and sweet yogurt. Some even would put their own undesirable food item into someone else's lunch box to avoid eating it. Children evaluated what each lunch box contained and traded to improve the tastiness or desirability of their own meal, even though the punishment for sharing was being required to clean up rubbish during recess. They also rebelled against parents' concerns about food allergies, trading milk products and fried foods to children who were said to be allergic to milk and whose parents adhered to a middle-class, white, "healthy only" diet. Ultimately, Rey-Vasquez's study uncovered a highly moralized cultural realm in the classroom, structured on white, middle-class norms and reinforced by food consumption rules (Rey-Vasquez 2011).

Several important points should be kept in mind when conducting semistructured observations:

- Observations can be intrusive, especially in households or classrooms; semistructured (as well as structured) observations require regular presence and, often, the use of a visual recording device. This makes it necessary to establish good rapport with participants in the study before beginning observations in field settings. In the previous example, Rey-Vasquez was able to take advantage of her youth in interacting with young children, and what she was recording was simple enough to handle in field notes.

- Observations of complex social interactions are difficult to do alone because a single observer may not be able to capture all of the activities going on among all of the participants in a large event or a classroom. For example, it may be impossible for researchers to observe a classroom teacher using cooperative learning methods and at the same time to observe small working groups of students involved in shared learning activities. Again, Rey-Vasquez was able to complete her study by limiting what she examined. However, in more complex studies, collecting enough desired data may require conducting observations of this type with a colleague.
- Researchers must prepare well in advance because semistructured observations require as much thought, prior knowledge, and disaggregation of already gathered text data as other forms of data collection.
- Behaviors to be observed must be observable. Researchers in Mauritius and Sri Lanka could observe locations where young people met and could even observe certain expressions of affection in public settings such as parks and lovers' lanes, but they could not observe intimate behaviors placing young women at risk for sexually transmitted infections. In contrast, Allison Bingham, in a time-location study of exposure to malaria in a malaria-endemic area, found that it was entirely possible (although potentially risky!) to time observations of farmers' exposure to malaria-carrying mosquitoes each evening as they walked home from their farmlands (Bingham 1998).

Some populations such as school dropouts, political dissidents, or people infected with, but not exhibiting symptoms of, an illness also are difficult to find, and therefore, to observe. For more information on how to study "hidden" populations, see Book 4, chapter 6, on studying hidden and hard-to-reach populations.

**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 4,  
chapter 6, on hidden  
populations



### **SAMPLING IN SEMISTRUCTURED DATA COLLECTION**

Semistructured data collection in qualitative research has two main purposes. The first is to ensure data are collected on



the maximum range of variability in the major dimensions of the study model or with reference to the study questions. Range of variability is especially important if the next stage of the study is quantitative, because the items and variables identified through interviews and observations will lead directly to the development of ethnographically driven survey instruments, observational coding, or checklists.

If a study is qualitative only, then the second purpose is to interview or observe enough examples of cases so that patterns that differentiate among them emerge, can be demonstrated, and appear often enough to have their existence confirmed. The more important demographic or other domains of difference are in the study population, the larger the sample should be in order to allow for subgroup comparisons.

In establishing the basis for a survey of Southeast Asian young men from six different countries, it might be sufficient to interview up to ten people from each country, a total of sixty young men, to establish maximum range of variation in the population. Even if age is believed to make a difference, five older and five younger men from each country may still be sufficient. However, if length of residency in the United States also makes a difference, the sample might need to be increased to capture the maximum range of variation by duration of residency as well as age. If gender is a factor, then the sample would need to increase accordingly to ensure proper differentiation by gender across age and residency differences. Roughly, researchers need to engage in something like quota sampling, multiplying the number of variables times some specific small number to assure that each variant type is represented.

For the second purpose, where researchers want to compare in detail *within* as well as *across* groups, and where there is strong reason to believe that the groups are sufficiently different by nationality, duration of residency, age, and gender to warrant representation of each, a substantially larger number of in-depth interviews must be collected so as to show patterns in a convincing way both within and across groups. Taking into consideration the key differentiating variables of gender and duration of residency, identification of major themes and patterns within a group might require doubling

the sample size to a minimum of forty people per country, twenty males/females, half older and half younger, for a total sample size of 240 respondents rather than 120.

It is probably impractical and financially impossible to conduct, transcribe, code, and analyze more than three hundred in-depth semistructured interviews unless they are very short. The same rule of thumb applies to semistructured systematic observations. Thus, research designs should try to maintain reasonable sample sizes, restraining them to the minimum required to meet the goals and purposes of the study.

### **IDENTIFYING AND RESOLVING CHALLENGES IN SEMISTRUCTURED DATA COLLECTION**

Semistructured data collection is very rewarding because it offers the opportunity to collect comparable data in a flexible manner from a substantial number of people and to see patterned similarities and differences in the study sample in a detailed way. However, collection of these data is challenging because of the inherent contradiction between the mandatory requirements of the interview or observation schedule and the open-ended nature of the interviewing/observation process. Respondents invariably engage in an interview that feels like a conversation; they want to diverge from the topic to tell researchers about important but irrelevant aspects of their lives. And if only for politeness' sake, interviewers do not like to prevent respondents with whom they have already established a relationship from changing the topic. Semistructured data collection requires considerable skill and self-discipline on the part of the researcher to know when and how to transform a completely open-ended, respondent- or situation-driven *conversation* into a research-relevant *interview* that is both shaped by the researcher and negotiated with the respondent.

A second major challenge is to maintain limitations on the length of interviews or observational periods. After the freedom of completely open-ended observations and exploratory interviewing, it is easy to feel constrained by the requirements of the interview. However, especially when the study is qualitative only and is intended to exam-



ine systematic differences between groups of people in the study, it is necessary to capture information about the same domains of behavior and opinion and experience across all respondents. To do so, and at the same time to leave response sets open to exploration and difference, takes practice. In a team setting it is even more challenging since different interviewers have different skills, styles, and biases that may emerge only later in a study.

Finally, length of interview is a consideration. The costs of transcription and coding are high, but the benefits of rich and inclusive qualitative data also are high. Researchers and research teams always have to balance and justify the length of the interview/observation process and concomitant recorded data against the cost of transcription, coding, and analysis.

### **SUMMARY**

Semistructured interviews and observations can be an end point for qualitative data gathering. Researchers begin their investigation with open-ended interviewing and observation that has the lowest power of representation and the broadest range of exploratory potential. As they learn what to look for, they increase the power of representation and decrease the range of topics and subtopics that they can explore. Semistructured interviewing and observation offer researchers the most systematic opportunity for the collection of purely qualitative data. An ethnographic research project may end here with a report of exploratory or descriptive data, or it may continue on to transform qualitatively defined factors and variables into quantitative measures amenable to investigation by using the techniques of survey research—systematic, structured, and standardized data collection; random sampling with a large sample size; and hypothesis testing through statistical analyses. In the next chapter we use the same structures—formative theory and research model, domains, factors, and variables—to guide the construction of an ethnographic survey or self-administered questionnaire.

# 8

## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

### WHAT IS A GROUP INTERVIEW?

Group interviews may be formal or informal, preorganized or occurring in natural settings, guided to a greater or lesser degree by the anthropologist/facilitator, and more or less open ended. Group interviews are interactive; members are encouraged to express their opinions and to discuss them with one another.

Group interviews offer a lot of advantages. They generate a considerable quantity of data in a relatively short period from a larger number of people than would be possible by interviewing key informants only. Because they are interactive, they allow the researcher to record and analyze the reactions of different group members to ideas and to each other (Morgan 1988, 12). The “natural language discourse” and styles of debate elicited in group interviews allows the researcher to learn idiomatic expressions, common terminology, and communication patterns in the community in a rapid and concise manner. Group interviews provide access to a rich source of data on social norms, behaviors, opinions and attitudes, structural features of a group or community, and cultural patterns. They can be used in conjunction with other sources of information to provide a well-rounded picture of the population or to develop cultural intervention material for use in behavioral change programs.

*What Is a Group Interview?*

*Formal Focus Group Interviews*

*Organizing and Preparing for Formal Focus Group Interviews*

*Creating a Representative Sample for a Focus Group*

*Identifying and Training Focus Group Facilitators*

*Conducting a Focus Group Interview*

*Asking Questions in Focus Group Interviews*

*Characteristics of Good Focus Group Questions*

*Recording Data from Focus Group Interviews*

*Videotaping*

*Validity and Reliability in Research with Focus Groups*

*Management and Analysis of Focus Group Interviews*

*Advantages, Uses, and*

*Limitations of Focus Group Interviews*

**Definition:**

A group interview is any discussion held between researchers and more than one other individual. A group interview can also be conducted by multiple researchers and a single interviewee

*Reasons for Conducting Group Interviews*

**Group interviews** are useful for:

- collecting information on a cultural domain;
- developing listings for pilesorts;
- identifying the range of variation in opinions or attitudes on a set of topics;
- collecting simple numerical data on reported experiences;
- responding to the results of previously collected data;
- orienting oneself to a new field of study;
- generating hypotheses based on informants' insights;
- evaluating different research sites or study populations;
- developing individual questions for interview schedules and questionnaires;
- obtaining participants' interpretations of results gathered in earlier research studies;
- obtaining respondents' views of a specific product, survey instrument, or other material artifact.

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 3, on cultural consensus analysis through listings and pilesorts

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 1, on material artifacts

**Key point**

Like individual interviews and observations, group interviews can be arrayed along a continuum of informal to formal—less to more planned and structured—as summarized in Table 8.1.

*Their advantages notwithstanding, formal group interviews have some limitations. They are only one among a series of interactive approaches to the collection of qualitative and quantitative ethnographic data. They should never be considered as a replacement for other forms of data collection.* More information on informal group interviews is provided in chapter 4 of this book. In this chapter we concentrate on the more preplanned and structured formal focus group interviews.

**Cross Reference:**

See this book, chapter 4, on participant observation and informal interviewing, including group interviewing

**FORMAL FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**

The formal focus group technique appeared in the 1930s as an alternative to direct interviews during a time when quantitative researchers were exploring alternatives to sur-

**TABLE 8.1** Comparison of Organization and Structuring of Group Interviews

| <b>HIGHLY INFORMAL</b>  | <b>HIGHLY FORMAL</b>   |
|---|--|
| Timing is spontaneous and not previously determined   | Timing is carefully preplanned and prescheduled  |
| Interview takes place in naturalistic setting chosen by participants  | Interview takes place in planned or contrived setting, chosen by the interviewer   |
| Interview is interactive and takes place in the normal course of conversation or activity                                 | Interview is directed in the form of questions that call for response; no interactive discussion between facilitator and respondents, although interaction may be encouraged among respondents |
| Size of the group subject to natural conditions in the field and not controlled by the field researcher                   | Size is strictly controlled in advance, and only those invited are admitted to the interview   |
| Respondents are self-selected   | Respondents are preselected  |
| Incentives to participate are never provided  | Incentives to participate are always provided  |
| Few predetermined questions; interview subject to interviewing skills and knowledge of the field researcher at the moment | All questions are predetermined, although probes may be used by the interviewer  |
| Researcher has an already established relationship with the group   | Researcher may have no relationship with the group, although the best interviews are conducted by those with extensive prior knowledge of the subject  |

vey research. During the 1940s at the onset of World War II, prominent American anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict used direct and indirect qualitative research methods, including group interviews, to study national character. Sociologists such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton also explored the use of focus groups for assessing media affects on attitudes toward the United States' involvement in World War II (Merton 1987; Stewart and Shamdasani 2007). Working for the Columbia University Office of Radio Research, they recruited groups of people to respond to radio programs designed to encourage improved morale with regard to the war effort. Listeners were asked to press buttons depending on whether their reaction to the radio message was positive or negative. Subsequently they were asked about their reasons for reacting as they did (Merton 1987). The two critical elements in this research, which now constitute important aspects of formal group interviewing are: 1) administering strategically targeted or "focused" interviews designed to obtain information on themes deemed important by the investigators;

and 2) recording people's responses at the moment or in face-to-face interaction.

These techniques have been used in advertising since the mid-1940s on, but it was not until the 1970s that, along with other qualitative data-collection techniques, the "focus group" came to be seen as a legitimate means of collecting information in field settings in the social sciences. Nowadays, some researchers view focus groups as a replacement for survey research because they are perceived to be less expensive than surveys while providing more information than individual interviews about how people think and feel about products or issues. More recently focus groups are being used to study the range of knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs in a variety of social situations and have become a widely accepted means of collecting formative, process, and outcome data in programs addressing a variety of means of introducing, stimulating, or supporting social change. Indeed, some methodologists have said that formal focus groups are the only reasonable way of collecting qualitative data. *We do not agree that focus groups are a substitute for surveys, nor do we think that they are the "only way to collect qualitative data." However, we do believe that group interviews can provide large amounts of data in relatively short periods of time, provided that they are set in the context of other data-collection efforts, that the data collected are appropriate to the focus group format, and that the data collected are not equated with that from a statistically representative sample.*



#### Key point

### ORGANIZING AND PREPARING FOR FORMAL FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

When might researchers decide to conduct focus group interviews? As mentioned, the desire to collect a lot of data quickly is one motivator. Individual in-depth interviews provide rich data but can take a long time, and to obtain a complete picture they have to be repeated with different respondents. The group interview, however, elicits extensive information from a more broadly representative number of people simultaneously within a one- to two-hour period. Given the length of time required to transcribe interviews

the group interview is a far more efficient means of collecting and recording specific kinds of information.

Focus groups provide a means of assessing locally valid or meaningful surveys for feasibility and acceptability. Quantifiable survey data are usually collected with questionnaires or instruments that have predetermined and numerically limited responses to questions for respondents to choose. Researchers face two major challenges in the creation of socially/culturally valid and reliable questionnaires: identifying the appropriate questions and finding the appropriate response alternatives. When time and other resources are short and researchers do not know whether they have captured all the questions or discovered every important alternative response, focus group interviews can be extremely useful in discovering new closed-ended items. A group interview with people from the study group in which survey questions are reviewed and assessed for meaning, relevance, and format is a good way to assess feasibility and acceptability of the instrument (Kreuger 2009). The focus group is also a good way to assess the validity of the study results (Powell, Single, and Lloyd 1996; Vogt, King, and King 2004).

Before deciding on focus groups as a form of data collection, careful thought must be given as to why data should be collected in this way, what kinds of data are needed, and under what circumstances, by whom, and how the data will be used. To prepare, researchers should consider:

- what should be the choice of interview topic;
- whom should be invited to participate;
- how comparison groups can be created;
- how to set up an interview process;
- how to conduct the interview once it is organized.

### *Finding the Focus of the Formal Group Interview*

*The first step in preparing for a more formal interview is to determine the “focus of the interview.”* Focus groups are relatively brief, usually no more than two hours in total. Thus, a limited number of topics can be discussed. Respondents can easily become bored with a discussion if it is *too*

Key point



focused, but the natural conversation flow may extend the conversation beyond the focus of the focus group. Focus group discussions do offer the opportunity for flexibility in question and response, and they may generate new ideas and information. Thus the success of focus groups depends a great deal on balancing breadth and depth of participation within a restricted time period.



**Definition:**

The target population consists of the people the researcher wants to study or to affect



**Definition:**

A cultural domain is one of the major categories of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, or policies that constitute the formative model and the focus of the study

One way to begin the process of deciding on focus group topics is to frame discussions around a specific number of domains. We suggest that formal focus group discussions should center on the relationship between **target populations**, or the group that the researcher wants to study or affect, and one or two **cultural domains**. Among cultural domains often addressed by social scientists in their research are “sports and leisure activities,” “drug use,” “dietary patterns,” “contraceptive choices,” “educational practices,” “peers,” “street life,” “health practices,” “religious beliefs and preferences,” “secular institutional affiliations,” and “attitudes about the environment” (Spradley 1979; Trotter and Schensul 1998). Each of these domains is broad enough so that both facilitators and participants can identify and discuss a variety of subdomains or subtopics. A prepared facilitator will consider the most important subtopics for discussion ahead of time and prepare questions related to them for use in the focus group. The discussion can also address questions researchers have about whether findings of a study are valid and what they mean to respondents or others from the study community.

### *Choosing a Target Population and Recruiting the Sample*



**Key point**

**Three important factors influence choice of the target population:**

- the purpose of the study;
- whom the study is intended to help or illuminate;
- for whom the information generated from the study is intended.

The following example considers whom to include in a study of diabetes among Latinos by age, gender, and language preference.

**EXAMPLE 8.1**

## DECIDING WHOM TO INCLUDE IN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS ON DIABETES WITH LATINO ADULTS

A team of anthropologists, mass media experts, and community leaders were developing a project designed to reach Puerto Rican women between the ages of forty-five and sixty who were potentially at high risk for onset of insulin-dependent Type II diabetes. To assist in the formation of a mass media campaign and strategies for direct communication regarding the need for screening, symptom reporting, and regular clinic visits, focus groups were planned with the “target population,” that is, Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican women of the target age group. The team spent several planning sessions collecting information to help them decide whether it was worthwhile to interview several other groups, including men who were partners and caregivers of female diabetics, younger women caregivers, and English-speaking Puerto Rican women. Considering time, money, and cultural factors, the team decided to conduct formative focus groups with women at the upper and lower end of the at-risk age continuum. Because men were not seen as sources of support and information to the women, they were not included in the formative formal focus group sample. However, men *were* included in the overall evaluation since both components of the campaign were intended to have secondary influence on male partners’ knowledge and behavior.



The following example includes two different approaches to identifying focus group candidates, predetermined groups (children in two classrooms), and an invited diverse group of adult caregivers (parents, teachers, and after-school service providers).

**EXAMPLE 8.2**

## FOCUS GROUP WITH CHILDREN AND ADULTS TO IDENTIFY DAILY ACTIVITIES

A study of Puerto Rican children’s energy expenditures called for creating a list of activities typically engaged in by children between the ages of seven and ten. To create such a list and accompanying meanings for the activities, researchers Schensul

and Diaz held focus group discussions with children in two mixed first- and second-grade bilingual classes. They then interviewed a group including ten mothers, teachers, and after-school program workers to obtain and verify a complete list of Puerto Rican children's activities, as well as information about where, at what time of day, during what season of the year, and how often each day or week these activities took place (J. J. Schensul, Diaz, and Woolley 1996).

### CREATING A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE FOR A FOCUS GROUP

Focus group interviewing uses a **quota sampling** procedure. Quota sampling assumes diversity within a target population. *The first step in quota sampling is to identify those sources of diversity or variation in the community of interest that are believed to be significant to the study.*



#### Key point with

#### Definition:



Quota sampling involves selecting equal numbers of respondents to represent each characteristic, group, or sector within a population

Focus groups are then organized to include representation from each of these sectors. Depending on the purpose of the study, focus groups may incorporate representatives of all sectors, or separate focus groups may be held for each one of the major sectors in the target population. Considerable thought must be given to representativeness of group membership and to the combination of individuals who are most likely to produce rich data and to enhance the likelihood that all present will contribute. Mixed gender groups, for example, may not feel comfortable at first discussing topics related to sex, power, or abuse. However, heterogeneous groupings are useful if the ethnographer knows enough about the study community to understand how diversity of membership can produce lively interaction.



#### Definition:

A sampling frame consists of a set of criteria for selecting the kinds of individuals to be included in a sample, as well as a list of individuals from which to draw the sample

The first step in selecting participants for focus group interviews is to create a **sampling frame**. A sampling frame consists of a set of criteria for selecting the kinds of individuals to be included in a sample, as well as a list of individuals from which to draw the sample, if one can be obtained. Below we discuss a number of ways to create a quota sampling frame for focus group interviews.

### **METHODS FOR CREATING A QUOTA SAMPLING FRAME**

- Generate a framework that includes the various groups believed to be part of the study population.
- Use previously generated data to identify groups that may be different and should be included in the sample.
- Create a profile of characteristics in the specific target population for the study.

In other words, the best way to ensure adequate representation is to know quite a lot about the study community and what the major grouping categories might be in relation to the focus group topic. Because a major reason for conducting focus groups is to capture the potential range of variation in the overall target population—including ethnic variation, gender differences, age groupings, geographic residence, type of work, and more—it is especially important to include representatives from a sufficient number of groups. It can be important to hold some important characteristics constant—such as ethnicity, ability level, or gender—in each focus group. This means that all members of a given group will be identical on that particular characteristic—ethnicity, ability level, gender—though they may vary considerably on other characteristics.

A number of researchers suggest that ethnographers must conduct at least two focus groups for each variable of concern to ensure that they capture most aspects related to the subject of inquiry (Khan et al. 1990). If two variables are considered, such as age and work patterns, at least four focus groups should be held: a minimum of two groups representing participants from several different “age groupings” (perhaps older and younger, or under/over thirty-five years of age), and several more groups representing two different categories of “work patterns (see the example provided in Table 8.2 below).” Table 8.3 has two variables, ethnicity/social race and gender.

**TABLE 8.2** Sample of Groups for a Study of Age Differences in Work Patterns

| Age Grouping | Type of Work    |                |             |
|--------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|
|              | Vendors/Hawkers | Service Sector | Contractors |
| 16–25        | 2               | 2              | 2           |
| 26–35        | 2               | 2              | 2           |
| 36 +         | 2               | 2              | 2           |

**TABLE 8.3** Sectors in a Study of Race and Gender Participation in an Arts Program

| Gender | Ethnic/Racial Identity |           |         |                   |                  |
|--------|------------------------|-----------|---------|-------------------|------------------|
|        | Asian                  | Caucasian | Latinos | African Americans | Native Americans |
| Female |                        |           |         |                   |                  |
| Male   |                        |           |         |                   |                  |

Depending on the research focus, researchers may either arrange two groups, one male and one female (if gender difference is the primary interest), with varied ethnicity, or five groups—if gender/ethnicity differences are of primary interest. In the most extreme case, researchers would organize ten groups, one for each of the variants in the table. The strategy used would depend on the research focus. In some cases, the complexity of variables and their interaction makes it necessary to conduct quite a few interviews. In other cases, the fraught nature of relationships between the various groups might mandate separate focus groups for each.

Researchers make judicious decisions about how many focus groups to hold with representatives from each grouping, depending on how much information they hold in advance and how much information they obtain during the first group interviews.

In a drug study being conducted in Hartford, Connecticut, three age categories, eighteen to twenty-four, twenty-five to thirty-nine, and forty and over, emerged as important in differentiating types of drug users. In addition, three categories of drug users have emerged from ethnographic and quantitative data: those using “gateway drugs” (marijuana, alcohol, and cigarettes), those snorting or sniffing cocaine and/or heroin, and those using drugs

intravenously. Three class categories in this study also were important: urban unemployed, urban employed, and suburban employed persons.

Obviously, since staff, time, and financial resources are limited, researchers will need to determine which differences are most important in accurately representing the target community in order to make their decisions.

### EXAMPLE 8.3

#### FOCUS GROUPS WITH LATINOS ABOUT HIV

The Boulder County AIDS Project (BCAP) wanted to determine whether the information campaign they had organized for HIV/AIDS prevention was reaching the rapidly growing population of Latino immigrants in the county. They hired Elias Martinez, a bilingual researcher from the University of Colorado who grew up along the Texas/Mexico border, to conduct focus groups among groups in the Latino population. BCAP wanted to assess: (1) levels of information—and misinformation—about HIV/AIDS and its transmission, (2) which sources of information Latinos in Boulder County used to find out about health care resources, (3) the extent to which Latinos used condoms and other means to prevent infection with HIV/AIDS, and (4) whether or not Latinos had seen or used the brochures and other materials on HIV/AIDS BCAP had developed for use by health care workers in the county.

Knowing the population well, Martinez decided to select the following groups: one of adult male and one of adult female migrant workers; one of male and female Latino adolescents; one of male and one of female native-born U.S. citizens of Latino origin; one of male Latinos working as professionals or volunteers to improve the conditions of Latinos in Boulder County, and one of parents of elementary and middle school Latino children. The group of professionals was recruited through a network of like-minded colleagues. However, Martinez faced a number of difficulties organizing the remaining five groups. First, many members of the migrant worker group were undocumented immigrants who feared being deported and were reluctant to talk with strangers. Martinez worked through an alcohol treatment center and a local clinic serving Latinos to find participants for the migrant worker and Chicano groups. Second, Martinez needed to secure parental permission before youths under the age of eighteen could participate in the research. Contacting youth through the schools required equally time-consuming permissions from school district institutional review boards (IRBs). To resolve the problem, Martinez solicited participants from a youth group run by the local church diocese. Third, women, particularly the migrant workers, were reluctant to talk about sexual practices of any kind, especially to a male interviewer. Martinez hired a young Latina social worker to conduct these interviews by herself; she assisted him with the other

interviews. Finally, many male members of the target population were reluctant to discuss a disease that they felt only homosexuals—which they denied being—could contract. Martinez’s knowledge of Latino cultural beliefs about sexual practices and homosexuality in general helped him tease out sources of bias and denial in these interviews (Martinez 1998).

**Key point**

Can the results of focus group interviews be generalized, or taken as representative of the larger population from which the focus group participants were drawn? *If sampling methods are carefully spelled out and if efforts to achieve representativeness are based on prior knowledge of the target populations, the results obtained through focus group interviews can be generalized with caution.* Generalizability can be considered when responses are patterned in predictable ways across groups. If the researcher conducts five focus group interviews each with older and younger Chinese women living in Flushing, New York, and finds that the within-age group perspectives are consistently similar and between-age group perspectives are consistently different, the researcher can feel more confident that the focus group responses reflect patterns prevailing in the larger population.

**EXAMPLE 8.4****FOCUS GROUPS WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SRI LANKA EXPLORING KNOWLEDGE OF HOW HIV/AIDS IS CONTRACTED**

In a city in the central highland area of Sri Lanka, two groups of male and female university students participated in focus groups discussing how they believe HIV/AIDS is contracted. They listed twelve ways, including sitting on a toilet seat used by a person with AIDS, mosquito bites, giving blood, touching the face of a person with HIV, and intimate sexual contact. When focus groups on this topic were held with young people in a low-income neighborhood near downtown, no new items emerged. A scale of “ways of contracting AIDS” was developed that included all the items. When this scale was reviewed with two additional groups, one in the community and one in the university, once again no new items emerged. Researchers could thus conclude that the listing was representative of the kind of information possessed in the overall population of youth in the target population (Silva et al. 1997).



In sum, one main purpose of focus group research is to identify important issues, domains for further investigation, meanings, values, opinions, behaviors, and explanations for cultural or physical phenomena. ***Focus group interviews can identify important variations in these areas, as well as the overall range of opinion, belief, or information held by the target population. It is crucial, however, to remember that focus group responses cannot be treated as percentages of the population. They are not intended to identify the distribution of these opinions, meanings, issues, or behaviors within the target population.*** Quantitative survey research using random or representative sampling techniques is required for this purpose. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that random sampling is not required in selecting respondents for any type of group interview.

**Key point**

### *Identifying and Recruiting Participants*

Once a list of sampling categories has been identified, ethnographers must identify and recruit participants. Some of the main ways to identify participants are described here.

*The ethnographer creates a list of all people known to be in the desired category, based on knowledge about people in the category.* A formative study to identify Puerto Rican families' perceptions of Alzheimer's disease (J. Schensul, Torres, and Wetle 1994) called for a comparison of health care providers' views of cognitive impairment with the views of families caring for Alzheimer's victims. Only a small number of geriatricians and social workers—sixteen in total—had experience with dementias, including Alzheimer's disease. All of them were invited to attend a focus group where they were asked to identify and prioritize symptoms of Alzheimer's disease and to discuss how it affected Puerto Ricans. Ten of them participated.

*The ethnographer uses a preexisting telephone or mailing list.* It is always easier to identify focus group members from a preexisting list. Lists of individuals can sometimes be obtained from agencies and organizations, clubs, and membership groups when confidentiality is not an issue. Because these lists may not identify individuals with the specific characteristics sought in the target group, researchers will need

to develop a screening tool that allows them to identify the appropriate candidates by age, gender, ethnicity, residence, and specific behaviors of interest.

*The ethnographer can advertise.* Clinical researchers often advertise in regional or local newspapers for subjects wishing to participate in clinical trials. For example, marijuana researchers at the University of Connecticut Health Center recruit regular marijuana users who wish to quit through newspaper advertisements, and osteoporosis researchers at a local health research center conduct clinical trials of new drugs advertised for women who are short, slim, postmenopausal, and not taking hormone replacements.

*Researchers can use snowball or network sampling.* Snowball or network sampling techniques recruit initial or index individuals who then identify other people they know who possess the characteristics desired by the researcher (Trotter and Schensul 1998; Watters and Biernacki 1989). This strategy guarantees that some participants will recommend others.

*Researchers can ask for assistance from organizations providing services to people whom researchers want to include in focus groups.* This strategy was used by Martinez in his study of the Boulder HIV/AIDS study. When contacting agency directors or project managers, the researchers should describe the nature of the research and the types of persons to be recruited. If agency personnel agree to help, researchers also will need to provide them with information about the project, eligibility for participation, duration of the group interview, and what the immediate benefits are to participants.

Once identified, researchers contact them directly, explain the purpose of the focus group, and invite them to participate. If incentives are given, potential candidates should be told about them in advance. Incentives cover the time that is given for the focus group, not for information, and generally consist of small amounts of cash, gift certificates, food vouchers, or other items as appropriate.



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 3,  
chapter 10; Book 4,  
chapter 5

### *Choosing an Appropriate Site for Focus Group Sessions*

One of the most important considerations in ensuring focus group attendance is location. ***Sites should be private, and comfortable, where people can express their opinions freely and without interruption.***

Key point



The four most important factors in choosing a good site for formal focus group discussions are:

- Convenience
- Perceptions of prospective participants about the site
- Accessibility
- Size
- Facilities amenities

#### *Convenience*

Researchers need to know how convenient it is for participants to get to the location. Long distances, the high cost of transportation, difficulty locating parking, the high cost of parking, or perceptions of safety in the neighborhood may be barriers to participation.

#### *Perceptions*

Researchers also must consider how participants feel about the location. Is it one normally used by the people who are to be invited? Do they see it as a place where they will feel welcome and comfortable, or will they feel like outsiders? We are not suggesting that focus groups always must be held in places used by participants. New places are quite appropriate and may even be of great interest to participants, as long as the places selected are not perceived as locations from which they have been excluded in the past.

#### *Accessibility*

Another consideration is whether it is easy for participants to locate the meeting space in the building where

the focus group is to be held. A hospital in Hartford is very generous with meeting space, but, with new construction and several new wings, getting to the correct entrance is complicated. Once inside, the locations designated for public meetings are very difficult to find. One participant, searching for a focus group on child care, found herself at a reception with people who seemed friendly and where food and coffee was being served. She stayed for almost an hour, waiting for the group to begin, before she discovered that she had been told by the hospital information desk to go to the wrong place. She missed the focus group session altogether (although she met a lot of very pleasant people!).

### *Size*

A crucial consideration is size. Is there sufficient space to accommodate the size of the group? The space designated for the interview should be big enough but also appropriate to the size of the group. A small group will feel more comfortable if it meets in a smaller space rather than an auditorium.

### *Facilities and Amenities*

An important issue also is whether the location has the proper facilities and environment for conducting a more formal focus group interview. Focus group settings with low levels of background noise are preferable. There should be enough comfortable chairs to accommodate everyone. Tables should be flexible and easily movable, so decisions to keep or remove tables, couches, and other furniture can be made at the last minute. There should be a place for serving food and drinks, a blackboard or its equivalent, and sufficient light. Researchers sometimes must “make do.” In Sri Lanka, researchers organizing focus groups with school children on concepts of mental health and mental health programming used whatever space was available in the school or in the school yard and managed some degree of privacy by asking curious nonparticipants to leave the area. In one instance, researchers held a meeting in a public school run by Catholic nuns. Adolescent girls were eager

to talk until researchers probed the topic of relationships with boys. The girls advised the researchers that one of the nuns had entered the library and was seated at a distance, reading. The girls were reluctant to disclose any information, and researchers had to ask the nun to leave in order to continue the conversation (Nastasi 1998).

### IDENTIFYING AND TRAINING FOCUS GROUP FACILITATORS

Both formal and informal group interviewing call for ethnographic fieldwork skills.

#### Cross

#### Reference:

See Books 1 and 2 for descriptions of such skills



### BASIC SKILLS FOR GROUP INTERVIEWERS

- The ability to synthesize qualitative data and formulate questions spontaneously in the field
- Being able to ask questions in a group setting as if one were a member of the group while still eliciting more or less satisfactory answers
- The ability to mentally (and physically) record responses so that they can be recalled and reconstructed later
- Group facilitation and management skills
- Experience in using appropriate equipment for recording data

Interviewers must follow the interview schedule, and at the same time they also must be ready to use probes, new questions, and other techniques to stimulate participants to tell their stories. They must retain large amounts of qualitative information, be able to sift through it quickly, and organize it spontaneously so as to improve or add to the existing interview schedule as situations require and to summarize results at the end.

Formal focus groups must be purposefully directed and managed, so good group facilitation skills are a real advantage for any focus group leader. Focus group leaders should be able to help group members to meet one another and build a degree of trust and group identity. Experienced facilitators can help respondents see that their views are



important, and can create opportunities that allow each respondent to participate. Facilitators are charged with managing that handful of people who might be confrontational, overly opinionated, very emotional or who want to dominate the conversation, thus leaving everyone else out.

### *Who Are the Best Individuals to Run a Focus Group?*

The best candidates to facilitate formal focus groups are those with whom the respondents feel comfortable and confident enough to express their opinions easily. It is important to consider in advance who such candidates might be. Should they be ethnographically trained researchers or project lead investigators or experienced people from the local community? If not part of the study team, what kind of experience should they have? Should they be of the same age or ethnic group as the participants? How much prior experience should they have had with the subject matter in order to be able to ask good questions while empathizing with the respondents? Should a special kind of facilitator be chosen if the topic of discussion is an illegal activity? Should the facilitator have the same professional credentials as the respondents? Is it better to select someone with teaching experience and a degree to conduct focus group interviews with educators? Should there be cofacilitators? If so, how should they be chosen so that they complement one another, and how should they work together? Regardless of *whom* is chosen, good focus group facilitators are individuals who:

- have language skills that match those of the respondents;
- demonstrate that they can function well in a group setting;
- have no strong opinions about the topic in question and, if and when they do, can withhold their opinions during the group's discussions;
- do not wish to use the focus group as a platform for airing their own views;
- are good listeners;

- have conceptual skills and can demonstrate that they can summarize the suggestions and ideas of group members to reflect what group participants have said;
- are similar to the study population in age, ethnicity, or other characteristics.

The next example shows how knowledgeable laypeople possessing the characteristics listed also can be hired as focus group interviewers.

**EXAMPLE 8.5****TRAINING NONETHNOGRAPHERS TO CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS**

Husaini and colleagues illustrate ways in which nonethnographers can be trained to conduct qualitative assessments to improve children's growth monitoring and nutritional services. In their study, regional nutritionists were trained for one week to collect data using rapid assessment procedures (RAP). Focus group interviews were held with three groups:

1. mothers with children under three years, chosen randomly from those visiting the center on that day
2. cadres (health volunteers) active on the day of the interviewing
3. key persons in each village, including head of subvillages and hamlets, religious leaders, women of the family welfare movement, and members of the village community welfare movement


Information focused on knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices in monthly weighing, use of health outpost services, breast-feeding and infant feeding, and benefits provided by the health outpost to people attending. Focus group sessions lasted one-and-a-half hours. Two nutritionists, one facilitating and the other recording, guided each focus group meeting. Focus group data demonstrated the existence of important variations across communities in the circumstances of service, the level of volunteerism, the protocols for weighing and recording, the administration of vitamins, the availability of counseling, the role of family, and the frequency of visits. These data were taken into consideration in the creation of a program for improvement of local outpost services (Husaini, Satoto, and Karyadi 1992).



Focus group interviews are often conducted in multilingual, cross-cultural or cross-national settings, where one or more members of the research team do not understand the local language and culture. In such situations, members of the research team must work together to construct appropriate questions in the local language, consistent with local cultural beliefs and practices and appropriate to the knowledge level and developmental age of the participants. Prior ethnographic experience coupled with cross-cultural teamwork is helpful in such situations, as is the identification of a good translator. The complicated nature of the translation process should not be underestimated. At best, it involves joint decision making about the terms and concepts to be used in the project, or at least paying careful attention to how such terms and concepts are translated into local languages so that all researchers/interviewers understand the basic principles and questions of the research. In addition, it cannot be assumed that the dialect or slang usages extant in the research site correspond to the particular linguistic facility of research team members who know the overall language of participants. The following examples illustrate this process.

**EXAMPLE 8.6** **FOCUS GROUPS WITH MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN IN SRI LANKA**

Nastasi and her colleagues conducted focus group interviews with middle school children in central Sri Lanka. The team included a Sri Lankan child psychiatrist and a professor of education. The team met together to formulate questions appropriate for the cultural setting and age of the children. In addition to translating questions from English to Tamil and Sinhala, the researchers had to translate language use from theoretical constructs to lay language, and from adult to children's language usages. This transformation occurred not only in the formulation phase but also in the field, as results were translated from Tamil and Sinhala. The latter process generated still more questions from English-only researchers. These were then translated back into either of the two local languages in a style appropriate for the group (Nastasi, Varjas, Bernstein, and Jayasena 2000).



### *Responsibilities of Facilitators*


The focus group facilitator has several key responsibilities. She/he must:

- Keep the discussion on topic.
- Ensure that the topics to be addressed in the group are culturally acceptable for the majority of the group members.
- Help individuals in the group to avoid extremely personal disclosures that they might regret later on.
- Make sure that the focus group does not turn into a therapy group.
- Make sure that every participant has an opportunity to speak as well as to listen in the group.

Facilitators must cover the important questions in sequence, remember group responses, and use the information during the group session to improve on the question sequence. One facilitator is needed to run an average-sized focus group of about five to fifteen members. Usually a single facilitator is better than two for a focus group of this size because the flow of questioning can be lost unless two facilitators are able to work together with a high degree of empathy and coordination.

Facilitators, however, cannot be recorders. Facilitators also need a recording partner to take notes using a computer, notebook, newsprint (or flipchart or white/blackboard), audiotape recorder, video camera, or other locally available recording device. The recorder also should know as much about the topic as the facilitator in order to recognize what is important to record. Training in knowing *what* to record applies—even though the rule of thumb is to record everything or at least as much as possible—regardless of the modes of recording. Later in this chapter, we will discuss types of data collected in the focus group setting and how to record the important points.

The facilitators should practice in advance in order to avoid reinforcing one point of view or set of comments

**Cross Reference:**   
See Book 4, chapter 7, on audiovisual research; see also Book 4, Chapter 8, on participatory ethnographic video



over another. They should be able to recognize that some people are more comfortable expressing themselves in public than others and hence may be able to do so more effectively. Facilitators can help participants expand upon their ideas by using interviewing techniques such as probes, repeated statements, and statements such as “Can you explain a little bit more about what you mean?” “Can you define the term you just used, so that others can understand it a bit more clearly?” or “Could you give an example of what you mean?”

## **CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW**

### *Getting Started*

In opening the focus group discussion, the facilitator should make sure to:

- Explain to participants the purpose of the group discussion, why they have been selected or invited, and why they are important to the project.
- Explain the roles of the facilitator and the recorder(s).
- Ask permission to audiotape or videotape.
- Have everyone introduce themselves at the beginning.
- Explain the “ground rules” for the discussion:
  - everyone should participate;
  - all ideas are equally valid;
  - there are no right or wrong answers;
  - each person’s view should be heard and respected;
  - confidentiality should be preserved, with nothing disclosed within the focus group or shared with people outside the focus group.

Participants should be told that “nobody wins” in a focus group. Participants are free to respond to and disagree with the ideas or opinions of another group member; disagreement is helpful, but it should be presented “with respect” or as an alternative viewpoint rather than as a way to discredit the ideas of others.

### *Handling Problematic Group Behaviors*

To make sure that groups run smoothly, focus group facilitators need to use group process skills to troubleshoot or prevent problems that can arise in any small group. Some typical problems and their solutions are summarized in Table 8.4.

### *Troubleshooting in the Field*

Even with the best preparation, focus groups present a number of unanticipated challenges and problems. For example, the following could happen:

- Nobody comes.
- Some people are late.
- Only half of those invited show up.
- Unexpected problems occur at the site.

### *People Do Not Arrive*

There are many reasons for “no-shows.” There could be a mistake in the address, an accident or other problem with transportation, failure to receive information about the location of the group meeting, unanticipated resistance by participants to the idea of a group session or to the facilitators, or insufficient understanding of the purpose of the group session. When none of the residents invited to a focus group session on oral health and older adults came to the session, Colleen Foster-Bey of the Institute for Community Research took steps to find out what happened. She discovered from a resident advocate for the program who had not received any information about it that the site manager had failed to distribute fliers. He agreed to pick up the fliers from Colleen and distribute them himself, and the meeting was rescheduled. Since definitions of “lateness” vary from one community to another, one rule of thumb is to wait a *full hour* to make sure that respondents have not encountered any unforeseen difficulties in reaching the meeting. The best strategy is to assume that there has been a misunderstanding. If no one arrives, it is imperative to check with

**TABLE 8.4** Solving Problems in Focus Group Sessions

| <i>PROBLEM</i>  | <i>SOLUTION</i>  |
|---|--|
| Some members of the group do not speak.   | The facilitator calls on each group member one by one, repeating the question or someone else's response. He makes sure to ask individuals who have not contributed, "What do you think about XXX?"  |
| Some members of the group speak too much.   | The facilitator asks those individuals to wait for their turn, to "hold their idea" for a moment, or to wait until others have had an opportunity to speak.  |
| One group member dominates the conversation by speaking too often, too loudly, or for too long or in a coercive or intimidating manner. | The facilitator reminds the group of the ground rules and the purpose of the focus group. If the offending individual does not understand or change behavior, the facilitator asks the participant directly to conform to the ground rules, either during the group session or during a break.   |
| Group members talk to people next to them but not with the group.   | The facilitator first determines the cause of the problem: e.g., the group may be too big; some participants may feel uncomfortable speaking in a large group; respondents may not have received enough opportunity to express their opinions; the conversation may be difficult to follow; some groups may not be able to understand the way others express themselves. Some participants may feel uncomfortable with a subtopic, or they may disagree with what someone said but feel uneasy saying so in public. The facilitator should take a few moments to observe and discuss with the individuals what the problem is. A solution then can be devised. |
| Group members begin to take sides on an issue.  | The facilitator reminds group members that everyone's opinion is valued and that differences of opinion are important as opportunities for learning. The facilitator encourages participants to state their opinions and to discuss and debate different points of view, but to avoid open conflict, as it can divide a group and preclude further open discussion, which disrupts the intention of the focus group.   |
| Group discussion diverges from the interview focus.   | The facilitator returns group members to the topic with a polite reminder and/or a shift in questioning. If group members do not wish to return to the topic scheduled for discussion right away, they can be invited to postpone the new topic until after the session is over, at which point they can remain and continue to discuss the new topic for as long as they wish. Divergence can happen very quickly.  |

Participants have ideas relevant to the topic, but either they have not thought them out clearly or cannot express themselves well.

Facilitators should exercise care when letting discussion flow, even if they are trying to avoid offending respondents by cutting off discussion. Facilitators should remember that each formal focus group interview member was selected because he or she was known to have experience and opinions on the topic to be discussed and that because of their expertise they are receiving incentives for their participation.

Facilitators probe by asking additional questions but avoid suggesting likely extensions of the respondent's thoughts. Some people work best from the basis of concrete examples; facilitators can ask such respondents to give some examples of what they mean, and then question them for clarity. Facilitators can also ask other group members to describe similar situations that may stimulate the thoughts of the struggling group member.

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key informants and respondents the next day to determine what has caused the misunderstanding and reschedule the event, taking the feedback into consideration.

#### *Some People Are Late*

Late arrival is disruptive to a focus group process, yet many people do arrive late, especially to a community focus group, and often because of circumstances beyond their control. Delaying the start of a group for a half hour by serving food and having informal discussions takes care of most late arrivals. Facilitators will have to make a decision about those who arrive later than that, especially when incentives are involved. Sometimes a makeup session can be scheduled so as not to disappoint either invited participants or researchers.

#### *Only Half of Those Invited Show Up*

A focus group loses its function with fewer than three people. Thus, if fewer than three people arrive, we recommend rescheduling the session.



### *Unexpected Problems Occur at the Site*

Problems include such things as faulty or missing equipment, inappropriate room size or furniture, changed location, power outages, broken heating or air conditioning, late arrival of food or drink, or finding that someone else is using the interview room for another purpose. There also can be unanticipated and unacceptable background noise at the interview site. The best solution to these problems is to try to address unanticipated problems at the site by arriving early.

Perhaps the best advice for focus group organizers is to maintain flexibility and good humor, to be assertive in requesting needed resources, and to recognize that there are always at least two or three ways to solve a problem. Most people do not mind working in less than ideal circumstances for a short period of time if the facilitators and other research team members are pleasant, supportive, and accommodating. In her middle school study of an arts program, when the conference room she had reserved became unavailable, LeCompte found that a supply closet was a suitable and very quiet place to conduct interviews. The children didn't mind sitting on the floor and were endlessly amused when the lights shut off automatically and everyone had to wave their hands to make the motion-sensitive switch illuminate the closet once again.

### **ASKING QUESTIONS IN FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**

Many different types of data can be collected from a group through an interview format. Focus group interviews, whether informal or formal, make most frequent use of open-ended questions when the issues to be explored are not very well understood and the facilitators want to provide the broadest possible latitude for response. It is very important for facilitators, other researchers, and recorders to meet beforehand to determine the core questions. For a ninety-minute group interview, five to seven core questions are sufficient. The more familiar the facilitators are with the topic, the more likely they are to ask good questions on topics they had not anticipated but that arose in the course of discussion.


 **EXAMPLE 8.7****QUESTIONS ORGANIZING A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION ON ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE  
FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS OF PUERTO RICAN CLIENTS**

In a focus group session with health care providers for patients with Alzheimer's disease (AD), ICR researchers asked three major questions:

1. What are the main symptoms of dementia?
2. Which of these symptoms are more important in reporting and diagnosing Alzheimer's disease?
3. What similarities and differences have you observed in assessing patients of different ethnic groups and seeing them clinically?

In our one-hour discussions with service providers about symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, we first asked them as a group to list the major symptoms of dementia and then to discuss the meaning and importance of each one in relation to Alzheimer's disease. We then discussed their observations and experiences serving Puerto Rican patients and families with symptoms of dementia. Toward the end, we asked them to compare their experiences with other families from different ethnic groups. We asked this question to obtain more information about their relative exposure to Puerto Rican families and their beliefs and attitudes about Puerto Rican seniors and dementia in comparison to other families.

In addition to the core questions, facilitators used a number of probes and additional questions in order to clarify or have participants elaborate on their responses. For example, in relation to the first question, we asked for a definition of dementia, why some of the symptoms listed were related to dementia, and whether some of the items on the list could be collapsed or combined with others. The second question led to our request for a medical definition of Alzheimer's disease, as well as to additional questions about the difficulty in diagnosis and available treatments or strategies for management of symptoms of AD dementia. The third question produced the observation that most patients served by the health care providers were not Puerto Rican. This offered facilitators the opportunity to raise questions about barriers to symptom identification and reporting among Puerto Rican families.





As this example illustrates, we advocate organizing focus groups around a logical sequence of questioning in which facilitators go directly to the primary subject matter, and then explore contextual factors. As an illustration, in focus groups to discover what women know about diabetes, the following questions can be asked:

- What is diabetes? What are the causes? How do you get it?
- How do you know when you have diabetes?
- Is it preventable? What can you do to prevent it?
- Of the list of things you have suggested to prevent it, which are the easiest to do? Why? Which are the most difficult to do? Why?
- What will help people to identify the symptoms of diabetes and report them to their clinic or doctor?

This sequence portrayed moves from the problem to factors that contribute to it, and then to what people perceive to be things they can and cannot do to report or prevent it. It concludes with facilitators and barriers to reporting. A similar sequence eliciting perceptions of gender differences in young women might begin with the following:

- What are some differences between girls and boys?  
(Probes)
- What are some similarities between girls and boys?  
(Probes)

These can be listed on a flipchart or newsprint and then further discussed in the focus group as follows:

- What do you like about being a girl?
- What don't you like about being a girl?

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

As is the case with surveys, questionnaires, or any interview, the open-ended questions used in focus groups should not be vague, leading, or misleading. Some examples of such ineffective questions are:

- **Leading Question:** (In a focus group with master teaching artists on instruction in elementary school classrooms), “Don’t you think that artists should be allowed to work independently with children in the classroom?”
- **Vague Question:** (In a focus group to elicit children’s activities), “What kinds of things do boys and girls do during the day?”
- **Misleading or Confusing Question:** (In a focus group with parents to identify their concerns about adolescent sexuality), “What types of violence do you think teenagers in this neighborhood may be exposed to?”

Questions also should not be phrased in the “negative,” such as (to an adolescent boy) “You don’t ever stay out all night without permission, do you?”

Elicitation techniques are generally used with individual respondents. They also can be used as techniques for stimulating group dialogue, including group “free listing” of **cultural domains** such as children’s activities, drug paraphernalia, or beliefs about the cause and prevention of diabetes, which can provoke interesting discussion and ethnographic data with respect to whether or not items belong in the domain. Group sorting, or pilesorting, in which participants are asked to discuss and organize items into predetermined categories, generates similar ethnographic data regarding differences and similarities in the way in which items in a cultural domain are grouped and how group members manage differences of opinion (J. J. Schensul 1998).

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 3, for a detailed description of these elicitation techniques

**Definition:**

A cultural domain is the major category of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, or policies that constitutes the focus of the study

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 3, on cultural domains and consensus analysis

**EXAMPLE 8.8****USING FREE LISTS TO DETERMINE DIFFERENCES IN DEFINITIONS OF VIOLENCE IN A COMMUNITY**

In 1995, a team of action researchers worked with a violence prevention coalition in a suburban town to prevent the acceleration of violent behavior in several target communities. The first agreed-on step was to understand differences in the meaning of violence in the community. In a free list exercise, a broad

diversity of residents working in small groups identified behaviors they considered to be somewhat violent to very violent. These behaviors (a total of approximately twenty-six) were listed and written, one to a card. The items included speaking loudly as a group in front of someone's house, loud criticism of someone in public, hitting with a belt, shooting, and killing someone intentionally. The second step involved determining where the areas of agreement and disagreement lay in the definition of violence. At the next meeting of the coalition, small groups were asked to discuss and agree on the placement of each of the items on a matrix of degree of violence by degree of acceptability. Each group had to decide where the behavior should be placed on a five-point horizontal Likert scale from not violent to very violent, and on a five-point vertical scale, arranged from acceptable to not acceptable. The four extremes were:

- very violent—very acceptable
- very violent—very unacceptable
- not violent—very unacceptable
- not violent—very acceptable

The conversation was documented in writing and on audiotape with the permission of all of the participants and treated as text data for coding purposes. The exercise produced valuable information on the ways in which participants viewed behaviors, and why they defined them as violent. Further, it provided information on the reasons behind differential tolerance of behavior.




Maps can be used in much the same way to promote group discussion about how and why social phenomena are arranged in space and to what degree there is group consensus regarding placement. In an open-ended approach to social geography, participants are given a map of a socio-geographic space, for example, a neighborhood, and then asked to place on the map the locations where social events or activities relevant to the research take place.

 **EXAMPLE 8.9****USING MAPS AS A STIMULUS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION WITH CHILDREN**

In Hartford, Connecticut, teenagers were given a map of a neighborhood and asked to identify locations where children play together, where teenagers “hang out” and what they do in those locations, and the ethnic composition of the groups to be found in each location. Discussions provided a picture of age and ethnic differentiation in the use of neighborhood open or public spaces, as well as typical types of public activities in this neighborhood.

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 4, for information about social mapping and the arrangement of social variables in space



Collage, drawing, and other creative ways of producing conversation are useful techniques for initiating focus group discussions, especially with children. Children and inexperienced adult speakers often enjoy the opportunity to draw their subject matter or portray it visually in other ways. Researchers can ask them to draw or produce a collage based on found objects, miscellaneous materials, or magazine pictures that show the researchers their interpretation of the research topic. The participants are told that they must make a collage with materials brought by the researcher, present it to the group, and then discuss the meaning of their collage with members of the group. The presentation and discussion are recorded, and together with the collages, they constitute the basis for later text analysis.

Focus groups also can be used productively to collect data on social relations. Researchers can show an organizational chart (an “organogram”) to a group of respondents and then ask its members to describe and discuss the relationships among components or departments. To obtain information about personal relationships such as friendship, respondents can be given a diagram showing themselves in the middle, surrounded by small circles, one to a friend. They can then be asked to fill in the circles with the first or fictive names of their closest personal friends. In focus group discussion, they can then compare the size of their personal friendship networks (the number of circles filled with a name) and the ways in which they define close,

personal friends. Such discussions reveal important ethnographic data about social relations in their community.

Group interviews can also be used to collect numerical data that demonstrate patterns that can then be discussed with the group, producing interesting ethnographic data.

### EXAMPLE 8.10

#### USING GROUP INTERVIEWS TO DIFFERENTIATE DEGREES OF SEX RISK

In an intervention study with Sri Lankan young adults, each member in seven groups of young adult Sri Lankan women was given a list of sex behaviors and asked to check which were not risky sex and which were “risky sex.” When each individual in each group had completed the task, the exercise sheets were handed in to the focus group facilitator. The facilitator then asked each group to do the same exercise together and to discover and discuss their differences of opinion for each. The discussion was documented, recording differences in individual and group responses. The exercise was repeated with the males in each group. Differences between male and female responses were noted in the text data and in the quantitative responses and presented to a mixed group of young men and women for discussion of the differences (Nastasi et al. 1998–1999).

Data also can be collected in the context of a group discussion where each individual provides the same information, which is then tabulated so that everyone can see the distribution of responses. Such data may be influenced by “group effects” or group pressure. However, certain kinds of data (those closer to “facts”) are less likely to be biased by group influence than others and may even promote more accurate self-revelation or reporting. Researchers must decide whether the data they wish to obtain from each individual is subject to influence from others and whether they would like to collect it before, during, or after a group discussion.

### RECORDING DATA FROM FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

It is critically important to record accurately and completely what is said in a focus group interview. If recording is neither comprehensible nor complete, valuable informa-

tion can be misinterpreted, incompletely remembered, or lost. We recommend using at least two techniques simultaneously to make sure that all important information is captured. Some optional combinations are videotaping and written observations; audiotaping and written observations; videotaping and recording group contributions in shorthand notes or “brainstorming” lists on newsprint pads; or having two observers record their observations in writing at the same time. Next we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different types of focus group data collection in the field.

### *Using Notepads/Notebooks*

When recording in a natural setting, ethnographers prefer to use unobtrusive means of recording, such as a small notebook, file cards, scrap paper, or the backs of letters or notes. Those taking notes by hand in notebooks should be able to write rapidly so as to capture as much as possible while the conversation is going on. ***Formal focus group data can be recorded directly into a computer.*** If the focus group team agrees on computerized verbatim recording on site, the following conventions should be observed:

#### Key point



- The recorder/rapporteur should be introduced;
- The importance of the computer in the interview situation should be described;
- The computer should have a relatively quiet keyboard so as not to interfere with the discussion;
- If the computer is portable, it should be plugged in to an electric source so no time is lost if and when the battery dies;
- Plug locations should be identified in advance to make sure that the computer can be plugged in at a location where it is comfortable for the recorder to enter data and where the recorder can hear everything being discussed;
- Data should be saved automatically every five minutes on the computer’s hard disk and backed up at the same time on a portable disk to avoid inadvertent data loss.



### *Newspaper Pads or Flipcharts*

Often recorders and facilitators work hand in hand to record the main individual or group responses to a question on newsprint pads or flipcharts. Recording ideas and suggestions on newsprint provides immediate feedback to group participants and helps them to think of new things, to recognize and discuss differences of opinion, and to clarify what they really meant. This process also allows all respondents to have access to the “data” emerging from the group. Smartboards—whiteboards that record information directly to a computer—or computers that project responses onto a screen during the focus group discussion are tools that can substitute very well for paper flipcharts and newsprint.

Listing who said what on newsprint (or using brainstorming software) offers both the facilitator and the participants an opportunity to see directly where differences of opinion lie and to address them right away. When the questions require numerical (or categorical) responses, the frequency of such “countable” responses, if placed on newsprint, can be displayed during the meeting for immediate discussion. For example, each member of the group might be asked, “How old are you?” or “How many times did you shop in a large supermarket in the past week?” and the responses tallied on newsprint. A question to each group member calling for a categorical response might be “Did you use any drug of any kind in the past month?” In this case the countable response would be “yes,” “no,” or “don’t remember.” Instant feedback provides the basis for continued discussion.

To use newsprint, you need the following equipment:

- One or more newsprint stands that have been checked in advance to make sure that they will fit the specific newsprint pads you have, and do not fall down easily when the recorder is writing.
- At least two newsprint pads with pages that can be easily detached.

- Masking tape or other tape that does not destroy paint or wallpaper for hanging up newsprint sheets, or newsprint pads that have sticky edges for posting on walls.
- New magic markers of different colors.

Newsprint is relatively cheap and readily locatable. It is advisable to supplement newsprint notes with another form of recording—either direct observation with written notes, or audio recording—because the quality and complexity of the dialogue among participants cannot be captured on newsprint alone. Newsprint lends itself to shorthand summaries, not detailed notes of conversations; even a separate recorder/rapporteur usually cannot write fast enough on newsprint to capture all of the important information. In addition, newsprint pads can become expensive if taking detailed notes means using many pages.


### *Audio Recording*

Audio-recorded focus group discussions can supplement other forms of recording group interviews and discussions. They capture *verbatim* the words and emotions of the respondents, the exchanges among respondents, new questions and probes facilitators introduce to obtain additional information, and the sequence of questioning occurring in the session. If sessions are held in languages different from the first languages of the researchers, audio recording captures the “flavor” of the language, the sound of the words, and their context and meanings in ways that are difficult to match with written notes alone. However, audiotapes may be incoherent and can be very difficult to transcribe, especially when everyone talks at once.

Audio recordings should be transcribed as quickly as possible after the session takes place and by the facilitators who are most likely to understand blurred sections of the recording and know what they need to complement their field notes. Facilitators and session recorders who transcribe the tapes also can avoid problems, as illustrated in the next example.

**EXAMPLE 8.11****PROBLEMS WHEN OUTSIDE TRANSCRIBERS DECIDE WHAT IS RELEVANT TO TRANSCRIBE**

Jennifer Vadeboncoeur was audio recording group discussions of interviews of undergraduate college students to assess the impact of their teacher-training program. These discussions were self-guided; the students had been given a list of questions to address, but no facilitator was present, because Vadeboncoeur was concerned that students would not talk freely if observed. Further, she assumed that if the program were uninteresting to them, the students would end up gossiping, so she wanted to see how well the students stayed on the topic at hand without guidance. She had hired one of the university's secretaries, a lady who was extremely religious, to transcribe the audiotapes of the discussions, each of which lasted over an hour. When she got the printed transcripts back, she was shocked to see how thin they were. "Where's the rest of the discussion?" she asked the transcriber. The explanation was that, having become offended by profanity and references to sex, boyfriends, and girlfriends, the transcriber simply deleted them. She also deleted as not relevant any deviation from comments on the teacher-training program. Since the students seldom talked about the program at all, most of the recorded material had not been transcribed! Not until Vadeboncoeur explained the purpose and methods of her study more fully to the transcriber did her work become more complete and accurate (Vadeboncoeur, Rahm, Aguilera, and LeCompte 1996).

 **Definition:** Logging a tape is marking them so that specific content can be located

This example shows how important it is to check the work of transcribers and coders very carefully, while not assuming that their performance will be complete. Transcribers also can **log the tapes** while listening to them and then comparing them with the field notes. Logging involves tagging or noting the location of a segment on the tape by time or other locational unit and topic, then recording the location in a log or notebook. Several *verbatim* lines from the tape or tape transcript are entered at the beginning and at the end of a topic, with a description of the content. In this way, other researchers can return to specific sections of a tape to retrieve information without having to listen to the entire tape once again. If these methods cannot be used, the next best strategy is to build into the project budget funds for a competent person to transcribe and translate all tapes from beginning to end, with the caveat that researchers need to check the tapes for accuracy and completeness.

Using audiotapes requires:

- Obtaining the best equipment affordable, including the type of microphone best for your purpose.
- Checking equipment beforehand to make sure it works.
- Cuing up the machine before the group interview begins, and testing the machine to make sure that it is recording at the correct volume and speed.
- Making sure there are sufficient audiotapes to cover the entire span of the group discussion (preferably 90 to 120 minutes on a tape).
- Making sure that those recording know how to use the digital recorder.
- Visiting the location beforehand to locate the placement of the microphones if they are external to the digital recorder.
- Making sure that the recorder has new batteries or is plugged in with a source of electrical current that accommodates your cord.
- Avoiding the use of inexpensive, small, handheld digital recorders for focus group interviews, as their sound quality usually is poor and they break easily.

Notwithstanding these rules of thumb, researchers should not depend on audio recording as the sole means of recording unless there are no other options, because so much important data can be lost when things go wrong. Even the best audiotape recorder with a directional microphone has difficulty clearly recording a group discussion in which people speak simultaneously or interrupt one another. Background noise also can impair sound quality.

### **VIDEOTAPING**

Videotaping is a more effective means of recording individual comments and group interaction than audio recording—though the same cautions about use of equipment that we listed for audio recording also hold true for

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 7, for a discussion of the use of video recording

videotape. The use of videotape is consistent with one of the primary objectives of the focus group interview: to capture the exchanges of ideas and opinions of group members in a naturalistic setting. Provided that the group is small enough so that every participant can be included in group discussions, virtually everything that occurs in the group can be recorded in sight, sound, and color. It is important, however, to make sure that everyone agrees to being videotaped, and that appropriate measures, such as “fuzzing” or blurring the faces of group members, are used to protect the privacy of participants.

It is always best to ask a skilled video recorder to film focus group interviews. Skilled recorders will know when to focus the camera on an individual, on two or more people in discussion, or on the entire group; when to fade in and out; and how to ensure that the words of the participants are fully and audibly captured on tape. The words of the speakers must be sufficiently audible if the videotape is to be useful to the focus group researcher. Even experienced documenters must still be trained to recognize which information in the interview is most important. Camera personnel should be involved with the rest of the focus group research team in discussions about the interview topic(s), the flow of the interview, and the information desired.

Research team leaders should decide with camera personnel exactly when camera people should film the responses of the entire group or an individual. For novice film recorders, practice sessions in which research team members or volunteers role-play focus group sessions can be very helpful. If researchers plan to use videotapes, they will need the following supplies.

**LIST OF EQUIPMENT OR SUPPLIES NEEDED FOR VIDEOTAPING**

- One or more video cameras with film cartridges (for example, for shooting individuals and the entire group from different angles)
- Tripods

- Portable microphones
- Lighting equipment (not essential)

In earlier sections of this chapter, we listed different techniques for recording focus group interview data, what equipment to bring, and how to check it. Following is a list of other materials you should have prepared before conducting a focus group session.

#### **FOCUS GROUP CHECKLIST**

- \_\_\_\_\_ List of questions to be asked
- \_\_\_\_\_ List of participants
- \_\_\_\_\_ Name tags for participants
- \_\_\_\_\_ Notebook, portable computer, audio or video equipment (use recorder checklists to be sure you have everything you need)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Video tripod
- \_\_\_\_\_ Incentives for participants
- \_\_\_\_\_ Pens and magic markers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Newsprint stand and newsprint pad
- \_\_\_\_\_ Paper and pencil for participants
- \_\_\_\_\_ Food and drinks of your choice
- \_\_\_\_\_ Babysitting/child care equipment

#### **VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY IN RESEARCH WITH FOCUS GROUPS**

Regardless of how formally or informally they are organized, inquiry and focus groups generally are almost always used either for explorative or project development purposes or to complement other forms of ethnographic data collection. Focus group interview data are almost always qualitative. Researchers do not expect the same questions asked in different group settings to produce the same responses; indeed, it may be preferable that they produce different responses, so that the researchers can gain a rounded understanding of the full range of responses within the target population. For these reasons, the concepts of validity

and reliability, critical to all scientific research, have different meanings when applied to ethnographic focus group data than when they are applied to quantitative data and experimental research. In this section we will discuss the meaning of these terms as applied to ethnographic data obtained from groups rather than individuals.

### Validity



#### Definition:

Validity is a measure of the fit between researcher and respondent perceptions and meanings or between data-collection procedures and what they purport to collect

**Validity** is concerned with accuracy of findings. It refers to “the degree to which the procedure really measures what it proposes to measure” (Golafshani 2003; Kreuger 2009; Vogt et al. 2004), or the degree to which responses are a valid reflection of how participants felt and thought about the topic (Kreuger 1998). Validity also depends on the appropriateness of the research design for the context of the study and the questions for which it is being used. If a focus group is an inappropriate method to use in the culture or context of the research, the results will not be valid. Establishing validity requires researchers to:

- Determine the extent to which conclusions effectively represent empirical reality;
- Assess whether constructs devised by researchers accurately represent or measure the categories of human experience that occur.



#### Key point


*There are two kinds of validity: internal and external. Internal validity refers to the extent to which scientific observations generate data and measurements that authentically represent some reality—for example, the way in which a given group of people view their world. External validity refers to the degree to which such representations can be compared legitimately across groups and the extent to which one or a sample of groups is representative of an entire population.*

Validity can be enhanced in group interviewing by:

- Pilot-testing the questions to make sure that participants understand them

- Heeding advice of participants about how to create a welcoming environment that fosters sharing and discussion
- Using culturally appropriate facilitators—people whom respondents trust or with whom they feel comfortable
- Situating the focus group in an appropriate location, that is, according to the guidelines earlier in this chapter
- Clarifying ambiguous questions and interim interpretations
- Discussing research results with participants for interpretive comments before they are published or disseminated

**Reliability** addresses whether the results of a study can be duplicated. Reliability is a lesser concern in ethnographic research, and especially in focus group interviews, since these interviews are specifically meant to be exploratory. Duplication of results across groups is not the desired outcome of focus group interviews. There is good reason to avoid lengthy discussions of reliability in focus group interviews, as they are not meant to reflect stability or generalizability of data. Rather, the intention of these interviews is to provide exploratory information leading to theory formulation, more valid instrument development, and explanation of quantitative results. Thus, for this form of research, differences are more important than similarities. But careful training of interviewers, team interviewing, rigorous notes and audiovisual documentation, and thought given in advance to the structure of the questions to be used in the group interview can go a long way toward ensuring that other researchers could approximate the research process (though not necessarily the results) a second time. Using other data to confirm the results of focus group interviews is another way of ensuring reliability of results. Following are ways in which two researchers addressed issues of reliability and validity in their field settings.

**Definition:**   
The reliability of a study has to do with whether or not it can be duplicated

**EXAMPLE 8.12** 


## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS ON PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY PLANNING

Paul Nkwi, an anthropologist at the University of Yaounde, Cameroon, studied people's perceptions of family planning. His team worked in four communities, using a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, a questionnaire, and focus groups. They conducted one focus group stratified by gender (male-female) and age (twelve to nineteen, twenty to thirty-five, thirty-six to forty-nine, and fifty and over) and one group mixed by gender and age in which they examined the following topics:

- community development
- resistance to family planning
- cultural and economic factors that could be used to promote family planning
- community problems with health and family planning services
- how services could be improved
- how much people would pay for improved health services

Interviews were held in the homes of influential community members, lasted about two hours, and were in the language of the people represented. After recording and transcribing, researchers found that information collected in focus group interviews paralleled information collected by other means, including individual interviews and observations (Nkwi 1992).

In another study, Ward compared focus group and survey data from three studies of voluntary sterilization in Guatemala, Honduras, and Zaire. He found that for 87 percent of the variables, results of focus group interviews were similar to those obtained through survey data, but that each provided useful additional information that the other source did not, demonstrating the importance of using both forms of data in good ethnographic research (Ward, Bertrand, and Brown 1991).



The validity and reliability of group interview data depend on how much the researcher actually knows about the respondents and the contexts within which they live, and what the relationship between the researcher and the focus group members is at any point. Group interviews offer the advantages of gathering large amounts of text data in a short period of time and can be very useful in helping researchers to learn local vernacular and styles of communication and to gather different opinions about a

topic. *It is always important to remember, though, that in ethnographic research, focus group interviews constitute only one set of tools in the ethnographer's toolkit. Focus groups alone are not sufficient to meet criteria of validity and reliability in ethnographic research.* They must be accompanied by other forms of data collection and should be thought of as supplementing rather than replacing in-depth individual interviews, observations, elicitation techniques, and survey methods.

**Key point****MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**

Group interview data are fundamentally qualitative. Most often, they consist of texts—transcriptions of recorded group discussions and/or field notes of observed group discussions in either formal or informal settings. They generally are handled in the same way as other text data. A formal coding system should be developed and applied to the data if one or more of the following three circumstances prevail: if the number of interviews is large enough (over twenty group interviews); if the interviews are long enough to warrant full-scale computerized coding (over fifteen pages each); and if the research team decides that focus group interviews will continue, thus expanding the sample over time. In sum, a database of more than twenty interviews, or more than one hundred pages of text, warrants the creation of a coding system.

The creation of a formal coding system and how it is used in computerized text-management programs can be found in Book 5. The coding system reflects the major questions and categories of interest in the research; it usually begins with the core questions that frame the focus group interview, since each of these carefully thought-out questions itemizes one critical component of the subject being studied. The coding system is then elaborated, based on the content of the interviews.

If the number of focus group interviews is small, the researchers may wish to reorganize all of the responses to each question in a single file. This can easily and rapidly be done using a standard word-processing program. Researchers

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 5, chapters 7 and 8, on code books and coding




can then screen each file searching for “classes of responses” and variations within each “class.” Classes and variations are then described, the implications of variations within classes are considered, and overall results are summarized.


### EXAMPLE 8.13

#### FOCUS GROUPS ON REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN MAURITIUS

In Mauritius, six focus group discussion sessions were held on reproductive health. One of the key questions asked how young, unmarried women felt about keeping their virginity. All of the responses to this question were summarized in a single file labeled “virginity.” Schensul then reviewed the responses and organized them into subcategories reflecting “valuing virginity,” “men’s roles in preserving virginity,” “male and female virginity,” “changes in attitudes toward virginity,” “procedures for evaluating the status of virginity,” and others. These subcategories were further analyzed for variations in response. The results were described and summarized for each subcategory or “theme,” paying special attention to variations in response. Variations across all categories seemed to be related to changes in the status and importance of virginity. These changes were then discussed by the research team in the context of the changing economic status of women entering the workforce for the first time in this newly industrialized country.

 **Definition:**  
Triangulation is the corroboration of results from one kind of data by results obtained from a different kind of data

When completing a report, each source of data collected within a focus group setting should be analyzed separately. Then the results of one source of data can be considered in relation to the others. This is referred to as **triangulation**. Triangulation is facilitated by the use of a matrix that summarizes the results obtained with each source of data.

 **Cross Reference:**  
For assistance in triangulation of data across data sources, see Book 5, chapter 8

Results of focus group interviews can be incorporated into other materials for dissemination, or they can be reported on separately. Guidelines for presenting the results of ethnographic research in different settings, using appropriate styles and formats for different audiences, is discussed in Book 5 and is one of the major topics covered in Book 7.

### ADVANTAGES, USES, AND LIMITATIONS OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Focus groups are a good way of collecting information on specific topics, especially at the “cultural” level. However, the results of focus group research, if unaccompanied by other forms of data collection, are not always convincing.

#### EXAMPLE 8.14

##### PROBLEMS IN SAMPLING FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWING

In his study of knowledge about HIV/AIDS among Latinos, Elias Martinez attempted to select for focus group participation representatives of the population who were most at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS. His selection process was hampered both by the tight timeline established for the project by the sponsoring organization, Boulder County AIDS Project (BCAP), and by the difficulties of recruiting people willing to talk about such a sensitive and culturally loaded topic—especially since many of the people most at risk were not legal residents of the United States and did not want to be identifiable. The results of the focus groups showed that BCAP’s intervention strategies were not reaching the target population at all. Print media were particularly ineffective; brochures were not used because they were placed in clinics whose staff the target population felt abused them and whose doctors the target population mistrusted because they did not speak Spanish. More useful modes of dissemination would have been radio or TV media, especially the Spanish-language “novellas” or soap operas, with which all Latinos were familiar. Further, gender issues and practices complicated prevention; regardless of their age or educational level, women felt unable to resist male demands for unprotected sex or to combat a widespread belief among Latino men that males who adopt the active role in intercourse with other men, or who have sex with both men and women, cannot be homosexuals and cannot, therefore, contract what they thought of as the “gay” disease.”

BCAP had specified that data be collected through the use of focus groups, but it soon became clear that members of the BCAP Board of Directors did not understand the limitations of focus group data. Martinez’s first draft report was heavily criticized for its lack of “statistics.” The Board members wanted to know such things as the percentage of Latino migrant workers who used condoms to prevent HIV/AIDS compared to middle-class and professional Chicanos, the percentage of Latinos overall who had read the BCAP brochures, and the number of persons unable to read or understand English among the population. These figures were impossible to obtain using focus groups—though the report did cover well the series of hypotheses about the effectiveness—or lack thereof—of BCAP’s educational inter-

ventions for Latinos, which the focus groups *did* cover. Martinez rewrote the report to include as many numbers as he thought he legitimately could, describing the percentage of respondents within each opinion or informational category by group, but even that did not satisfy some members of BCAP. Some requested a larger and more systematic survey based upon the focus group results, but others ended the project feeling as though they had been cheated.



As Martinez's study for BCAP illustrates, focus groups are not a panacea and do not answer all questions that participants and policy makers want answered. Researchers must clearly explain the process and expected outcomes of focus group research as well as their sampling limitations, especially when there is the possibility that the users of the results are more familiar with, or place higher value on, survey research. Furthermore, facilitators must be experienced and well trained in the conduct of group investigation to produce good focus group data. Not everyone can facilitate a good focus group despite familiarity with the study community.

The quality and validity of the information may be influenced or hampered by the composition of the group and the interaction of the personalities within it. The logistics of recruiting and retaining formal focus group participation are complicated, and the format may be unfamiliar to many respondents. The process of conducting group interviews in culturally and linguistically diverse settings where translation must occur at multiple levels may affect the validity and reliability of results obtained in focus groups.

Despite these caveats, most ethnographers use informal group interviews, and more and more, focus groups are being used in exploration and verification of study results, as well as in testing surveys and other data-collection methods. Careful advance thought and preparation can take good advantage of these unique opportunities to capture new insights while at the same time observing the ways in which differences in cultural beliefs, behaviors, and perceptions are negotiated by group members.

# 9

## STRUCTURED APPROACHES TO ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA COLLECTION: SURVEYS

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### THE ROLE OF STRUCTURED DATA COLLECTION

Ethnography attempts to understand social and cultural phenomena from the perspective of participants in the social setting under study. To do so, the approach builds conceptual models using a combination of experience, previous literature, and qualitative data collection techniques and then validates or “tests” these models, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Structured ethnographic data collection offers a way to transform exploratory and semistructured data into quantitative instruments that measure variables situated within and across cultural domains and test their relationships with a representative sample of the population (Babbie 1995, 51, 55).

In chapters 4, 5, and 6 in this book, we discussed the role of exploratory or unstructured data-collection methods in uncovering critical ethnographic domains and factors. Chapter 7 reviewed the important contribution of semistructured data-collection methods, and especially semistructured open-ended interviewing, in enriching description and defining the range of variation in knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, social organization, and

*The Role of  
Structured Data  
Collection*  
*Defining  
Ethnographic  
Surveys*  
*Steps in the  
Construction of  
the Ethnographic  
Survey*  
*Administration  
of Ethnographic  
Interviews*  
*Analysis of  
Quantitative  
Data*  
*Integrating  
Qualitative and  
Quantitative  
Data:*  
*Triangulation*  
*Summary*

### Cross Reference:

See Book 1,  
chapter 1, Book 2,  
chapters 3 and 4,  
and chapter 1 of this  
book for discussion  
of building formative  
models in the early  
stages of research

### Cross Reference:

See this  
book, chapter 10,  
on approaches  
to sampling in  
ethnographic research

patterned event sequences at the variable and item levels. In chapter 8 we discussed approaches to group interviewing.

In this chapter we discuss a further step: the role of structured data-collection methods in ethnography. In particular, we concentrate on the construction of survey instruments, the most typical way of collecting data from a representative sample of respondents in a population. In addition to self-report on surveys, however, there are other types of structured data collection. These include various forms of observations including measures of behavior (Altmann 1974; Bernard 2000; Mastrofski, Parks, and McCluskey 2010) at specific points; for example, timed observations of patterns of use of emergency rooms or time-activity accounts of individuals in relation to exposure to disease-carrying mosquitoes. Bonnie Nastasi's chapter in Book 4 on audiovisual methods of data collection in ethnographic research provides a thorough discussion of techniques for the systematic collection of quantifiable observational data. However, audio and visual means are not necessary for conducting and recording such data.

Like ethnographic surveying, direct, systematic observation of behavior can help to avoid the bias that inevitably occurs when ethnographers engage in opportunistic, and therefore less systematic, participant observation in the field (Bernard 2000; Johnson and Sackett 1998; Mastrofski et al. 2010). Structured ethnographic data collection moves ethnographers beyond the collection of information about cultural consensus and structural descriptions to the quantification of specific relationships among independent and dependent cultural domains. The reasons for using structured data-collection methods are to:

- build or adapt from other studies measures and scales that are locally appropriate and culturally specific;
- predict and test the relationships among variables nested within factors and domains against the formative ethnographic model;
- discover hypothesized as well as new and unexpected associations among variables for which local explanations can be sought in the existing qualitative database or by conducting additional ethnographic research.



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book  
4, chapter 7, on  
multimedia techniques  
in ethnographic  
research

Even the most homogeneous communities, institutions, and work settings display wide variation in their members' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Gurven, Zanolini, and Schniter 2008; Pelto and Pelto 1978; Schrauf 2009; Schrauf and Sanchez 2008). Factors such as educational performance, teenage sexuality, or activities of daily living and leisure behaviors are variably distributed in any population. Structured ethnographic data collection gives us the opportunity to test quantitatively those hypotheses that we have generated from formative theory that links variable domains to each other. It also permits ethnographers to build on and refine themes and concepts identified in the course of collecting unstructured and semistructured data.

The difference between structured ethnographic data collection and standard surveys centers on the fact that ethnographers, as differentiated from most psychologists or sociologists, create or adapt their quantitative research measures based on local formative ethnographic theory and prior research. The intent is to construct or adapt measures that relate to emergent, culturally specific theoretical frameworks and reflect local cultural meanings and behaviors (Hitchcock et al. 2005, 127; Hitchcock et al. 2006; Park 2006). By contrast, nonethnographic quantitative research models and measures often are developed *a priori* on the basis of theoretical perspectives drawn from specific academic disciplines, using instruments selected to correspond to the theory when neither the theory nor the instruments may be congruent with the study population (Aday 1989; Gay 1985; Wilson 1998).

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 2,  
 chapters 4, 5, and 6

**DEFINING ETHNOGRAPHIC SURVEYS**

We use the term **ethnographic survey** to refer to closed-ended, quantitative instruments and observation schedules that:

- follow from and are built on unstructured and semistructured observation and interviewing done in the specific site where they are to be administered;
- are based on items derived from ethnographic data that reflect the identification and linking of

**Definition:**

An ethnographic survey is based on concepts and scales that emerge from or are adapted to the culture of the study site





**Cross Reference:**  
See Books 1 and 2 and chapter 1 of this book

domains/factor/variable hierarchies or taxonomies relevant to the local setting, as we have described in Books 1 and 2 and in chapter 1 of this book;

- may include measures derived from others' research that are adapted and validated for use in the study setting by testing them for completeness, acceptability, and coherence;
- gain validity and reliability from prior investigation in the local setting or other settings like it;
- enable researchers to triangulate the results of quantitative analysis using bivariate and multivariate statistics with qualitative data generated through the use of comparable coding categories;
- do not stand alone but are used in conjunction with other data sources to provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomena in question in the local setting;
- generate results calling for further qualitative data collection and analysis, either to resolve contradictions between qualitative and quantitative data or for further explanation of why observable quantitative relationships have occurred.



**Cross Reference:**  
See Book 5, chapters 8 and 9, on the organization, management, and analysis of ethnographically informed quantitative data

Ethnographic surveys are *never*:

- the first data-collection operation in a research project;
- the product of a process in which research staff generate survey items based only on their own personal experience or only on existing instruments. Rather, the variable domains and items emerge from formative theory based on the literature and the systematic analysis of qualitative data.
- opportunities to limit a study only to the use of standardized indices from other studies and/or validated on national samples (for example, "locus of control" or "depression" scales). Instead their strength lies in the fact that the survey variables and items used emerge from the local context. The local foundations of the survey enhance its validity.
- part of the "discovery" process; instead **they are designed to determine the degree to which the ideas,**



**Cross Reference:**  
See chapter 11 of this book for a discussion of validity in ethnographic research



**Key point**

***information, and results that emerged during the discovery process from in-depth investigation with a limited and selective sample can be generalized to the whole population.*** Thus there should be no open-ended questions in an ethnographic survey, and specific variables should not include opportunities for “open-ended” responses. If such alternatives are necessary, then qualitative data collection was insufficient in that area of the survey.

Ethnographic surveys share many of the characteristics of other types of surveys:

- They can be administered face-to-face (structured interview), self-administered (questionnaire), or administered via the Internet, using tools such as SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang
- They use common formats for questionnaire construction (e.g., rankings, ratings, true/false questions, Likert scales)
- They require pilot-testing to ensure that the population will understand the questions and to establish the adequacy and range of the distribution of responses for each variable
- They use representative (randomized, systematically selected, targeted, or respondent-driven) sampling procedures to create a set of respondents
- The results they generate often call for further qualitative data collection and analysis, either to resolve contradictions between qualitative and quantitative data or for further explanation of why observable quantitative relationships have occurred

Ethnographic surveys differ, however, from other types of quantitative surveys in a number of ways. First, construction of ethnographic surveys is based on previous experience in the field situation. Surveys may incorporate instruments or questions drawn from other studies, including nationally validated instruments, but their strength is their ability to draw from and quantify the meaning and variation of elements of local or regional culture. Thus, they are used toward

the end point in the testing of midrange or local theory once these elements are known and understood.



#### Key point

*Ethnographic surveys measure constructs that the study population understands and has identified as relevant and which are included in the theoretical model.*

Ethnographic survey questions and the results they generate are most useful when they are connected with the qualitative data and when they are based on and integrated into the study's theoretical model.



#### Key point

Most important, *ethnographic surveys are based on the theoretical model that has evolved over the course of other data collection during the study.* In Book 2, and in the first chapter of this book, we describe an approach to developing theoretical frameworks for a study that come from a combination of reading the literature on the study topic and geographic area, visiting the study site, and making educated hunches. The first step in operationalizing an ethnographic study, then, is the formative study model.

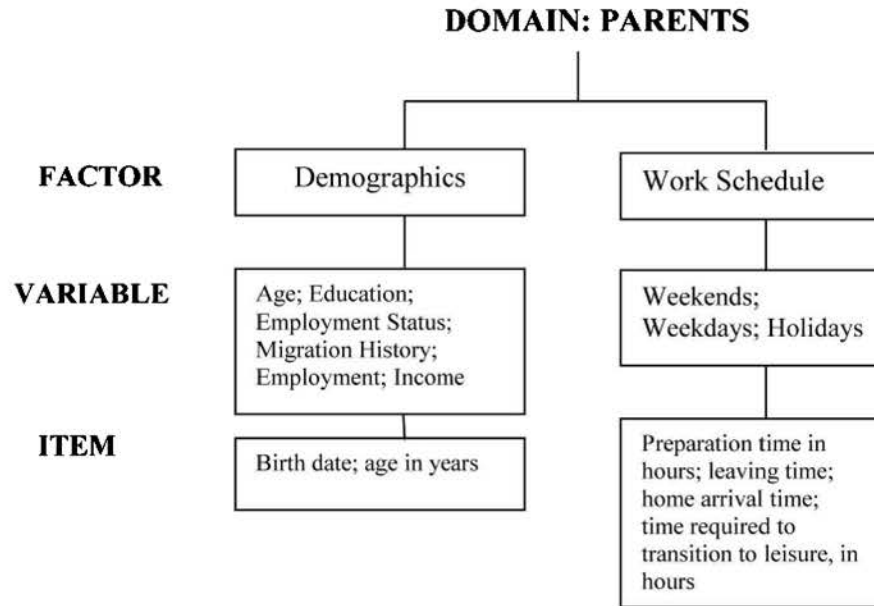
In chapter 1 of this book, we remind readers of how and why we develop guiding theoretical models. And we describe the formation of one such model that reflects first guesses as to what might account for why Somali children are not doing as well in school as their counterparts from other countries. The model includes several domains within which sources of the problem may be located: teachers, parents, peers, and the curriculum. The collection of some additional data (which could be through exploratory interviews, observations, semistructured interviews, and other data-collection strategies), leads us to a more elaborate model in which these *domains* are unpacked into *factors* that are then further unpacked into *variables*. Under the “parent” domain, for example, we include demographic characteristics, work schedules, and supervisory behavior as *factors*. Under the “peer” domain, we include as factors *patterns of peer use of social-network sites* and *peer influence to use social-network sites*. When we unpack these factors into variables we get a **taxonomy**, or hierarchy of terms moving from more abstract to more concrete in definition.



#### Definition:

A domain taxonomy is a hierarchy of concepts moving from abstract (low level of specificity) to concrete (high level of specificity)

Using the case of Somali children's educational performance, the parent domain taxonomy might look something like in Figure 9.1.



**FIGURE 9.1** Taxonomy: Somali Children’s Educational Performance from Domain to Factor, Variable, and Item Levels

Surveys are based on variables and items derived from ethnographic data collection and the literature that “fit into” domains in the study model. We certainly are not suggesting that ethnographers should never use instruments developed by others for purposes similar to their own. *Such instruments should be selected with care, should be congruent with the study’s theory, and always should be translated, adapted, and tested in the new study population.*

**Key point**



### STEPS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Ethnographic surveys flow from the systematic collection and analysis of ethnographic data. The data are organized into domains, which are then operationalized as factors, subfactors, and variables and smaller units that we call “items,” which constitute the basis for specific closed-ended choices or questions on a survey. Researchers using these data to construct their survey will be faced with the need to select from among a large number of factors and variables



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 2, chapter 4, Figure 4.1, for a synopsis of the concept of levels of abstraction and operationalization; also Book 5



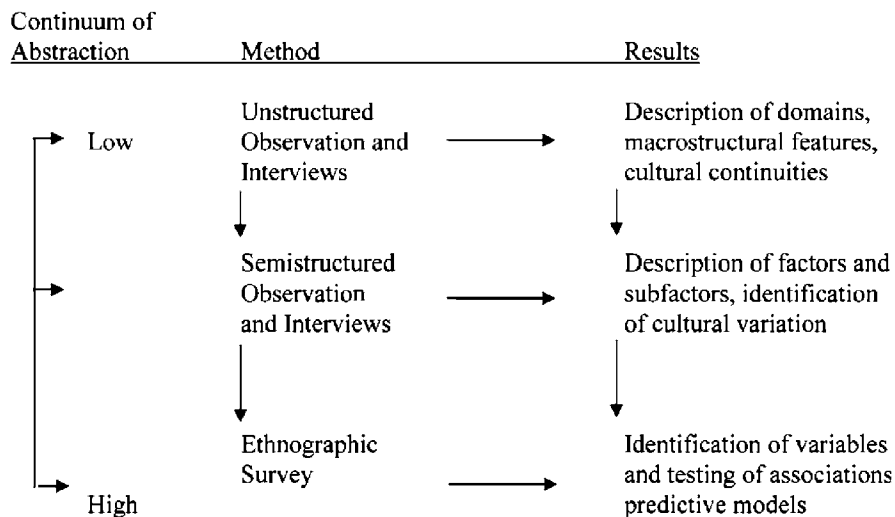
**Cross Reference:**

See Book 5, chapter 8, and Book 2, chapter 6 on operationalization for a definition of variables and their attributes or the items of which they are composed

only those that they wish to include in the survey instrument. As we have described earlier, step one of the data-collection process starts with unstructured interviewing and observation at the domain level, guided by formative theory. Ethnographic researchers use these data, prior research literature, and insights from study participants to delineate new domains, identify factors, and eliminate domains that have proved to be less significant than first thought.

Moving down the ladder of abstraction, as illustrated in Figure 9.1, step two involves using identified factors as the basis for developing questions for a semistructured instrument. Semistructured interviews create the first opportunity in the data-collection process for researchers to ask the same specific, focused, yet open-ended questions to a larger sample of respondents. The answers to these questions and the subsequent probes that seek further clarification of answers to them generate variables and items or attributes that constitute the components of variables for step three: assembling the basic building blocks for a quantitative survey.

Example 9.1 below shows how the process diagrammed in Figure 9.2 looks in practice.



**FIGURE 9.2** Methods of Data Collection Associated with the Continuum of Abstraction

**EXAMPLE 9.1****EXTRACTING FACTORS AND VARIABLES FROM UNSTRUCTURED AND SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW DATA**

In research conducted in Mauritius on the newly emergent exposure of young women in the industrial sector to intimate relationships and possible HIV risk the WORK domain was identified as one of the major components of the formative model. One important factor that emerged in unstructured interviewing was “reasons young women enter the workforce.” In the semistructured interview schedule, researchers investigated this factor by asking the following question *in Creole*, the language spoken by every Mauritian, “For what reasons did you take up employment in the Export Processing Zone [EPZ]?” The resulting text responses were given a code name at the Factor level (a factor code), “WHYWORK” (why work?), and situated under the Domain “work.” Content analysis of the text coded under the factor “WHYWORK” resulted in the identification of five categories of reasons why women chose to enter the workforce that resulted from grouping specific items such as “to be able to buy my own clothes” (under financially independent), “to be able to buy food for the household” (support the family), and others.


- (1) to be financially independent;
- (2) to support the family;
- (3) to be away from home;
- (4) to join friends who are also working;
- (5) because of family problems.

Many of the women mentioned multiple reasons for entering the workforce, so the variable “why women entered the EPZ” was then transformed into a “ranking” question in the ethnographic survey, with the following format:

Here are five reasons why women take up employment. I would like you to rank each reason from 1–5 in terms of their order of importance to you (1 = highest and 5 = lowest).

For data analysis purposes, each response was treated as a separate ordinal variable in the form of a Likert scale.

When the scores for each question were summed and averaged (not a proper step; nevertheless, a common practice and was done in this study), the results showed that the most frequently chosen reason was “to support family” (mean = 2.03), with “financial independence” (mean = 2.61) in second place. Note: As we have indicated in Book

**Cross Reference:**  See Book 5, chapter 8, on definitions of ordinal and other types of variables and the organization and management of ethnographic survey data

5, chapter 9, the responses for ordinal variables (rankings without fixed values between levels) strictly speaking should not be summed, but treating ordinal variables as if they were interval or ratio scales is a common practice used to display trends and relationships. There were many significant differences between young women who were motivated to join the EPZ workforce for their own development or personal interests (reasons 1, 3, 4) and those who entered the workforce as a result of family motivation (reasons 2, 5) with regard to their relationships with men and sexual behavior.

This example illustrates the points made in Figure 9.1, earlier in the chapter, that each level of methodology contributes:

- a unique set of results specific to that level;
- a basis for further operationalization and increasingly focused research methods;
- an opportunity for cross checking (triangulation) one set of results with another on the same issue;
- a follow-up procedure to build on and further elucidate results.

As Example 9.1 demonstrates, the first step in the process of ethnographic survey construction is analysis of data obtained from semistructured interviews and observations. These data are in the form of text, generated by recording the respondents' answers to questions and transcribing field notes. For purposes of constructing the ethnographic survey, text data is analyzed by searching for and identifying variables that "operationalize"—or make visible—factors, and for finding the attributes or items that make up these variables as they are expressed in the population. Thus, a search of the code WSAT (work satisfaction, a factor) in the responses to the semistructured interview question, "How do you feel about your work in the EPZ," identified two groups of respondents: those satisfied with their work life in the EPZ and those who were not. A further analysis of the responses to the question abstracted under the code WSAT identified a number of subfactors and variables, including:



**Cross Reference:**

See Book 1, and chapter 3 of this book for further guidance on creating field notes and other text data; see also Book 4, chapter 1, for a discussion of creating texts about artifacts

- Quality of relationships with coworkers
- Relations with supervisor
- Amount of job training
- Level of tiredness
- Physical effects of work tasks
- Adequacy of salary
- Amount of time off during work hours
- Amount of free time after work

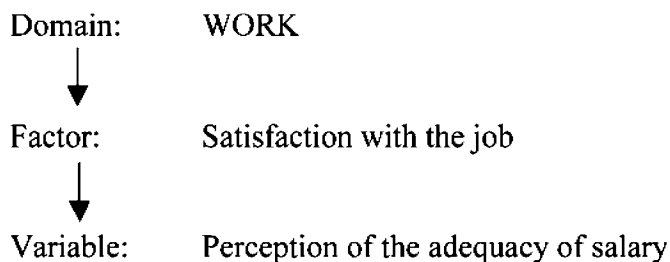
In terms of the process of operationalization, we have moved in the following fashion:

One approach our research teams have taken to make this process of transformation easier has been to work with enlarged models mounted on several sheets of posterboard or newsprint taped to a large wall. A standard rule of thumb is to select two to five independent domains and one (or no more than two) related dependent domains for inclusion in the survey. The ethnographic surveys constructed for use in Mauritius and Sri Lanka and later on, in work on HIV risk among men and women in India, included the three independent domains “family,” “peer,” and “work/community,” and the dependent domain “sexuality.” The study of pathways to high-risk drug use conducted in Hartford, Connecticut, included the independent domains “family,” “school,” “peer,” “involvement in illegal activities,” and “social networks,” and the dependent domain “drug use patterns.” Figure 9.4 illustrates the way in which the relationships among domains can be diagrammed. The same process was used in a study of arts programming, described in Book 5.

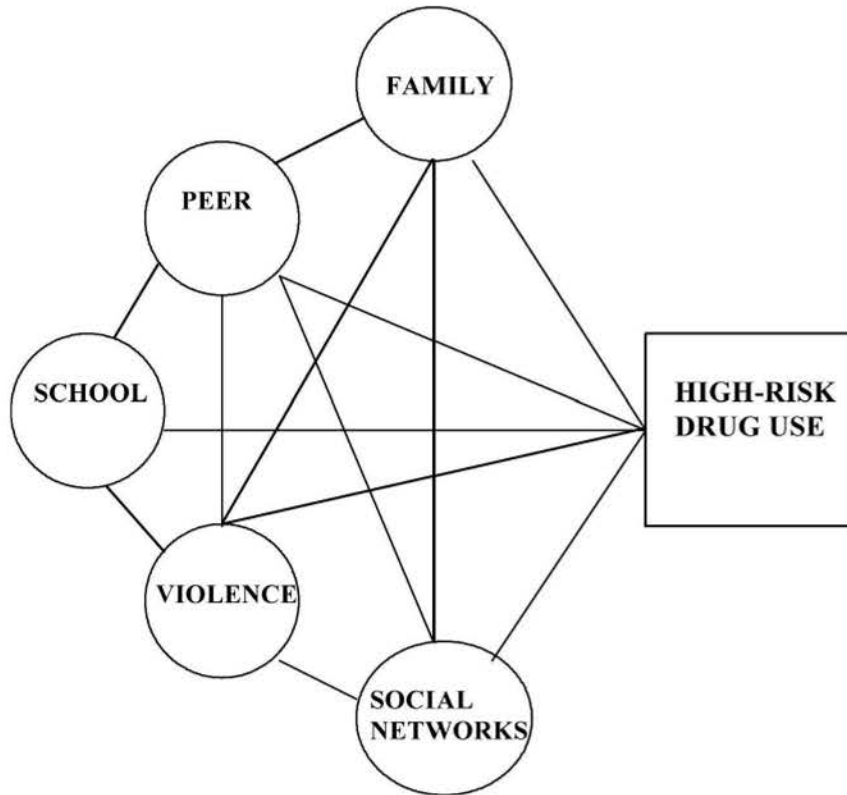
**Cross Reference:**



See Book 5 for a discussion of a similar process, using newsprint and post-its, in a study of arts programming



**FIGURE 9.3** Moving Conceptually from the Domain to the Variable Level



**FIGURE 9.4** Displaying Independent and Dependent Domains for Inclusion in the Survey Instrument

The next rule of thumb for survey construction is to review the analyzed secondary and primary (in-depth and semistructured) data for the purpose of identifying four or five factors in each domain, and up to six variables in each factor. These can be listed on the wall on a separate sheet of paper, in the form of taxonomy, as shown in Figure 9.1 and Table 9.1.

The next step is to superimpose factors that are candidates for inclusion in the ethnographic survey instrument onto the conceptual model, as illustrated in Figure 9.5.

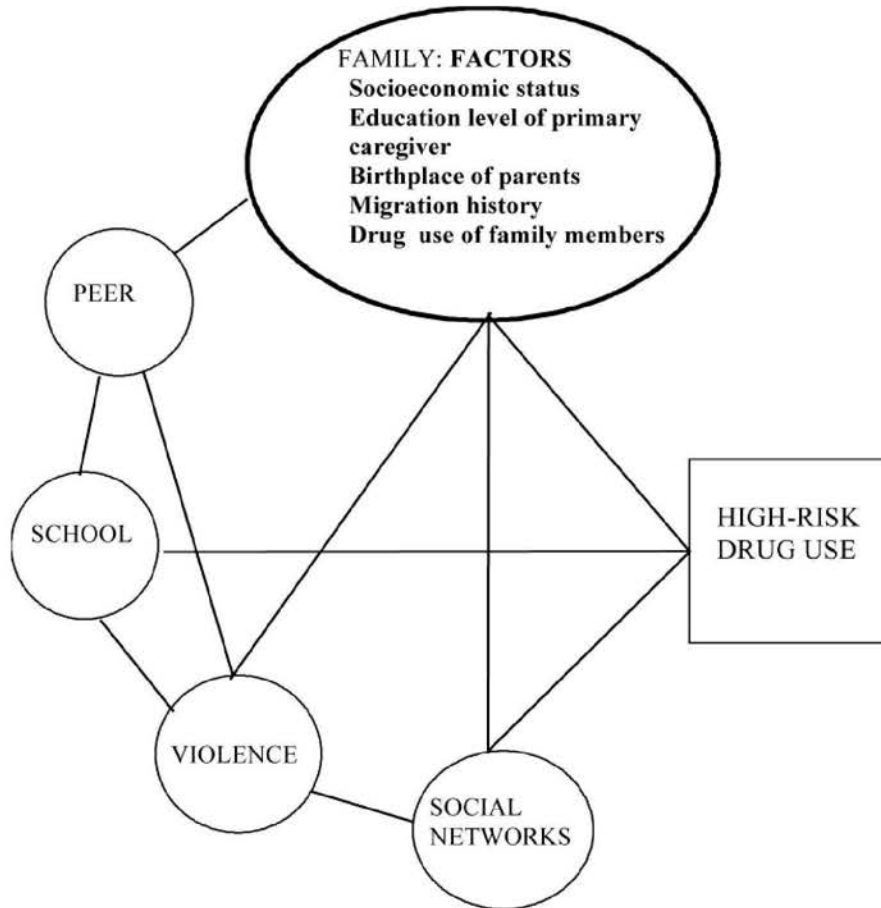
Finally, we demonstrate in Figure 9.6 how *variables* are included in the model by using the factor “socioeconomic status” as an example. Here we list the variables that are indicators of socioeconomic status in this study:

- Household income
- Material style of life
- Occupation of household head
- Number in household working

The process of breaking down six domains into six factors each, with seven variables in each factor, gives us over two hundred variables on the bottom tier of the conceptual taxonomy or tree diagram. This number of variables may at first seem daunting, and the appearance of the new office “wallpaper,” brightened with colored construction paper and post-its with different colors representing different levels (domain, factor, and variable), may surprise visitors not familiar with its meaning. It will, however, provide a sense of the distribution of identified variables by factor and domain, illustrating where the distribution of variables is uneven and where there are gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed to ensure that the survey covers every relevant topic in an adequate manner.

**TABLE 9.1** Taxonomy of Factors and Variables for Survey Construction

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>FAMILY DOMAIN</b></p> <p><i>Factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Socioeconomic status</li> <li>Education level of primary caregiver</li> <li>Birthplace of parents</li> <li>Migration history</li> <li>Drug use of family members</li> </ul>  | <p><b>VIOLENCE DOMAIN</b></p> <p><i>Factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exposure to violence</li> <li>Perpetration of violence</li> <li>Drugs and violence</li> <li>History of arrests or court involvement</li> </ul>                                 |
| <p><b>PEER DOMAIN</b></p> <p><i>Factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of peers</li> <li>Number of activities with peers</li> <li>Drug use with peers</li> <li>History of court exposure of peers</li> <li>Drug use of peers</li> <li>Peer pressure to use drugs or alcohol</li> </ul> | <p><b>SOCIAL NETWORKS DOMAIN</b></p> <p><i>Factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Size of social network</li> <li>Composition of social network</li> <li>Density of social network</li> <li>Density of risk network</li> <li>Centrality of ego</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>SCHOOL DOMAIN</b></p> <p><i>Factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History of school performance</li> <li>Exposure to drugs in school</li> <li>Exposure to alcohol in school</li> <li>School norms related to drug use</li> </ul>   | <p><b>DRUG USE DOMAIN</b></p> <p><i>Factors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of drugs used</li> <li>Frequency</li> </ul>   |



**FIGURE 9.5** Taxonomy of Factors for Survey Construction

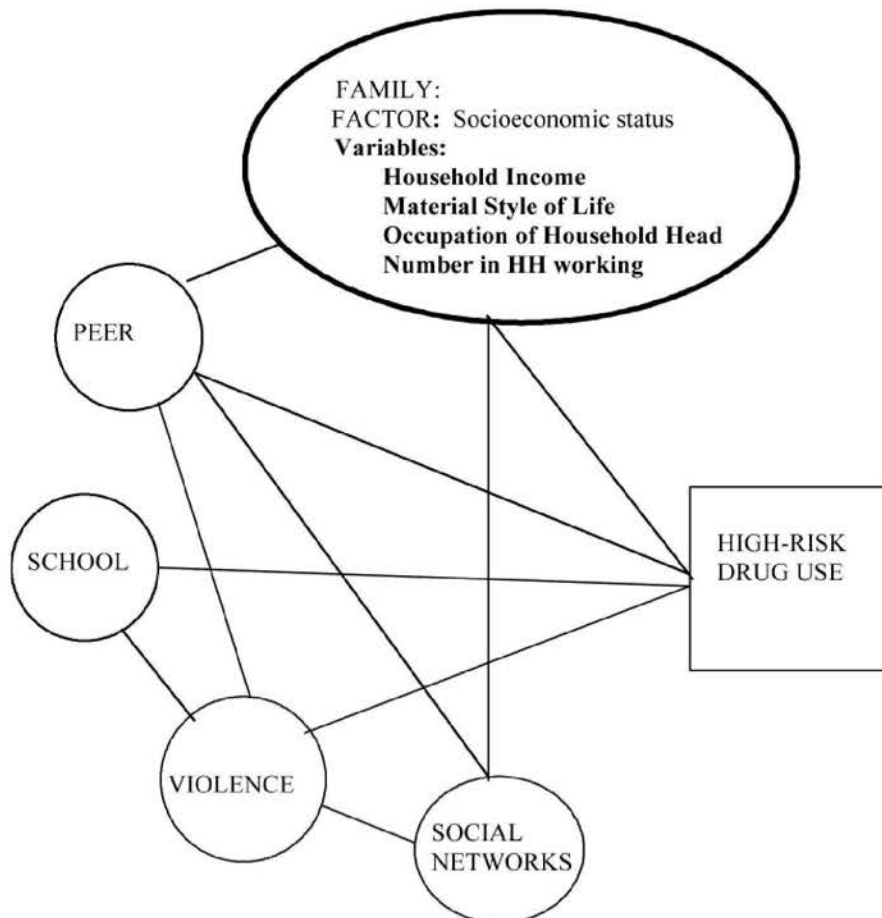
Formulating an ethnographic survey instrument calls for careful selection at both the factor and variable level because researchers cannot cram into a single instrument questions about every single factor or variable of interest. Looking at a complete list of factors and variables arrayed on the theoretical model makes the selection/deselection process at these levels more systematic and conscious.

We use our wall hanging/wallpaper example to generate the following criteria for selection and deselection:

- Are there *factors* within any domain *that have not been well operationalized*—that is, do any factors lack a sufficient number of variables? If other fac-

tors within the domain are well operationalized, the less well operationalized one could be a candidate for deselection.

- Are there *factors* that *include too many variables*? If so, redundant or less relevant variables could be identified and eliminated.
- Is there an adequate *balance of factors to domains*? A significant imbalance may guide the deselection process by pointing to domains that are less well represented in the existing data and are thus less important for the study.



**FIGURE 9.6** Taxonomy of Variables for the Factor "Socioeconomic Status" in the Domain "FAMILY"



- Is there a limitation on time and resources for conducting the interview, taking into consideration sample size, incentives for respondents, and the duration of the study? These limitations help to determine how many domains, factors, and variables can be included in a study (although they do not necessarily determine which ones are actually selected).

It is more difficult to provide concrete guidelines for how to choose one variable over another. A variable that is difficult to format may need to be eliminated. However, if it appears to be very important, researchers should either collect more data or think more deeply about how to properly format it. Redundancy also is a good reason for rejecting a variable except in cases where having more questions about the same factor increases reliability. When in doubt, researchers must rely on the decision of the lead researcher or principal investigator, who will determine the final selection based on revisiting the conceptual model. The tree diagram also allows other members of the research team who may be more familiar with the ethnographic data to have input into the formation of the ethnographic survey.

The process we have described here calls for “editing down” or crunching variables identified in the ethnographic text and other complementary sources of data, rather than “inventing” variables or identifying them from the literature. The more conscious and intentional the process is, the less mysterious the construction of a survey instrument will seem. Having selected the final variable list, researchers are now ready for the conversion of these variables into questions on the survey instrument. This process can be replicated with observational data; shrinking multiple observational domains, factors, and variables into those consistent with the study model; and developing an observational checklist or instrument that collects systematic data only on those variables considered critical to testing the theoretical model.

### *The Construction of Variables*

Variables consist of attributes (or items) that “vary.” Ethnographic data collection in stages 1 and 2 assists us in defin-

ing attributes, organizing them into variables, and eventually, determining how the variables are to be constructed.

The construction of variables involves several important qualities:

- Attributes of variables should be exhaustive
- Attributes of variables should be mutually exclusive
- Attributes and questions about variables should avoid using two or more nouns or verbs—that is, they should not be “double-barreled questions”

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 5, chapter 8, on the organization and management of quantitative data

*Exhaustiveness*

The attributes or units of which a variable is composed should be *exhaustive*. That is, every observation with regard to that variable should be able to be classified into one or the other of the attributes; there should never be a response that fits an attribute other than one already included in the variable. Attributes can be made exhaustive by adding the categories “other,” “none of the above,” and “don’t know.” Researchers should remember, however, that responses to “other” will have to be coded for use later on, and the category should be avoided whenever possible.

**EXAMPLE 9.2**

EXAMPLES OF EXHAUSTIVENESS IN ITEM SELECTION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF CLOSED-ENDED RESPONSES ON AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. Main reason for thinking of dropping out of school
  - harassment by teachers
  - harassment by students
  - poor grades
  - need to help family financially by working full time
  - had a baby
  - illness of family member
  - illness of self
  - other
2. Future education/career paths. What educational option is most likely for you in the future? You may select only one of the following choices.
  - join the army
  - go to college

- go to a technical school
- get on-the-job technical training
- don't know

3. Where were you the *first* time you tried a drug (not alcohol)?

- have never used drugs
- with friends at a party
- with friends in a car
- at a public event (concert, game, dance, etc.)
- at school during regular school day
- at home with friends or family members
- alone (at home or elsewhere)

### *Mutual Exclusiveness*

Unlike coding of qualitative data, attributes in survey data must be mutually exclusive. When there are optional responses it should not be possible to respond to two attributes simultaneously with respect to the *same variable*. For example, “Where do you live most of the time?” should include all of the possible places where a person could live and should request the respondent to select *only one location* where he or she lives most of the time. The question *could* read, “Where do you live at the present time?” In this case, those who live in several different locations could check each one. However, the question would be structured in the form of not one but multiple variables. Each variable would be a location (e.g., New York, Houston, Colorado, Hartford, Essex on the shore, San Miguel Allende) with a “yes/no” response.

Next, we illustrate flaws in the construction of a question measuring a variable called “employment.”

### **EXAMPLE 9.3**

#### **A POORLY FORMATTED QUESTION REGARDING EMPLOYMENT**

What is your current employment status?

- Full-time employment
- Part-time employment
- Unemployed

The question is problematic because the responses are not mutually exclusive. Respondents could check both of the first two statements if they have both a full-time *and* a part-time job. To correct the problem, the researcher could do one of several things:

- Include part-time employment under the general category “employed” and provide only two optional responses: employed or unemployed. This option would result in lost data.
- Offer the respondent only one choice, which would result in the respondent’s choosing the most salient or important option. This strategy could result in inaccurate data as someone could check “part time” because it is more lucrative but hold full-time employment as well.
- Indicate that full-time employment takes precedence over part-time employment. In this case, only those NOT WORKING FULL TIME would check the part-time employment box. This would also result in incomplete data because full-time employees might also work part time but would not have the opportunity to indicate this in the survey.
- Leave the question as it is, if the researcher has obtained enough information to know that the options are indeed mutually exclusive in that setting.
- Ask two or several questions designed to elicit the full range of full- and part-time work combinations.

Researchers should *avoid double-barreled questions with two or more subjects or verbs*. Inexperienced researchers sometimes include questions in surveys that contain two or more subjects or verbs, such as, “Has the use of alcohol or drugs ever influenced you to engage in an illegal or violent act?” This is a poor strategy for question construction because neither the respondent nor the researcher knows to which of the subjects—“alcohol” or “drugs”—or adjectives—“illegal” or “violent”—the response refers. Further, the notions of *illegal* or *violent* have not yet been defined. The question should be disaggregated into two questions, each of which contains two variables:

Have you ever, because of drinking alcohol

- robbed a person of money?
- stolen a car or other object from the street?
- taken an object from someone’s house?
- gone through a red light?
- gotten into a fight with someone?



Have you ever, when using any illegal drug

- robbed a person of money?
- stolen a car or other object from the street?
- taken an object from someone's house?
- gone through a red light?
- gotten into a fight with someone?

These are basic characteristics of variable construction. Up to this point we have applied them only to categorical variables for which respondents are asked to select one response alternative from among several choices. Respondents also may be asked to compare one attribute with another, for example, to determine relationships among attributes. They can rank attributes from high to low or in relation to one another (first, second, third, etc.) as in “please rank the following desserts from 1–10 in order of preference: carrot cake, *halwa* (a kind of sweet, semolina dessert popular in northern India), chocolate chip cookies, flan, lemon meringue pie, Jello with whipped cream, fruit salad, ice cream, dried fruit compote, chocolate layer cake. In this case, each item is treated as a single variable, and each would receive a ranking. Analysis compares the ranking of one respondent to that of others using a ranking statistic such as Spearman's Rho or Kendall's Tau, using spreadsheet statistics or a statistical software program such as SPSS.

Attributes also can be scored. It is important to know what choices researchers have when constructing variables and why they should choose one type of variable over another, because data analytic procedures differ depending on the type of variable used.



**Definition:**

Nominal measures are variables with exhaustive and mutually exclusive attributes that are qualitatively but not quantitatively different

*Types of Variables or Measures*

- Nominal measures
- Ordinal measures
- Interval measures
- Ratio measures

**Nominal measures** are variables whose attributes are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Nominal measures


vary in terms of quality but not in amount. Nominal variables are *categorically* different, that is, they can be differentiated by name or label but not by “quantity.” In international training programs that bring together people from different countries, people could be grouped by country. The variable would be “country of origin.” All of the people from Zimbabwe, Ireland, Peru, and Indonesia would differ by one characteristic: “country of origin.” All those from Zimbabwe would share the same characteristic “Zimbabwe as country of origin.” People can be arranged in the same way by gender (male versus female), food preference (vegetarian versus nonvegetarian), home tenancy (home ownership versus rental), or meeting attendance (present versus absent). But the differences between these attributes *cannot be ranked*. They are merely categorically or qualitatively *different*.

Variables with attributes that can be ordered by *rating* are referred to as **ordinal measures**. Rating means that different attributes have relatively “more or less” of the variable, but the differences *are not measured in absolute terms*. We can establish a rating by educational level. Respondents would be instructed to choose only one from among the following items.

- Completed elementary school
- Middle school
- High school
- Less than college degree but some college
- Completed college degree
- Postcollege education

These are mutually exclusive and are ranked in terms of “amount of education.” Yet the specific “amount” of education, as measured by classes or years, is not indicated. The so-called distances between levels do not have any meaning other than “more or less than.” Likert scales, which ask respondents to rate a preference or opinion from 1–5, that is, “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree,” are ordinal measures.

Guttman scales are ordinal scales that demonstrate logical orderly accrual of attributes or items in a single cultural domain, that is, they demonstrate the presence of a ranking in a set of items that might be different and/or might rank

**Definition:**  Ordinal measures are variables that can be ranked, where the differences between levels are only relative and not measured in standardized units

differently in different cultures or with different populations (Andrews and Peterson 2006; Andrich 1885). Guttman scales have been used to measure the order of accumulation of material goods, theory of mind understandings (Wellman, Fang, Liu, Zhu, and Liu 2006), social images of substance users (Streiner and Norman 2008), protective measures for pesticides (Sivayoganathan, Gnanachandran, Lewis, and Fernando 1995), and the accrual of sexual or sexual intimacy behaviors (Bentler 1968; de Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, Meijer, Woertman, and Meeus 2009; Gutek, Nakamura, Gahart, Handschumacher, and Russell 1980).

Table 9.2 shows a Guttman scale of sexual intimacy based on interviews with male and female adolescents thirteen to nineteen years of age. The Guttman scale was obtained by asking a sample of respondents to check whether they had ever engaged in each of a list of intimate behaviors identified through free listing. First the frequencies were examined. This identified a ranking from most performed to least performed behaviors. Then working from least (oral sex) to most (tap kissing, a quick kiss without tongue given to family and friends), each individual's behavior was arranged in the matrix along a row and then compared with every other's manually to find the best fit across all respondents in a sequence from involvement in NO behavior to involvement in EVERY behavior. The result was the representation in Table 9.2.

Rows show number of respondents, and columns show the pattern of sequencing from none to all behaviors. The exact number of respondents in each cell is not included. However, the scale error score indicates that there were 158 "mistakes" or cases where there were zeros when there should have been Xs or Xs where there should have been zeros in the Guttman scale matrix. This places the coefficient of reproducibility at an acceptable level (over .90). Individuals in the study can then be given a score from 1–12 based on their level, and the score, treated as an index of risk, can be associated with other—demographic, education, relational, or behavioral—variables.

When the distance between ranked attributes has meaning as measured with a standard unit of measurement, the variables are referred to as **interval measures**. It is dif-



**Definition:**

Interval measures are variables for which the ranked distance between attributes is determined by a standard unit of measurement that does not begin at zero point (for example, units on the thermostat, or IQ)

**TABLE 9.2** Guttman Scale of Sexual Intimacy (male and female Hartford teens aged 13–19, 1999)


| Scale Type | N  | 6 | 2 | 8 | 1 | 10 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 11 | 9 |
|------------|----|---|---|---|---|----|---|---|---|---|----|---|
| 12         | 2  | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 11         | 6  | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 10         | 9  | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 9          | 13 | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 8          | 5  | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 7          | 11 | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 6          | 9  | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 5          | 6  | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 4          | 8  | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 3          | 11 | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 2          | 16 | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |
| 1          | 6  | X | X | X | X | X  | X | X | X | X | X  | X |

Total Cells: 1,661; Scale Errors: 158; Coefficient of Reproducibility = 158/1661 or .904 (N = 104)

- |                |                          |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Caressing   | 6. Tap or tongue kissing |
| 2. Touching    | 7. Sucking breasts       |
| 3. Banging     | 8. Sucking neck          |
| 4. Making love | 9. Oral sex              |
| 5. Licking     | 10. Grinding             |
|                | 11. Fingering            |

difficult to find variables in social science research that are true interval measures that are not based on a zero starting point. Some authors give the example of IQ or other intelligence scores, in which the distance between a score of 100 and 120 is considered to be the same as the distance between 90 and 110. However, for a living person the start point could not be zero—that is, no living person could be considered to have no intelligence functions at all.

**Ratio measures** are based on an absolute baseline, measured against zero. Actual age, absolute income in monetary units, number of people in personal networks, or spatial units such as miles or kilometers all are ratio measures.

**Definition:**  Ratio measures are based on zero point

### *Transforming Variables by Selecting or Creating Items That Vary*

Our next task is to disaggregate a “variable” into its constituent items or attributes and to reconstitute those attributes into a question that will appear in the ethnographic

survey instrument and will measure the variable. Example 9.4 illustrates the relationship between a variable and a variable-level question and the reframing of the question to obtain responses to items or attributes.

**EXAMPLE 9.4**

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VARIABLES AND ITEMS

**Variable:** Reasons for working in the EPZ, Mauritius

**Semistructured Survey Question:** Why do women work in the Economic Processing Zone in Mauritius?

**Responses or attributes:** Five reasons why women take up employment:

- To be financially independent
- To support the family
- To be away from home
- Friends are also working
- Family problems

**Ethnographic Survey Question:** Here are five reasons why women take up employment. I would like you to rank each reason from 1 to 5 in terms of their importance when you took up employment. Five means most important, and one means least important.

- \_\_\_To be financially independent
- \_\_\_To support the family
- \_\_\_To be away from home
- \_\_\_Friends are working
- \_\_\_Family problems

*Suggestions and Guidelines for the Construction of Survey Questions*

In the next box we list some suggestions for the formulation and construction of survey questions. The primary messages we want to convey to researchers are to make sure that questions are clearly phrased and do not bias respondents toward favoring one answer over another and to design questions that research participants can easily understand.

- Select either a question or statement format.
- Avoid open-ended questions.
- Make sure that all items are clearly stated.
- Make sure that items are mutually exclusive.
- Avoid statements that include “combinations” (and/or) in either noun or verb.
- Make sure respondents have sufficient knowledge to answer the question.
- Make sure the questions are relevant to the topic.
- Keep questions and item responses as short as possible.
- Avoid alternating negatively phrased items with positively phrased items in the same scale.
- Avoid questions and terms that are obviously biased or have hidden meanings that could confuse the respondent.

### *Formatting Survey Questions in Relation to Types of Variables*

Researchers can choose from a broad range of question format options when transforming variables into items. Typical survey question formats are the following:

- Fill in—Respondent completes the response with the correct answer.
- Multiple choice—Respondent chooses one from among up to fifteen choices.
- Likert rating scale—Respondent rates an item from high to low on a three-, four-, or five-point scale.
- Semantic differential—Respondent locates a cultural domain in relation to a series of items consisting of a characteristic and its polar opposite (e.g., hot . . . cold; sweet . . . sour; happy . . . sad; cheap . . . expensive; fast . . . slow; clever . . . stupid).
- Ranking—Respondent is asked to rank each item in relation to the others in a finite list of no more than ten items.



- **Rating**—Respondent is asked to rate an individual item on some characteristic, usually from 1 to 10, as in from happy to sad; pretty to ugly; desirable to undesirable.
- **Category**—Respondent is asked to choose one of two or more categorically distinct options, for example, “Given a choice, which would you rather do? Go skiing or go sailboat racing?”

These question format options are summarized in Table 9.3, along with examples of questions and type of measure.

In Table 9.4, we show how researchers can create and format questions representing variables within the same factor and domain. Here we have chosen the factor “family income.” In our study of AIDS risk in Mauritius, family income is situated in the FAMILY domain. All of the questions in the table relate to the factor “family income.” They represent seven different variables, each an indicator of a slightly different cultural construct and each measured differently. Selection of the appropriate format is based on the nature of the variable, the education and experience of respondents (both of which influence their ability to respond accurately), and the results of pretesting.

### *Piloting and Pretesting the Survey*

Pretesting an ethnographic survey should take place in two steps. First, the instrument should be pilot-tested with a small sample to assess the clarity of the questions and the timing of administration. Second, the instrument should be pretested with a larger sample to assess validity and adequacy of variable and scale construction.



#### **Definition:**

Skip patterns are instructions to the interviewer to move from one set of questions to another consistent with the logic of the instrument

### *Piloting the Instrument*

The instrument should be reviewed with a small group of respondents from the study population for sequencing, flow, and **skip patterns**, language use, comprehension, and length. The review can take place in a focus group setting or through individual interviews or both. Any issues regarding

TABLE 9.3 Question Format Table, with Examples

| QUESTION FORMAT           | EXAMPLE  | MEASURE<br>(Nominal, Ordinal,<br>Interval, Ratio) |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Fill-in                   | How old are you now?<br>Exact age _____  | Ratio   |
| Multiple choice           | Please choose one answer only.<br>I believe that women in this community:<br>__ should remain at home to raise children<br>and should not earn money<br>__ should earn money doing traditional<br>women's work (sewing, selling food in the<br>marketplace, etc.)<br>__ should be able to do any work men can do | Nominal   |
| Likert scale              | What would you say is your risk of exposure<br>to AIDS in the next five years? (1 is highest,<br>5 lowest)<br>__1 __2 __3 __4 __5  | Nominal   |
| Semantic differential     | Where would you locate the term <i>applied<br/>research</i> on the following scales:<br>useful _____ useless<br>wealth _____ poverty<br>weak _____ powerful  | Nominal   |
| Rating                    | Rate each of the following items from 1<br>(highest) to 4 (lowest) in terms of how<br>important they are to you:<br>__car __computer<br>__TV __stereo/CD player  | Nominal   |
| Ranking                   | Rank the following from 1 (highest) to 4<br>(lowest) in relation to each other, in terms of<br>how important they are to you:<br>__car __computer<br>__TV __stereo/CD player   | Nominal   |
| Positive/negative: yes/no | Do you expect to be living in this area five<br>years from now?<br>__yes __no  | Categorical                                       |

TABLE 9.4 Different Ways of Formatting Variables for the Factor “Family Income”


| Format                           | Question  | Variable  | Cultural Construct   | Scale or Measure        |
|----------------------------------|---|---|----------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Positive/negative: yes/no</b> | Please indicate whether your monthly income is ___ less than \$600, ___ more than \$600   | Estimated monthly income                                | Demographic          | Nominal/<br>Categorical |
| <b>Fill-in</b>                   | What is your monthly household income?  | Exact monthly income                                    | Demographic variable | Ratio/<br>Continuous    |
| <b>Multiple choice</b>           | What is your average monthly income?<br>Check the response that applies most directly to you:<br>___ \$100–\$499 ___ \$1,000–\$1,999<br>___ \$500–\$999 ___ \$2,000–and above   | Estimated average monthly income                        | Demographic variable | Nominal/<br>Categorical |
| <b>Likert</b>                    | How satisfied are you with your monthly income on a scale from 1 (highest) to 5 (lowest)<br>1 ___ ___ ___ 5   | Satisfaction with income                                | Perception           | Ordinal/<br>Continuous  |
| <b>Semantic differential</b>     | How do you consider your monthly income? Please check the place that applies.<br>High _____ Low<br>Adequate _____ Inadequate<br>Similar _____ Dissimilar  | Characteristics of monthly income                       | Attitude             | Ordinal/<br>Continuous  |
| <b>Rating</b>                    | For each item, please rate from 1 to 8 (highest to lowest) how likely it is that your monthly income will enable you to purchase each of the following items in the next year:<br>___ television ___ microwave oven<br>___ automobile ___ living room couch<br>___ motorcycle ___ radio<br>___ stereo ___ indoor toilet | Probability of purchase of material style of life items | Expectancy           | Ordinal/<br>Continuous  |
| <b>Ranking</b>                   | Please rank from 1 to 6 the following items in terms of sequence of purchase:<br>___ television ___ microwave oven<br>___ automobile ___ living room couch<br>___ motorcycle ___ radio  | Importance of MSL items                                 | Attitude             | Ordinal/<br>Continuous  |

the construction, conception, and flow of the instrument can be taken up with respondents during the administration on a question-by-question basis, or afterward. The instrument then should be redrafted for pretesting.

### *Pretesting the Instrument*

Any instrument, regardless of the source of the questions, should be pretested on the local population involved in the study. Pretesting prevents problems associated with validity and stability and allows researchers to test the degree to which scales assessed for reliability and validity with national samples measure variables in the same way locally. Pretesting an instrument is especially important in the construction of ethnographic surveys where most variables, including those measured by scales, are derived from field research rather than from nationally validated instruments. The pretest permits researchers to validate the instrument in the field setting before using it on a larger sample.

The instrument should be pretested with a representative sample of no more than about thirty respondents who are from, or similar to, the study population. A pretest sample of this size allows for testing scale construction as well as acceptability and social validity (whether the questions are interpreted by respondents to mean what the researchers are asking). Ideally at least 50 percent should be repeat-interviewed with the same instrument during a two-week time frame to check for consistency of responses from the first to the second administration, although this extra step is subject to the limitations of time and resources. A high correlation between selected responses from time 1 and time 2 suggests that the instrument is **stable** or reliable, that is, the questions are structured so that they will be highly likely to obtain the same answer from the same respondent more than once. Respondents who participate in the pilot studies should be excluded from the complete study sample because they have already answered the question and they have already been exposed to the survey. The data collected from the larger pilot study are useful for the same purposes as the first pilot phase and, if not very different from the

**Definition:**   
Stability refers to an instrument's ability to obtain the same answers to a question from the same respondent at two points within a brief time period



final survey, can be used in the final sample. However, these data also serve other important purposes. They:

- Permit checking for internal reliability and consistency by cross-tabulating similar questions to see whether they correlate.
- Permit checking for stability of the instrument.
- Enable the creation of scales with good reliability scores.
- Permit researchers to see whether there is sufficient variation in responses to questions to retain the question.
- Enable researchers to eliminate variables that do not show enough variation (i.e., where all the responses are the same).
- Permit researchers to eliminate potential scale items that do not fit well into a scale.

Of course, some studies are quite small, consisting of only fifty respondents or even fewer than that. In such cases, a survey may only be evaluated for acceptability and comprehension, with a small group of people from the study community. Researchers would have to forego the steps recommended for larger surveys.

Many social-science-field-based dissertations, however, do collect surveys from 150 respondents or even more. Lwendo Moonzwe, a graduate student at the University of Connecticut in sociology and public health, is typical of such students with her dissertation. In her study of factors contributing to HIV in women in a large urban compound in Lusaka, Zambia, she conducted a pilot study to evaluate her survey with a group of thirty women from the community, and then she revised it and submitted it to a randomized cluster sample of 150 women from fifteen zones in the study community. To do this she had the help of two local research assistants and a small dissertation fellowship from the National Institutes of Health that covered the cost of paying the research assistants and survey respondents. The issue of sampling is critically important in ethnographic surveying. For this reason, we have devoted much of an



**Cross  
Reference:**  
See chapter 10 of  
this book

entire chapter to a consideration of systematic and probability sampling in ethnographic research.

### ADMINISTRATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS

*Researchers should try to administer ethnographic surveys to respondents directly in a face-to-face interview.*

Face-to-face interviews are preferable since respondents often make additional comments during the interview process. These additional comments constitute ethnographic data that add to understanding of the respondent's life and may also add to overall data in the study. Direct administration of interviews also can create more rapport between the interviewer and respondent, leading to more valid responses. Further, as we have said elsewhere, we also believe that face-to-face administration and direct knowledge acquisition gives researchers a better intuitive understanding of the responses. Face-to-face administration of ethnographic surveys helps researchers to avoid problems stemming from illiteracy, poor reading comprehension, and mixed-language ability. However, it can take a great deal of time and effort to locate respondents, find safe places for administration of the interview, and complete the interview without the intrusion of other family members, friends, and personal obligations. Next, we discuss optimum conditions for administering surveys, and we then comment on strategies to use when optimum modes of administration are not available.

Optimal conditions for face-to-face administration of ethnographic surveys are similar to those outlined as necessary in supporting the acquisition of good information from focus group interviews. The interview should take place in a quiet, private place, with few or no interruptions. Ideally, it should be conducted away from other family or community members who could influence the opinion of the respondent directly (see, for example, Angela Johnson's predicament described in chapter 6 of this book). This is not always possible, especially in communities where trust of strangers is low or where it is the custom that people—especially women—be accompanied

#### Key point



#### Cross Reference:



See Book 1 on the interpersonal nature of ethnography and researcher as an instrument of data collection; and Book 6, chapter 1, on the researcher's role

#### Cross Reference:



See discussion of focus group interviews in this book, chapter 8

at all times. Under these circumstances, interviewers must do their best to minimize the input of others by telling them that they will be able to respond later in their own interview or that the opinion of the immediate respondent right now is the most important.

Respondent fatigue or restlessness can be a problem in a long interview, when the respondent has small children or other family obligations, or is sick, disabled, or addicted. Interviewers can always terminate an interview before it is completed and make appointments to return to complete it. Researchers may also decide that the interview itself is too long to be administered in a single session and instead schedule two sessions to complete it. However, two-session survey interviews are costly and time consuming, and we caution researchers to avoid them if possible.

If the appropriate conditions for face-to-face surveys cannot be obtained, researchers can resort to a self-administered instrument. The creation of a self-administered instrument may take longer because researchers must be sure that the questions asked are transparent—that is, with clear and complete instructions so that it is completely comprehensible to anyone likely to become involved in the study. Self-administered instruments also can only be used with literate populations. It is easiest to administer them in places where respondents normally gather for other purposes—in classrooms and adult learning centers, clinic waiting rooms, check-cashing lines, and after-school programs for youth. This requires setting up arrangements with staff at these settings beforehand.

#### EXAMPLE 9.5

##### USING SELF-ADMINISTERED QUESTIONNAIRES WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SRI LANKA

In a project on youth and sexual risk in Sri Lanka, members of the research team organized respondents to a survey—urban youth and university students—into small groups of six to ten youth, which were “proctored” as they answered the survey by members of the research team. With each group, the proctors reviewed the questionnaire in blocks. Respondents completed one self-administered block of questions as a group and then received instructions before they moved on to the next block of questions. Proctors were also available to answer any questions or to clarify issues if youth did not understand. Most of the youth in the study had an eleventh-grade educa-

tional level or more and were literate. As the questionnaires were handed in, proctors checked them and asked respondents to fill in any incomplete answers.

This approach made it possible to collect over six hundred completed instruments in less than three weeks, despite electricity blackouts and other kinds of logistical problems.

It also is possible to invite large numbers of respondents to a central location to complete questionnaires. Even with monetary incentives, food, a party, or a raffle, these events often require transportation, baby-sitting, or child care. Researchers must devote considerable time and attention to the social relationships that built the trust necessary to bring people to the session.

#### EXAMPLE 9.6

##### USING SELF-ADMINISTERED QUESTIONNAIRES WITH MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN HARTFORD

Urban Women Against Substance Abuse (UWASA) was an intervention study that tested whether improving mother-daughter communication in girls nine to twelve years of age could prevent early initiation of drug- and sex-risk behaviors. The study design called for the recruitment and evaluation of three one-year cycles of forty girls and their mothers (or mother equivalents—"other mothers") and a comparison of the results of a nine-month intervention with both girls and their mothers with a matched comparison group of mother-daughter pairs. Evaluation using self-administered instruments with both girls and their mothers was carried out at baseline (before the beginning of the intervention cycle) and at three time points after the intervention program was completed: immediately following completion, and then at six months, fifteen months, and twenty-four months after the intervention. During the second and third cycles, up to 120 mother and daughter pairs needed to be assessed at approximately the same time, as data-collection time points for several cycles overlapped. To overcome this challenge, the small evaluation staff of three decided to hold "evaluation parties." Program and comparison mothers and daughters from each cycle were invited to their own special events at the Institute for Community Research. They were separated into two groups, one for mothers and the other for girls. Program staff monitored each setting, handing out questionnaires in English or Spanish, making sure that mothers and girls understood all the questions, reviewing questionnaires as they were completed, and sending respondents back to complete questions that had not been filled in. At least one member of

the evaluation staff was available to read the evaluation survey to mothers who did not read either English or Spanish well.

Both mothers and daughters received their own incentives. In addition, they could participate in a raffle. Following the completion of the evaluation “party,” mothers and daughters were invited to a reception. Babysitters cared for small children, and program staff and hired drivers transported both mothers and daughters who needed rides to each evaluation session. With this plan, the program evaluation staff could evaluate between 50 and 75 percent of each cohort at the same time, leaving only a small number of responses to be obtained through door-to-door data collection. This method reduced evaluation staff time in the field by more than 60 percent.

Despite hidden costs, self-administered questionnaires offer researchers many advantages. They are less costly to administer, they take less time, they are effective with most study populations whose reading and comprehension levels are good, and they offer ready opportunities to increase sample size. At the same time, they may not capture the entire sample desired for the study, and some respondents might never arrive at a central location despite incentives. Furthermore, it is possible to identify patterned misunderstanding of specific questions only after the data have been collected and analyzed, not during the administration of the survey. For these reasons, self-administered instruments require more initial effort to ensure the accumulation of valid data.

Another solution is to use computer-assisted data entry. Three popular forms of computer-assisted data entry are computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI), or data entry using handheld computers (Babbie 2007, 272). There are a number of advantages to using all of these technologies, mainly in terms of ensuring data quality control and ease of data entry. In both CAPI and CASI, the survey respondent enters data on a computer terminal. The data are entered into a preprogrammed survey system with an associated database. The survey establishes acceptable ranges of response for each survey question. If respondents enter inaccurate data, the program returns to the

question and asks for the answer to be reentered. In CAPI, the interviewer may ask the question and enter the data; in CASI the respondent enters the data, though the survey researcher may be present. Handheld computers are increasingly used, especially in locations where it may be difficult to find an interview location in the field or where there is the potential for mistakes in data recording using paper and pencil surveys. Several recent examples include CDC-funded surveillance studies of HIV drug risk, where interviewers may be in multiple locations recruiting participants and may not have immediate access to an office of the Global Tobacco Survey (GATS), which involved interviewers in the collection of data in the field across multiple institutions, countries, and communities. In these cases, interviewers entered the data in preprogrammed surveys using handheld computers, and the data were downloaded to central collection, quality control, and analysis sites. Survey data can also be collected by telephone and through Internet surveys such as SurveyMonkey. The advantages and challenges of Internet surveying are summarized by Fan and Yan in a recent review article (Fan and Yan 2010).

There are many advantages to these systems, especially for technologically savvy respondents. The appearance of computer screens can be made interesting, audio recording of the questions provides an additional opportunity for ensuring that the questions are heard and understood, reporting on sensitive topics is often more accurate, and the data-entry process is considerably less expensive and more accurate. There are, however, disadvantages. Some respondents may not feel comfortable entering data into a computer, even with an interviewer present. The technology is still expensive in terms of time and cost of equipment and setup. And, where a decision is made to replace interviewers with technology, respondents' questions about meaning and sequence may go unanswered, affecting the quality of the data collected.

### **ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE DATA**

Analyzing ethnographic survey data can be more systematic and structured than is true for other kinds of survey data



**Cross Reference:**  
See Book 5, chapters 8 and 9, on organization, management, and analysis of quantitative survey data



**Definition:**  
Frequencies are the number and percentage of times that each item or attribute appears in the response to the question addressing the variable



**Cross Reference:**  
See Book 5, chapter 8, for a discussion of quantitative data-crunching strategies



**Cross Reference:**  
See Book 5, chapter 9, for a discussion of descriptive statistics, and bi- and multivariate analysis

because it follows the guidelines set by the formative theoretical model and the conceptual taxonomy of domains, factors, and variables. In this section we outline the steps in quantitative data analysis only briefly. We refer readers to chapters 8 and 9 in Book 5, where these steps are treated in greater detail.

Surveys usually include large numbers of variables that must be reduced for further analysis. Data “crunching” (reduction) occurs through combining variables in a variety of different ways. The first step in quantitative survey data analysis requires the production of **frequencies** for each of the variables in the study. Computer analysis programs such as SPSS, SAS, or EPI-Info provide summary information on each variable (for example, frequency, means, and range), which helps researchers to describe the variable and interpret the meaning of the results. Once the data have been tabulated and frequencies and other descriptive statistics have been produced, they are ready for use in hypothesis testing. To test hypotheses, researchers first revisit the original research model and use the data to examine the relationships among domains, factors, and variables. Hypothesis *testing* then involves comparing the means of variables for two groups of people within the sample, or examining the associations among variables, two or more at a time. This strategy of using statistical techniques to examine the strength of association between two variables is referred to as bivariate analysis. Using statistical techniques to associate groups of variables or more than two variables is referred to as multivariate analysis.

### INTEGRATING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DATA: TRIANGULATION

Triangulation of data for verification of results and the integration of qualitative and quantitative data are critical components of ethnographic research. The problem for ethnographers lies in how to integrate the results of each kind of data analysis so that they complement and reinforce one another. Doing this involves returning to modeling and

operationalization, which form a common basis for both the qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis procedures in an ethnographic study.

The qualitative data generated from the unstructured and semistructured interviews are coded into domains, factors, and variables and are stored in computerized form with a text-based data-management program. The quantitative data are organized and stored in the form of scales and indices representing the *identical* variables, factors, and subfactors. The meeting of these two comparable data sets at the factor and subfactor level provides an opportunity both for triangulation and integration.

The approach to coding qualitative data that we have found most effective is exemplified by the conceptual taxonomy or the “tree diagram.” Text data are coded by domains, factors, and subfactors, based on these levels in the taxonomy. It is not advisable to code text data at the variable level since coding is very time consuming, and coders generally cannot remember efficiently anything below the subfactor level in any conceptual/coding taxonomy. When a text-based computer management program such as ATLAS.ti, ETHNOGRAPH, or NVivo searches for a domain such as WORK, it will retrieve all the codes for the factors and subfactors in the WORK domain, as well as any other coded domains and factors in the same block of text. Researchers can then examine associations among domains, factors, and subfactors in that block of text, in line with the conceptual model. Furthermore, text-management programs allow researchers to request blocks of text that include any two or more specified codes. This is a second way in which researchers can seek associations among domains and factors.

Quantitative data analysis explores the associations between two or more variables either within or across domains and factors in much the same way as researchers do when they look for associated blocks of text. Using the theoretical model as a guide, ethnographers can explore the same associations in their qualitative and the quantitative data and use one type of data to help validate, interpret, and raise questions about the other.

### Cross

### Reference:



See Book 2, chapter 7, for ways to integrate mixed method data; Book 5, chapter 9, for a detailed discussion of the ways in which hypotheses can be tested. Table 9.3 in chapter 9 summarizes the statistical techniques that are used to determine whether the associations are significant or not and which can be used for bivariate or multivariate analysis

### Cross

### Reference:



See Book 1, chapter 7, and Book 5, chapters 4, 5, and 7, for instructions on analysis of qualitative data

**EXAMPLE 9.7****INTEGRATING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DATA  
IN A STUDY OF WOMEN, WORK, AND AIDS IN MAURITIUS**

Statistical analysis of quantitative data obtained from the ethnographically informed survey conducted among young women in the workforce in Mauritius showed that, contrary to researchers' beliefs, the young women's peers contributed little to their AIDS knowledge. However, to our surprise, family and work settings both played a significant role in providing young women with information about the potential of sexual transmission of AIDS. It was difficult for us to understand how Mauritian families, who rarely, according to our ethnographic data, addressed issues of sexuality, could or would contribute to their daughters' knowledge of AIDS.

A review of the qualitative data, however, showed a strong link. Parents considered work in the EPZ to be a risk factor for unsupervised relationships with men. Therefore, in the hope of reducing their daughters' contact with their male coworkers, parents, and fathers in particular, were using the threat of HIV/AIDS to dissuade their daughters from any sexual involvement. Thus, using both quantitative data—whose results surprised us—and qualitative data enabled us to solve a puzzle regarding how and why information about STDs was being conveyed to young women.

**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 5,  
chapters 10 and 11, for  
instructions on how to  
report and interpret  
ethnographic data

Researchers generate many new hypotheses during the course of data analysis, based on the original model and new ideas that emerge by interacting with the data. Qualitative data already collected in the study can help to interpret the meaning of these new hypotheses. The final step in analysis is reporting on and interpreting the results and deciding which unanswered questions will guide the next study.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter, we have covered most of the primary considerations in the construction, administration, and analysis of ethnographically informed surveys or questionnaires. The approach we have evolved is designed to systematize the formulation of surveys from conceptual model to the construction of questionnaires. It also provides a structure for the analysis of data, proceeding from intradomain analysis to interdomain analysis. Finally, the approach we are suggesting simplifies the integration of qualitative and

quantitative data by structuring both forms of data collection along parallel conceptual tracks.

The following boxes summarize the steps in formulating an ethnographic survey.

- Analyze the qualitative text data resulting from the unstructured and semistructured data-collection methods.
- Use the results of that analysis to modify the formative theoretical model by subtracting or adding domains, factors, and variables.
- Construct a complete “tree diagram” or conceptual taxonomy that includes all of the identified domains and their associated factors and variables. The “tree diagram” provides a guide to the careful selection and elimination of variables.

The next steps in survey development and implementation are to:

- Develop questions using a variety of question formats.
- Pilot-test the instrument with a small group.
- Pretest the instrument with a larger sample to develop scales and eliminate variables that do not show variation.
- Finalize instrument for use in the field.
- Administer the instrument to a systematic or probability sample of respondents.
- Create a structured approach to the analysis of quantitative survey data.
- Integrate qualitative and quantitative data.

In the next chapter, we discuss how to complement the collection of interview, observational, and survey data with secondary and archival data as the final step in completing data collection for the story the ethnographer eventually will tell. Sampling and ways of ensuring validity and reliability in ethnographic research also are critical issues in ethnographic research, and they pose different challenges for unstructured, semistructured, and systematic or structured data collection. We discuss these issues in chapters 10 and 11 of this book.

Approaches  
to Selection in  
Ethnographic  
Research

Approaches to  
Sampling to  
Approximate  
or Achieve  
Representativeness  
of a Population  
in Ethnographic  
Research

Requirements  
for and Cautions  
about the Use  
of Samples

Summary

# 10

## SAMPLING IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH



### Definition:

A population is an entire group or universe of activities, persons, settings, or items in which a researcher is interested



### Cross Reference:

See Book 1 for a discussion of how populations are bounded



### Key point



### Key point

Historically, ethnographers sought to study entire **populations**. Populations usually are made up of human beings, but they also can be constituted of communities, organizations, programs, animals, places or things, time periods, documents, words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs in interview texts and transcripts, specific activities or bits of behavior, or almost any unit whatsoever. A population of humans may define itself, or be defined by others for specific or general purposes, or both. The human populations ethnographers once studied were conceived of as intact, bounded, and rather small groups, often on islands, in remote villages, or otherwise located in exotic places. Under such conditions, it was not difficult to locate, contact, and to learn about every member or unit in a population, especially over a long period of time. However, current ethnographic practice often involves the study of large groups that may be embedded within other groups, organizations, activities, or settings, or scattered over a number of sites. **Researchers always define and select an appropriate population before they initiate research.** In most cases, studying every single member of a population is not possible, and researchers must engage in **sampling**. **A sample is a selection of items, persons, activities, or settings taken**

*from, and believed to represent accurately, the characteristics found in the entire population or universe of interest to the researcher.* Sampling is necessary where the entire population is either too big or not really accessible. *Sampling renders the research task possible, and it always is preceded by a careful process of selection.*

Researchers therefore can study both populations and samples. They draw samples when the populations they want to study are too large or unwieldy to study, usually because of limitations on resources, time, or personnel available to conduct a larger-scale investigation. Good samples always represent as accurately as possible the characteristics of the entire population; these good samples can be created in a number of ways. However, some forms of sampling—particularly those that use probabilistic methods to choose units from a comprehensive list of the population—guarantee more accuracy in sampling than others. More importantly, probabilistic samples offer more support for generalizing or extending the results of research with the sample to the rest of the population.

The list from which a sample is drawn is called a **sampling frame**. A sampling frame is a list that includes every single member of the population. Sometimes, researchers cannot create a comprehensive sampling frame because they are unable to identify and enumerate all members of a population. This is especially true if they are in the early, discovery stages of a study and are interested in identifying key issues from which to build their formative research model or are in the process of discovering general trends and variations in the study population that can be quantified later on. In such cases, other systematic strategies for choosing people or units to study must be used.

Deciding upon the population to study involves **selection**. Selection is a conceptually or theoretically informed process by which researchers become interested in studying a particular issue, phenomenon, or group of people and then go about establishing a set of criteria for identifying and bounding the issue, phenomenon, or group for an actual research project. By contrast, sampling involves creating a smaller group of people, events, or issues drawn from the entire population that reasonably can be expected

**Key point****Definition:**

A sampling frame is a comprehensive list of all members or units within a population. Samples are chosen from sampling frames

**Definition:**

Selection is the process of establishing criteria for choice of a research population



to equate with the characteristics of the entire population. As we shall indicate in this chapter, researchers interested in some kinds of topics *should not* use samples. Where populations are very small, sampling is not needed. Where the phenomenon is unknown, sampling is inappropriate. For example, early research into the causes and characteristics of the intellectual disability autism was based on clinical studies of every known case of autism. These were, in turn, analyzed as a body of case studies so as to compile some comprehensive description of the disorder. Sampling was inappropriate not only because the entire population of autism sufferers was unknown (and therefore, no sampling frame could be created) but also because it might have omitted important information about the as-yet-poorly described ailment contained in unsampled cases. Sampling can only be done when the overall characteristics of the population are already documented. Good sampling frames require that every member or at least all categories of members in a population be represented. If all categories are not clearly identified, sampling would cause researchers inadvertently to omit important segments of the population. For example, because AIDS was initially identified in the United States as a disease of adult homosexual males, researchers did not investigate whether heterosexual males, young males, and women could contract it. Further, in the absence of reliable tests for AIDS, researchers missed many infected individuals because of the long period of time between initial infection with HIV and the onset of actual AIDS symptoms.

Regardless of whether samples or populations are used, researchers must define the populations and sampling units they plan to study with precision and in operational terms. This is because they must know specifically from which groups to sample, and then they must identify discrete individuals or units from the given population for observation, questioning, interviewing, or counting.

The first steps in selection and sampling involve discovering and defining the boundaries of the population or universe to be studied, if these boundaries are not known. For example, an initial ethnographic study of commercial sex workers in Sri Lanka revealed three different groups of

women working in different settings—those residing in and serving in large tourist hotels, those living at home or with friends and working with smaller local inns and residences, and those living on the street and working in more public locations. Together, these three groups constituted the overall population to be sampled for a study of commercial sex work and AIDS risk in an urban area of Sri Lanka. Similarly, in a study of smokeless tobacco use among women of reproductive age in Mumbai, the overall population of interest in the study community was women of reproductive health age. However, once initial mapping and observations in the community were conducted, the study team found many small tobacco shops they had not previously identified as sources of tobacco products. As time went on, the shops, and then their owners, became populations of interest in the study.

Once a population has been described, units for analysis and sampling must be defined. Here are some simple rules for defining units:

- They must be countable.
- They must be measurable and observable.
- They must be locatable in space and/or time.
- They must be distinct and distinguishable; that is, the researcher must be able to identify their beginnings and endings, or their physical boundaries, and to distinguish one unit clearly from others.

In this chapter, we first discuss the ways in which ethnographers locate and select members of a population based upon specific selection criteria, followed by a description of strategies for using probabilistic and statistically randomized procedures in ethnographic research. We end the chapter with a discussion of requirements for and general cautions about the use of sampling procedures.

## APPROACHES TO SELECTION IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

### *Selection in Exploratory Research*

In the earliest or exploratory stages of ethnographic research, as noted in chapters 4 and 5 of this book,

#### **Cross**

#### **Reference:**

See Books 1 and 2 for a detailed description of how to define and operationalize units of analysis and sampling units



**Definition:**

A convenience sample consists of any group readily accessible to the researcher that reasonably might be assumed to possess most of the characteristics relevant to the study


researchers can make use of **convenience or reputational samples**. Convenience samples are so called because they are selected from any group conveniently accessible to the researcher. Studies of adolescent behavior in general could be undertaken in the high school nearest to the researcher's office—with the usual cautions that such populations may not be representative of *all* adolescents in a given society. Convenience samples should be used when the research is exploratory or when specific variations in the population have little effect on the phenomenon under study. For example, a study recently undertaken of how very young children who have not yet learned to read make use of books in their preschool classrooms was conducted with a convenience sample of children in the preschool that the researcher's four-year-old daughter attended (Cumbo 1998). Similarly, the study of lunch box contents in chapter 7 of this book (Rey-Vasquez 2011) used a primary school class near to her residence whose teacher permitted her to be an observer. Even in exploratory phases of research, however, care should be taken to decide when and whether it matters whether a broad range of respondents is necessary. Key informant or local expert interviews might begin with a list of people in the community already known to the researchers, who have expert knowledge in specific areas relevant to the study and that then can be extended to others who nominate other people whom they know for the researcher to contact.

**EXAMPLE 10.1****IDENTIFYING KEY INFORMANTS OR LOCAL EXPERTS**

In the early stages of a study of smokeless tobacco in Mumbai, members of the research team interviewed two types of people who provided them with information about the community and about women's use of smokeless tobacco. These included known key informants introduced to them by other researchers who had worked in the community in the past, and people they met in the process of mapping the community who knew something about women's use of smokeless tobacco in that area. Some of these people eventually became key informants, to whom the researchers returned over and over again in different stages of the project. These interviewees were identified through others' prior knowledge or through random encounters with the researchers in the community. They were not selected systematically for

their identified knowledge of the community. As the team members came to know the community somewhat better, they were able to list other types of people who might know something more about the conditions of women's lives in the community, thus providing needed additional background for the study. Among those they listed were informal leaders of women's groups, *aganwadi* (child care) workers, and community health volunteers. By identifying and approaching these informal and formal organizations, they were able to identify one or two more women from different sectors to interview.

**Reputational case selection** requires that researchers get help from community experts to identify suitable persons or units to study. Researchers first must decide what kind of individual or units they want to study. They then ask community experts to name others who—because of their reputations—are known to be the best examples of the kind of people the researchers want to study. For example, researchers might ask hospital administrators to identify the *most competent administrators* in the medical establishment of a community. Similarly, automobile dealers and mechanics can be asked to identify *expert mechanics*. Study populations of trustworthy drug dealers (identified by drug users and other dealers), talented music students identified by music teachers, uncooperative patients with mental illnesses (identified by doctors and staff in their care facility), and effective traditional healers in Native American communities (identified by their clients and by community public workers) can be identified in the same way. Reputational case selection can produce excellent lists of key informants to be interviewed in the exploratory stages of a study.

**Definition:**  Reputational case selection involves asking experts from, or participants in, the community who are familiar with the criteria of interest to the researcher to recommend individuals for participation in the study

*Selection in Focused and Semistructured  
Data Collection: Criterion Selection to  
Determine Population Differences*

Ethnographic research involves a search for cultural patterning within a community or group. Researchers know that they have identified important ethnographic patterns and structures when they are able to identify similarities or systematic differences in themes, units, and structures over



**Definition:**  
Criterion-based selection involves choosing study participants or units because they possess characteristics related to the study's central questions

time and across different spaces or groups in a cultural scene. Confirming such variability—or its absence—requires that researchers select for study populations that maximize the chances that they will find the patterns for which they are searching; doing so involves engaging in **criterion-based selection**. (Please see LeCompte and Preissle for a more detailed discussion of criterion-based selection and sampling procedures than is possible in this chapter; LeCompte and Preissle 1993, chapter 3). Researchers use criterion-based selection to choose the population or set of units they want to study. First they identify their theoretical, conceptual, or topical interests. They then try to decide what kind of population would best enable them to explore those interests. These decisions are based on criteria establishing how or why the particular population matches with the theoretical or descriptive interests of the researcher, or how it facilitates answering the research question. Researchers interested in studying the degree to which students in a community fail to graduate from high school might decide to study dropouts. However, as dropouts are notoriously difficult to locate, they might need to define a different—but similar and more accessible—population as a substitute.

#### EXAMPLE 10.2

##### STUDYING POTENTIAL DROPOUTS IN PINNACLE

In the study of school failure LeCompte and her associates conducted for the Pinnacle school district, the criteria for selection were all students in grades nine through twelve who had failed at least two major subjects (math, language arts, science, or social studies) in the previous semester. Of particular interest were those students who had failed three or more such classes. The researchers used this criterion for selection, reasoning that students who already had dropped out of school would be difficult to find for interviews without extensive, and expensive, fieldwork, and that students who already had failed major courses were at risk of falling so far behind that they would not be able to graduate with their peers, a factor that often leads to a decision to drop out of school.

LeCompte decided to study potential, rather than actual, dropouts. A sampling frame for potential dropouts was available because the school district had records of every student

who matched the criteria LeCompte established: failure in at least two major subjects. ***It is important to remember that criterion-based selection strategies do not use probabilistic techniques to generate groups for study; criterion-based selection does not, therefore, create random samples or permit researchers to generalize their results to larger populations without further research or careful comparisons (see the subsequent discussion of “comparable case selection”) among results from other studies.***

Key point



The most common approaches to criterion-based selection are:

- extreme or dichotomous case selection;
- typical case selection;
- intensive case finding;
- unique case selection;
- bellwether or ideal case selection;
- comparable case selection;
- chain referral selection.

Reputational case selection, already described, also is considered to be a form of criterion-based selection. Regardless of the type of criterion-based selection used, researchers should, whenever possible, select more than one person, activity, item, or unit to study, and then explore the same issues with each. This is because the experiences or characteristics of one person or unit are not enough to establish a *pattern* of experiences or characteristics of a whole population of similar units or persons. The purposes of ethnography are, after all, to identify domains of importance in the study (exploratory research), to establish the existence of variability (semistructured research), and then to map the range of variability within the group under study (structured research methods). Consistency or lack of variability confirms the existence of patterns. Within patterns, however, there is always variability, and the existence of variability calls for further and more systematic ethnographic exploration of the factors that account for the range of variation in a study population.

The first four criterion-based selection procedures—extreme or dichotomous, typical, intensive, and unique case

selection—are used when researchers want to explore specific kinds of variation and similarity in a group, or to determine differences among members in a population of interest.



**Definition:**

Extreme cases are those representing the ends of a defined population continuum

**Extreme** or dichotomous **case selection** requires that researchers first define a characteristic that interests them and then create a scale or continuum by which individual members of a population can be arrayed in accordance with how much of that characteristic they possess—from little or none to the highest level of that characteristic. For example, if measured by grades, a continuum of academic performance of high school students would range from 100 percent failing grades to grades that are 100 percent perfect. If qualitative measures were used, researchers could ask teachers to array students along a continuum from those they believed to be “the worst” students to those they thought to be “the best.” Extreme cases are those members or units in a population that are most highly “saturated” with, or have the highest proportion of, the characteristics the researcher wants to study. Examples of extreme cases include geniuses, musical child prodigies, Nobel Prize winners, or psychopaths, each of which is “saturated” respectively with intelligence, creativity, or mental illness. While extreme case selection usually involves only those individuals at one end of the continuum, dichotomous case selection requires selecting individuals from both ends of a continuum. For example, a study of the social relationships of young women from households at the *highest* and *lowest* socioeconomic levels (i.e., both ends of a socioeconomic continuum) in Mauritius is a dichotomous case study.



**Definition:**

Typical case selection involves selection based on a known average for the population

In contrast to extreme case selection, **typical case selection** is used when researchers want to study “average” people or units. Researchers first must determine what the “average” or mean characteristics of a population are and then locate individuals for study who have the same characteristics as that average. Typical case selection of teachers in the United States, for example, would involve selecting married women of European American ancestry and middle-class origins between the ages of thirty-two and fifty, because statistics indicate that these descriptors characterize the “average” North American teacher. Harry Wolcott’s famous study of a public school principal involved deter-

mining what the average characteristics of school principals in the United States were and then finding a person who matched those characteristics who was near enough for him to study and willing to be a research subject for an entire school year (Wolcott 2003).

### *Intensive Case Selection Based on High-density Locations*

*Intensive case selection* using a geographic approach is based on the assumption that people who behave in similar ways tend to live, work, or relax together. Thus, they can be most easily found in the geographic areas where these activities take place. Intensive case selection can be used to explore any cultural domain in which behaviors and geographic location overlap. The sites themselves can be considered units of observation and analysis if behavior conducted in them is the topic of study. Ethnographers studying youth culture, for example, can find and recruit African American high school youth (a population of interest) on basketball courts (a behavior identified with the population in a specific type of location) and in local parks (a larger geographic unit where the behavior occurs). Identifying lower-income urban women residents (a population of interest) is easier if recruitment occurs at banks or ATMs where women cash their government subsidy checks (locations where behaviors that are indicators of income level occur) or in public clinic waiting rooms where they wait to have their children seen by doctors, or in programs for low-income women and children where women go to obtain nutritional supplements (both are locations where a specific behavior typical of the study population occurs). ***Although they are used all the time, ethnographers should note, however, that operating on the basis of such assumptions about the population may be stereotypic (“All African American youth play basketball” or “All low-income women are on welfare or make use of public clinics”). Relying on such stereotypes or generalizations risks missing segments of the population who do not engage in such behaviors and therefore do not frequent the locations in which the ethnographer may choose to recruit.***

Key point



This approach, which is used to recruit a substantial number of people who are similar in one or more important ways and who can be interviewed in-depth using the same standardized list of open-ended questions (e.g., semistructured interview) can be applied to any area of research in which individuals are involved in activities in geographically designated public or semipublic areas, including street corners, playgrounds, shopping malls, sports events, empty lots, lunchrooms, bars or fast food restaurants, and bus stops, from which they can be recruited for interviewing purposes.

### *Unique Case Selection*



**Definition:**

Unique case selection means selecting for study a nonreplicable event or situation

In contrast to typical case selection, which identifies those activities, events, or individuals *most* common within a population, **unique case selection** seeks the *least* common: cases or events set apart from the normal flow of events or not amenable to repetition. Natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, or large-scale displacements because of war or civil conflict are such unique events, as is the unexpected sudden influx of immigrants to a community or the consequences of Hurricane Katrina.

A unique case with significant impact on educational systems occurred when schools in a small community near Denver, Colorado, experienced sudden increases in their Cambodian immigrant enrollment. Cambodian families choose to live near one another, and when the large apartment complex in which the majority of Cambodians in Denver closed, the entire community moved, as a group, to another apartment complex in the nearby community. This meant that the bilingual education classes for Cambodians in Denver suddenly had no students, while the smaller community had to accommodate a large number of Cambodian students for which district officials were unprepared. Similarly, a unique case occurred when a high school in a rural eastern Colorado town was shut down overnight in the middle of the school year for six months because of asbestos contamination (Ludwig and LeCompte 2002). Researchers were interested in how the community


would cope. Yet another unique case is that of the *Challenger* spacecraft disaster, in which the spacecraft exploded shortly after take-off, with a teacher on board and elementary school students all over the United States watching. Studying these unique (single instance/one of a kind) situations shed light on the ways in which communities or groups address the circumstances, individual business ventures or community development programs adapt and prosper, or institutions ignore residents' welfare to accomplish their own ends, with unanticipated consequences, often for all parties.


### *Bellwether or Ideal Case Selection*


**Bellwether or ideal cases** are what Borko and Peressini (1998) call “no wonder!” cases. Borko and Peressini, who study innovative mathematics programs (Borko et al. 2000; Peressini et al. 2004), have selected for study schools where teachers have the best training and facilities and administrators are the most supportive of the innovations. Under these conditions, success of the programs is “no wonder”; in fact, the only wonder would be if the programs actually failed, contrary to expectations. Bellwether or ideal case selection is especially good for examining the effects of an intervention—once initial fieldwork has determined an appropriate strategy for that intervention—because it most closely simulates the controlled laboratory conditions instituted in experimental research. Although ethnographic research cannot control what occurs in natural settings, ideal case selection tries to control contamination of an intervention's results by selecting for study a case in which problems are not expected to occur.

### *Chain Referral Selection*

**Chain referral selection** is similar to reputational case selection or snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Díaz, Heckert, and Sánchez 2005). In this procedure, each initial study participant suggests to the researcher the next person or set of persons to be contacted, based on a set of criteria the researcher has established in advance.

**Definition:**  Bellwether or ideal cases are those in which the optimum conditions for observing what the researcher wants to study are found

**Cross Reference:**  See Book 1, chapter 4, for a discussion of the conditions required for conducting experimental and quasi-experimental research

**Definition:**  Chain referral selection asks participants in an activity or persons who possess specific characteristics to identify others known to them who share those activities or characteristics

**Definition:**

Index respondents are individuals who fit the criteria for the study and whom the researcher first asks to generate other names for a study population

“Starting points” or **index respondents** for a chain of referrals are selected on the basis of their conformity with known criteria. These referrals are interviewed and then asked to identify other persons they know who also fit these criteria—that is, they are the same age, engage in similar behaviors (they play a musical instrument or are football fans), or share a characteristic (they all are high school dropouts). The people whom the index person names then are interviewed. This means that all persons in the study population not only share at least one or several characteristics important to the study but they also are linked to the index person in an association that can be characterized ethnographically—or in terms of other behaviors that they manifest, or that they share or exchange directly.

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 6, for sampling hidden populations

Procedures for chain referral selection involve interviewing the individuals named by index respondents. They are then asked to refer to others in their social network in the same manner. As with any nonrandom selection procedure, chain referral selection is likely to assure that the group selected for study is saturated with the characteristics the researcher wants to study, but the degree to which the individuals interviewed represent any particular population other than themselves is difficult to ascertain, in the absence of other kinds of corroboratory data. It has been used to study drug subcultures such as cocaine users in the Netherlands (Kaplan, Bieleman, and TenHouten 2007), injection drug users (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), homeless people (Faugier and Sargeant 1997), and gang members in a variety of locations (Moore 1991).


### *Comparable Case Selection*

Ethnographers usually cannot set up experimental conditions that permit them to establish multiple—and exactly identical—cases in which to study specific activities, events, or persons. However, they *can* look for multiple—and quite similar—cases in which they can study the degree to which structures, patterns, or themes in which they are interested are stable or even exist across multiple settings or persons. Sometimes the cases can be matched quite closely, particu-

larly when the “cases” to be studied are individuals or identical innovative programs.

During their professional lifetimes, researchers often choose to study a single kind of phenomenon over time, with different populations and in varied settings. These studies can be termed **comparable case studies** if their results are systematically compared. Similarly, a researcher may choose a site primarily because it is similar—or comparable—to one he or she, or another researcher, had studied previously, and in which the researcher wishes to explore the topic of the first study in more detail or in different ways. Multiple-site ethnographies also are considered to be comparable case studies; in such studies, one or a group of researchers attempt to study the same phenomenon simultaneously in similar settings—or at least to make clear what the differences among settings are, to the extent that they are dissimilar. LeCompte’s Learning to Work study (LeCompte 1978) described in Books 1 and 5 is such a study. Another early example was the series of ethnographic studies exploring what happened in schools undergoing racial desegregation in the United States during the late 1960s and 1970s. These studies, under the direction of an anthropologist, Murray Wax, all focused on the same phenomenon: the impact of racial desegregation on patterns of social interaction and conflict among teachers and students and within communities. They used similar ethnographic research strategies and asked similar research questions. However, although most were conducted in high schools, each study was conducted by a different researcher, and the sites differed widely; they even were in different regions of the country, a factor that considerably affected the context for interracial conflict (Clement, Rist, Eisenhart, and Harding 1979; Schofield 1982; Wax 1979).

In other instances, ethnographers can conduct an “ethnology,” or a secondary analysis of separate ethnographic studies, done in different sites by different ethnographers or even at different time periods. In such cases, the “data” sought are reports of studies that address a topic of interest to the researcher but do so in slightly different ways, with slightly different populations, or

**Definition:**  Comparable cases are those selected because each exemplifies as closely as possible the specific characteristics of interest to the researcher



under somewhat different circumstances. The task of the ethnographer, then, is to analyze the impact of these differences on the subject under investigation. The process is analogous to a series of controlled experiments in which the researcher varies a different factor in the experiment each time it is performed, so as to assess varied influences on the results (LeCompte and Preissle 1993).

### **APPROACHES TO SAMPLING TO APPROXIMATE OR ACHIEVE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF A POPULATION IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

Up to now, we have been discussing procedures for selecting participants for study from populations defined on the basis of specific criteria of interest to the researcher. Ethnographers initially use unstructured and semistructured observations and interviews with criterion-based groups to explore initial research questions and to narrow the focus of their studies. There are a number of different sampling strategies that ethnographers use to move toward, or to achieve representativeness in, a population or universe. These include:

- Quota Sampling
- Targeted Sampling
- Respondent-driven Sampling
- Systematic Sampling
- Random Sampling

#### *Quota (or Theoretical) Sampling*

We have described *quota sampling* in chapter 8 of this book in the context of selecting participants for formal focus group interviews. Quota sampling is not probabilistic, but it does attempt to select representatives from all known sectors or categories within a population. It requires that the major characteristics of either the population or the population characteristics salient to the research question be identified. Researchers then select a certain number—or quota—of individuals representing each of these characteristics for their study. For example, researchers interested

in voting behavior know that gender, ethnicity, age, educational level, and income affect how people vote, so they generally select for study persons who represent all combinations of those five variables. Similarly, researchers seeking to explore the variation within a population need to include representatives—or quotas—from all relevant segments of that population in their sample.

Quota sampling is particularly useful in the early stages of research because it can help researchers identify the full range of behavior, attitudes, and opinions within a population without having to elicit information from every single member. For this reason, it is an appropriate strategy for identifying persons to participate in focus groups and in the interviews, which are a precursor to development of an ethnographic survey.

**Cross Reference:**

See this book, chapter 8, on focus group interviews



**EXAMPLE 10.3**

USING QUOTA SAMPLING TO STUDY SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIORS IN MAURITIUS

Quota sampling was used in Mauritius to define the range of variation in life histories and sexual risk behaviors. The researchers hypothesized that sexual risk varied by ethnicity and gender. In selecting respondents for the semistructured interviewing, the selection frame in Table 10.1 was used.

Quota sampling is not a very accurate way to represent the percentages of demographic or attitudinal characteristics of a group, but it is a very important strategy for capturing the range of cultural variation. If the population is known to be skewed so that some groups are considerably larger than others, the quotas can be “weighted.” This means that researchers might select a larger quota from those specific categories within the population that have more members.

**TABLE 10.1** Selection Frame for Respondents in Mauritius Study

| <i>Ethnicity</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> |
|------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Hindu            | 10          | 30            |
| Muslim           | 10          | 30            |
| Christian/Creole | 10          | 30            |

Alternatively, if some segments of the population are considered to be more relevant to the research question than others, or are—despite their very small numbers in the population—still very relevant to the issues involved, then “oversampling,” or recruiting more study participants from those groups than others, might be done to ensure that the researchers appropriately select and fully understand the parameters or dynamics of that particular group.

### *Targeted Selection and Sampling with and without Chain Referral*



#### **Definition:**

Targeted selection uses multiple sources of data to identify high-priority areas from which a group of study units can be selected or sampled

**Targeted selection** is a strategy that allows researchers to approximate a process of selecting from an entire universe of units or people, even when the size or characteristics of the universe itself is unknown. In this way it, like quota sampling, begins to approximate the precision of probabilistic sampling, which we discuss later in this chapter. Targeted sampling is possible only when researchers have access to multiple sources of secondary data describing the population of interest; these multiple data sources help to ensure that the major divisions or categories of the study population can be identified and members selected systematically from each of those categories (Watters and Biernacki 1989).

Secondary data sources usually include such information as crime rates, arrests for reasons relevant to the research topic, information about buildings and residences (for example, abandoned or boarded-up buildings, or those scheduled for demolition, any of which could be geographic locations useful for recruiting participants in urban drug use studies), police records, health and social service data, ethnographic observations, behavioral monitoring data, or any other information relevant to the study. Once these data are available, they are triangulated to create geographically based targeted sampling areas.



#### **Cross Reference:**

See Book 4, chapter 6, for further discussion of the uses of multiple sources of data for targeted sampling purposes

#### **EXAMPLE 10.4**

##### TARGETED SAMPLING OF INJECTION DRUG USERS

Based on estimates from the Hartford City Health Department, somewhere between seven thousand and twelve thousand injection drug users reside in the city of Hart-

ford, Connecticut. Because many are homeless, residing with friends, moving from house to house of family members or friends, living in shelters, or living on the streets, these people are difficult to locate and cannot be enumerated. For research purposes, the “universe” of this population is unknown. Street outreach programs and ethnographic research, however, suggested that such people, however many they were, were concentrated in several neighborhoods of the city.

The city of Hartford collects data on arrests of drug users, drug sellers, and prostitutes; types of crimes (for example, muggings, prostitution, burglaries, car thefts); housing conditions; child abuse referrals; infant mortality; and a variety of other issues, so these data could be aggregated and defined as measures of “exposure to risk.” Working together, and with the help of city agencies, the Institute for Community Research and the Hispanic Health Council aggregated, organized, and mapped these risk exposure data by neighborhoods characterized by high, moderate, and low levels of risk exposure. Highest-risk neighborhoods were then targeted as locations where participants for an intervention study could be recruited and enrolled. Such a system of ranking neighborhoods by levels of risk exposure also permitted the researchers to do weighted quota sampling for each risk category.

For studies such as these, chain referral can be combined with targeted sampling to enhance outreach to hidden or hard-to-reach populations as well as generalizability of the study sample. This is because before initiating the chain referral process, the locations for recruitment of “seeds,” or starting individuals, can be geosocially mapped. An effort is made to identify every location where seeds can be identified. Then those locations can be sampled and chain referrals begun in a representative sample of sites. This combined approach is particularly useful if it is not possible to compare results obtained from chain referral procedures with other data obtained with the same or similar populations.

#### EXAMPLE 10.5

##### USING A TARGETED SAMPLING PLAN AND CHAIN REFERRAL APPROACHES TO SAMPLE HARD-TO-FIND YOUTHFUL SUBSTANCE ABUSERS

Researchers in Hartford, Connecticut, were unable to identify the universe or population of high-risk young drug users, as they did not attend school or after-school programs and were irregularly employed. In addition, researchers had no way to know how many young adults in Hartford were between the ages of sixteen and

twenty-four and how many fit the criteria for the study: use of marijuana or alcohol at least once in the past thirty days and use of at least one other drug during that same time frame. The researchers developed a targeted sampling plan (Watters and Biernacki 1989) in which they identified a certain number of index individuals in each of six neighborhoods (see our discussion of targeted sampling later in this chapter). The individuals referred to as index people were then asked to list all the people close to them; to whom they turn for social, emotional, and financial support; and with whom they had ingested drugs or engaged in sexual activity over the past six months. The index person was asked to help bring respondents to be interviewed and offered a very small financial incentive to do so. This is a procedure typically followed in targeted sampling through chain referral methods. Potential respondents referred to the researchers were screened for eligibility and then interviewed after signing a consent form.



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 4,  
chapter 5 for a  
discussion of network  
research

Targeted sampling and chain referral selection can be used in network research to identify clusters of people engaged in similar activities and to determine how information or specific behaviors are diffused through networks. As Trotter's contribution to the *Ethnographer's Toolkit* demonstrates, this information is useful for both intervention and descriptive purposes.

Chain referral can be combined with randomized sampling techniques (see the discussion of probabilistic sampling techniques later in this chapter) to increase the generalizability of the study's results to other populations or groups. For example, if index persons name more contacts or "alters" who possess the appropriate characteristics for inclusion in the study than an ethnographer has resources to study, several of them may be chosen using randomized techniques for more intensive investigation. In such a case, the ethnographer could have reasonable confidence that information obtained from the randomly selected sample also would characterize all of the index person's named contacts—whether or not they were included in the study.

### *Respondent-Driven Sampling*

*Respondent-driven sampling* (RDS) goes one step beyond chain referral sampling to specify a systematic

approach in which bias that researchers believe can be representative of the general population can be calculated. It is based on several important assumptions. These are:

- Respondents can report their personal network size accurately.
- Respondents know one another, thus the relationships between them is reciprocal.
- Respondents constitute a single network component; that is, there is a relational path between each and every person in the sample.
- Recruits are identified with a probability proportional to the number of people in their network, thus a person with ten friends is twice as likely to be recruited as a person with five friends.
- The recruitment of peers from one's network is random, rather than depending on some specific implicit or explicit criteria that could bias the sample such as intimacy, commonality of purpose, familial relationships, gender or other similarities, or difference.
- Three to five "levels" of recruitment will produce the equivalent of a representative sample of a population for which the universe cannot be defined or known.

In respondent-driven sampling, "seeds" are recruited to initiate chain referrals using a targeted selection or randomization procedure. Once identified, they are interviewed and asked to offer recruitment cards to no more than three of their contacts. The cards have the seed's assigned unique identifier, call-in numbers to schedule an appointment, and a brief description of the project. Contacts are asked to call in to schedule appointments for interviews. Each contact recruited from the "seed's" personal network is then asked to repeat the effort—to contact an additional three persons and give them a card that now has that person's unique identifier on it. This process continues for at least four rounds, and the study team tracks the sequences to determine how many "seeds" produce the requisite number of contacts, and when to re-recruit seeds. The procedure assumes that the further out the respondent is from the first-level seed, the greater is the difference between them.

A formula can be used for calculating bias based on degree of similarity/difference at each level (Abdul-Quader, Heckathorn, Sabin, and Saidel 2006; Heckathorn 1997). A sample that meets the criteria for degree difference is considered to be representative of the broad range of variation in the population (Heckathorn 2002).

### *Probabilistic Sampling Strategies*

After ethnographers have done exploratory and semi-structured investigations and have identified patterns typical of smaller groups studied in depth, they may wish to determine whether what they found with the small groups also pertains to the entire population. For this purpose, ethnographic surveys (discussed earlier in this book) can use *probabilistically selected samples* as necessary. *Sampling* is a statistically based form of selecting participants from a population the researcher wants to study. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, samples are small groups taken from a larger group; probabilistic or semiprobabilistic sampling procedures are designed to assure that the characteristics of the small group very closely match those of the larger group that it is to represent.

Probabilistic samples must be constructed very carefully, as their purpose is to accurately represent a larger universe of units or members. If they are not representative, researchers cannot make **generalizations** about the population as a whole with any degree of confidence. Generalizations are inferences made about the characteristics of the larger population. They expand the results from the sample by applying them to the larger population. As we shall indicate later in this chapter and in chapter 11, poorly constructed samples lead to inaccurate generalizations and to invalid research results.

Several of the approaches we have described as selection based are not based on statistical probability, but they *are* concerned with representation or the ability to represent an entire population. Targeted sampling and certain types of chain referral selection are efforts to approximate probability or statistical sampling. They are used when it is not possible to meet all the conditions of probability sampling as



**Definition:**  
Generalization is the process of making inferences about a larger population based on research results obtained from a sample

described next. When conditions permit, however, social science researchers prefer to use two kinds of probabilistic sampling to ensure the strength of their results: systematic sampling and random sampling. There are many texts that give elaborate details on procedures for sampling; we have listed them as further resources at the end of this chapter. Here, we simply describe briefly the most common procedures.

### *Systematic Sampling*

*Systematic sampling* is the most commonly used kind of sampling because its requirements are not so stringent and more often can be met in field research conditions.

#### **HOW TO CREATE A SYSTEMATIC SAMPLE**

To create a systematic sample, researchers first decide *what* they want to sample, and then determine *how many* such units will be necessary for the study. For example, researchers interested in the smoking behavior of college students might select a nearby college and determine that they can administer surveys to half the student body of 662 students. They then create an appropriate **sampling interval**, or “n,” calculated by dividing the actual or estimated population size by the desired sample size, given the resources available to conduct the study. Since the smoking study will sample half the students, the sampling interval is two. Researchers then select every “nth” member from a list—such as the student directory—of the entire population for their sample. In this smoking study, researchers could use a directory listing all the students’ names, choosing for their sample every second student on the list. If they surveyed 25 percent of the students, their sampling interval would be four, and they would choose every fourth student on the list.

Systematic sampling does not require that every single unit to be sampled be identified in advance and placed on a list. In fact, most systematic studies of naturally occurring



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book  
4, chapter 7, for  
a discussion of  
systematic sampling  
in the multimedia  
recording of  
ethnographic  
observations

behavior such as social interactions—which cannot be enumerated and listed—use systematic sampling. Researchers studying three-wheel taxi drivers in Sri Lanka, for example, might decide upon a sampling interval of five minutes for their observations at stops and stands, recording every five minutes whatever behaviors occurred. In a more structured fashion, researchers studying instruction in a theater arts program could, for example, decide to focus on the speeches or lines that students deliver in their practice sessions. Knowing that practice sessions occur not only in formal classes but also in small classroom groups, the hallways, and even on the playground, the researchers could follow a specific group of theater students for a week, videotaping their interactions throughout the school day. Reviewing the videotapes, they then could use a sampling interval of three to record every third instance of a speech or line delivery.

A limitation of systematic sampling (taking every “nth” instance) is that sampling intervals arbitrarily ignore any confounding variation or fluctuation in the population or research context. If the college population described included a large number of students from Vietnam, where very common names are Ngoc and Nguyen, sampling every second student name from an alphabetical list of surnames might result in overrepresentation of Vietnamese, whose smoking behavior could differ from students from other ethnic groups. If the week that researchers chose for videotaping theater students occurred just before a major theatrical production at the school—so that students were practicing intensely for their performances—or if they chose to follow students who were most active as performers rather than as stage crew or set designers, they would be more likely to observe line delivery than if they had chosen a more “normal” week or a more varied group of students.

### *Random Sampling*

*Random sampling* is the most commonly mentioned and best-understood form of probabilistic sampling, though it is not the most commonly used. Simple random sampling requires that:

- the characteristics of the entire population be known in advance;
- every single member or unit in the population be identified and placed on a numbered list (a sampling frame) from the first member to the last;
- each member or unit in the population be available to the researcher for study.

These requirements exist because simple random sampling assures that each member of the population has the same chance as any other member to be included in the sample. Thus, researchers using such sampling procedures can be certain that their samples exactly replicate the characteristics of the population from which they are drawn. Simple random samples, then, enable researchers to make valid generalizations about populations, because no underlying irregularities or factors (as described above for systematic sampling) confound the degree to which samples match populations.

### **HOW TO CONSTRUCT A SIMPLE RANDOM SAMPLE**

To construct a simple random sample, researchers first decide upon the size sample they need and select a sampling interval which, when it divides the population, will generate the desired number of people for the sample. They then obtain a table of random numbers, available from computer programs or in statistics textbooks, and choose a number at random from it. The researchers begin sampling by finding the number in their population list that corresponds to the number chosen from the random number table. They then use their sampling interval to choose subsequent numbers from the random number table. Selecting random numbers involves counting down the column of random numbers by the sampling interval—by 2, in the case of the college students. They select for their sample those members of



the population whose numbers on the list match the random numbers selected from the random number table. The numbers in random number tables usually contain far more digits than the size of the researchers' population, so researchers must first note the number of digits in the total size of the population (three, in the case of the 662 students enrolled in the college described); they use only the right-hand three digits of each random number. If the first number in the table chosen were 29,384,132, the researchers would divide it into 29,384 and 132; the first person selected for their sample would be person #132. This whole process can be simplified by using a computer program to select a population using a program that applies a random number table to a list read into the computer—if such a program is available.

### *Variations on Simple Random and Systematic Sampling*

If the populations in which researchers are interested contain distinct subgroups or are clustered in specific groups, researchers may decide to use variations of random or systematic sampling. These sampling procedures are called *stratified sampling* and *cluster sampling*.

#### *Stratified Sampling*

*Stratified sampling* involves identifying significant segments or groups within a population and then sampling separately from each segment. Studies of the sexual attitudes of urban, suburban, and rural boys and girls could be done with a stratified sample in which separate lists of urban, suburban, and rural boys and girls were created and then systematic or random samples drawn separately from each. Stratified sampling facilitates comparisons; it also assures balanced representation in the sample of segments within the population. Stratified sampling is particularly useful when some population segments are much

larger than others. For example, Native Americans constitute a tiny percentage of public school enrollments in the United States, and so they tend to be missed by ordinary systematic or random sampling procedures. Researchers who really want to include Native American schoolchildren in their samples use stratified sampling procedures. Often they will weight their samples so that a larger percentage of Native American students are included than from other ethnic groups, just to make sure that this very small, but very diverse, group is adequately represented.

### *Cluster Sampling*

*Cluster sampling* involves first identifying the natural groups or settings in which a population can be found, listing the groups or settings, and sampling from these groups or settings rather than from a list of individuals. The individual units of analysis, then, become all the individuals found within the specific clusters in the sample. Cluster sampling is especially useful for populations whose groupings are stable, such as children in *classrooms*, households in *neighborhoods*, or patients in *residential treatment facilities*. Researchers can create a sample of classrooms, neighborhoods, or treatment facilities and then study all students, residents, or patients in the selected units.

### **EXAMPLE 10.6**

#### USING A STRATIFIED CLUSTER SAMPLING DESIGN TO STUDY COMPLIANCE WITH REQUIREMENTS FOR IDENTIFYING LANGUAGE-MINORITY STUDENTS

LeCompte and her staff at the Houston Public School District were required to monitor whether teachers were properly testing and screening Latino and immigrant students for services to students who did not yet speak English. LeCompte's staff suggested examining the records of a simple random sample of all 232,000 students in the school district. This procedure was feasible, because the school district maintained a comprehensive list of all students with their addresses. However, only 35 percent of the students in the district were potential language-minority students, and these students were not distributed evenly among the schools in the district. Sampling the remaining 65 percent of the enrollment would have wasted resources and not answered the research question. Further, language-minority students tended to be clustered in specific neighborhoods. Therefore, LeCompte designed

a stratified cluster sampling procedure in which the district's schools were divided into two strata: schools whose enrollments include more than 50 percent Latino and immigrant students, and schools whose enrollments had fewer than 50 percent Latino and immigrant students. Her staff selected a 50 percent sample of the schools whose enrollments were more than half Latino and immigrant, reasoning that these were the schools where, if problems in screening existed, the greatest number of students would be excluded from needed instruction. They then examined a 20 percent systematic sample of student folders (selecting every twentieth student folder) to determine whether children at those schools had been properly tested and assigned to appropriate instruction.



This procedure maximized the *saturation* of the sample; that is, it focused on schools in which the largest percentage of target students were likely to be found. It also permitted the researchers to make valid generalizations about practices in those schools most heavily affected by Latino immigration. LeCompte and her staff decided to concentrate efforts in those schools, saving schools where fewer students might be at risk for later monitoring when resources were available.

#### **EXAMPLE 10.7**



##### **SAMPLING "THREE-WHEEL DRIVERS" IN SRI LANKA**

In Sri Lanka as well as in other Southeast Asian locations, three-wheel vehicles are a major source of public transportation. Three-wheelers are electrically powered small vehicles that are very inexpensive to run and to hire, and they transport large numbers of people locally in large cities of South and Southeast Asia. They often are called autorickshaws. The vehicles and their drivers provide an important link in the commercial sex trade, maintaining connections between commercial sex workers, their clients, and the locations in which sexual exchanges take place. Three-wheel drivers must register their vehicles with the municipality, at which point they are assigned to "stops"—locations where they can park their vehicles and wait for customers. The stop locations are known, and even though the registration lists are not up to date, every three-wheel driver must register and every driver is assigned to a stop. The lists provide a general idea of large, medium-sized, and smaller stops, but a complete list of drivers at each stop can be obtained only through enumeration at that stop.

In a study of sexual risk among drivers of three-wheeled vehicles, a team of Sri Lankan and North American researchers mapped the locations of three-wheel driver stops. Ethnographic interviews with the drivers enabled the researchers to differentiate stops by size and by estimated proportion of drivers engaged in the sex trade. Based on these stratification criteria, a sample of stops was chosen for more in-depth exploration and formal enumeration of the three-wheel drivers assigned to the stop. A random sample of drivers stratified by age was then chosen for ethnographic surveying.

### *Cross-Sectional, Trend, Cohort, and Panel Studies*

Most samples are constructed for *cross-sectional* studies. These are studies that take place at one point in time and whose results apply only to that time period. Sometimes, however, researchers want to look at events or phenomena *longitudinally*, or over time. For these purposes, *trend*, *cohort*, or *panel* studies are useful, although they are more expensive, can be difficult to execute, and may require considerable follow-up. Trend studies are the simplest to implement; in them, a researcher simply replicates a study several times over a designated period of time. LeCompte, for example, could have monitored the same set of schools every year for five years to see whether compliance practices regarding language services to immigrant students changed over time. Trend studies have weaknesses, however, since conditions within the settings sampled, and even the persons within those settings, will change over time. The influx of immigrants and Latinos to many of the schools sampled could have ceased, for example. This would make compliance data districtwide inaccurate, and the schools most heavily affected by immigration would no longer fall into the sampling frame.

#### *Cohort Studies*

*Cohort studies* eliminate some of these difficulties. Cohort studies define the population of interest and then study groups with identical characteristics at designated intervals over time. LeCompte could have designated



“schools in which more than 50 percent of the enrolled children were Latino or immigrants” to be the sampling frame of interest and then selected for study each year only those schools in the district with more than 50 percent Latino or immigrant enrollment, whether or not they were in the original study. Cohort studies permit distinctions between historical influences and ordinary lifecycle or developmental influences, but, like trend studies, they suffer from the disadvantage that settings, contexts, and populations can change over time. Thus, a sample collected at one point in time may be very different from a similar (but not identical) sample collected at another point in time because of changes in the sample rather than changes occurring in the setting that are of interest to the researcher.

#### *Panel Studies*

*Panel studies* eliminate all of these disadvantages. Panel studies select a specific sample or group of people or units, and then follow the same group over time. If LeCompte had instituted a panel study, she would have followed for successive monitoring only the students whose folders were examined in the first study. Doing so would mean that she would have had to locate these students each year, regardless of whether they had transferred to different schools within the district (a challenging but not insurmountable problem) or moved away from Houston (a serious logistical problem, indeed!). Panel studies are particularly useful for studies of illness, health, and educational attainment. Panel studies, for example, determined that the percentage of persons ever completing a high school education in the United States was much higher than data from high schools indicated, because only by following people over time could it be determined that many people completed their high school degrees through informal means or in adult education programs decades after they left high school. Studies of the progression of HIV/AIDS and treatment of patients with heart disease also have been greatly facilitated by using panel designs. However, as we mentioned, panel studies suffer from attrition; panel members move away, die, or refuse to continue participation and cannot be replaced after the

baseline assessment. This loss can change the composition of the sample in ways the researcher must explain.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR AND CAUTIONS ABOUT THE USE OF SAMPLES

### WHAT RESEARCHERS NEED TO DRAW A SAMPLE

- A precise definition of the population and sampling units
- A list of the members of the population
- Familiarity with the community or research setting
- Knowledge of the population's characteristics

### *A Precise Definition of the Population and Sampling Units*

Definition, itemization, and enumeration of the population is critical to any form of probabilistic sampling, especially in exploratory, or ethnographic, surveying where the universe or population is known but the individual units or members have not been itemized or listed for purposes of sample selection. In some settings—for example, schools, public housing projects, clinics, or labor unions—a complete listing of membership is available. In many cases, however, such lists do not exist. Researchers must create them by identifying all members of the population and then counting them.

***Enumeration involves visiting, or observing and listing, each unit or member of a population.*** In a demographic study of neighborhoods in Hartford, Connecticut, for example, staff of five community-based organizations enumerated every residential unit on a set of city blocks randomly selected from sets of blocks ranked by density of population in each one of thirteen residential neighborhoods. The enumeration involved visiting each building and residential unit on the designated blocks to determine whether it was occupied, how many people lived in it, and what their self-identified, primary ethnic/racial category

Key point





was. On the basis of this enumeration procedure, a random sample of residences on each designated block was chosen (see our discussion of random sampling later in this chapter). The previously mentioned study of three-wheel drivers in Sri Lanka involved enumerating three-wheel drivers at each of a random sample of stops or stands, categorized or stratified by size and their level of involvement in the sex trade, which in turn was determined by previous ethnographic observation and interviews.

Locating people or units so they can be listed, however, assumes that they are part of a known or defined and locatable population. As we have pointed out, it may be impossible to establish a precise population of naturally occurring behavior or to create precise definitions of unknown, hidden, or hard-to-reach populations. For this reason, ethnographic researchers attempt to approximate precision by imposing on the study group a set of:

- researcher-defined geographic boundaries, and
- inclusion/exclusion criteria.

By researcher-defined geographic boundaries, we mean that the researcher designates as members of the target group those who live, or on specified occasions are found, within specified borders of place or time. For example, the population of three-wheel drivers was defined as those who frequented specified stops or stands; the population of village-level nurses investigated by Lakshmi included all village-level nurses within a particular region; the population studied by the theater arts researchers was defined as all students who participated in or worked on the production of performances and or who uttered lines from plays in rehearsals within a specified week.

By inclusion and exclusion criteria, we mean specific traits, behaviors, or other qualifying features that define the individual as someone of interest to the researcher. In the study of the three-wheel drivers, drivers who had no connection with the sex trade, for example, were not included.

Decisions defining these boundaries are arbitrary, in that they are made by the researchers, but they are not artificial. Rather, they stem from careful prior fieldwork, which

generates descriptions of observable behavior, cultural meanings, beliefs, values, expectations, and shared understandings; information about how target group members identify themselves; specific social scenes, including locations, settings, and socially defined occasions and events—all of which mark group activities. The selection strategies described impose boundaries for purposes of recruiting study participants, but they also retain sufficient flexibility that researchers can change the inclusion rules based on new information. This need for flexibility reflects the constant tension ethnographers experience between the desire for researcher control of all aspects of the research project and the reality of constant confrontations with and feedback from the field.

### *Familiarity with the Community or Research Setting*

Familiarity with the community or research setting is important in helping the researcher determine whether to draw a simple random sample or to stratify the sampling frame so as to appropriately capture the range of variation within the population. It also helps to determine how big the sample should be. For example, if researchers want to collect data from a single ethnic group in a multiethnic neighborhood, a simple random sample will not guarantee that the target group will be included, especially if the target group is very small or segregated. Ethnicity often influences where people live in a neighborhood; a simple random sample of an otherwise multiethnic neighborhood might miss the one block on which the target population resides.

#### **EXAMPLE 10.8**

##### **SAMPLING HOUSEHOLD UNITS IN A MULTIETHNIC NEIGHBORHOOD**

The Asylum Hill neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut, is the most diverse of fifteen urban neighborhoods, including fourteen major ethnic groups. However, analysis of census-block clusters shows that the neighborhood as a whole is highly segregated, with Latinos living on some blocks in rental housing, African Americans on other blocks in private and condominium housing. West Indian/Caribbean, African, and European American residents live on still other blocks. To obtain a representative sample of households, researchers had to use a stratified cluster sample,

in which a list that ranked blocks by density of inhabitants was created. The ranked list was then grouped into blocks with high, medium, and low densities of inhabitants. Household units in these blocks were enumerated, and a random sample of household units weighted by density of block was chosen for face-to-face surveying. Interviewers were told to return up to eight times to be sure to interview every household on the sample list (Berg 1992).

A similar situation was encountered by LeCompte and her staff in the study of school services provided to language-minority students by the Houston School District. A simple random sample of all children in the district would not have yielded an adequate sample, as it would have included many children who were not second-language learners. Rather, the researchers used a stratified cluster sample that identified schools with high percentages of such students and then sampled from their enrollments only.

### *Knowledge of Population Characteristics: Problems of Bias and Representativeness*

We indicated that researchers who sample must take care to make sure that their samples accurately represent the populations from which they are drawn, or, if this is impossible, that researchers account for any lack of representativeness and describe why it exists in the study. Lack of representation introduces **bias** into a study. Certain kinds of lack of representativeness in samples are not under the control of researchers. Bias introduced because of *sample error*, for example, exists simply because samples are not the entire population; each sample drawn from a population will vary slightly, even when the most rigorous mathematical procedures are used in the sampling procedure.

Other forms of unrepresentativeness, however, are the responsibility of researchers to minimize. The most important of these is **sampling bias**, which is created when the sample is not representative of the population because some component of the population was omitted from the sampling frame. Sampling bias is not a major concern in



**Definition:**

Bias is any influence or factor that distorts research results in a particular direction



**Definition:**

Sampling bias exists when sample characteristics do not match population characteristics because some segment of the population was not sampled

preliminary or exploratory studies that focus on identifying relevant cultural domains and the range of good strategies for such studies. The objective of such research is to reach the *informational saturation point*; that is, the point at which additional data collection, including interviews and observations, produces no new information about cultural domains, subdomains, or factors. This is the point of “sufficient redundancy,” when patterns of response begin to repeat themselves and generate no new information.

**EXAMPLE 10.9**

## INTERVIEWING AGENCY STAFF ON DRUG USE OF ADOLESCENTS

In a study of transitions in drug use among adolescents from “gateway drugs” (marijuana, alcohol, and cigarettes) to “hard drugs” (cocaine, heroin, and pills), researchers at the Institute for Community Research in Hartford decided to interview some members of the staffs of youth-service agencies in the area. The first person interviewed reported that for the most part, young users were accessing alcohol and marijuana, but as far as he knew, most others used nothing at all. These data did not conform to other sources of information about young drug users, so researchers went on to interview four other front-line youth workers from different parts of the city. They all reported the same information, confirming that use of both alcohol and marijuana was widespread and that young people were not using other drugs in the city. The research staff determined that there was no further need to interview additional agency staff since the same information would be forthcoming. Instead they decided to interview young people directly about their drug use patterns.

**EXAMPLE 10.10**

## INTERVIEWING FACTORY-FLOOR SUPERVISORS ON OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION BETWEEN UNMARRIED MEN AND WOMEN

Factory-floor supervisors are key gatekeepers for researchers desiring to access factory workers in Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and other parts of southeast Asia. They also are responsible for supervising their workers and monitoring their activities throughout the course of the workday. Researchers in both Mauritius and Sri Lanka interested in opportunities for engagement between male and female factory workers decided to interview several factory-floor supervisors known to be friendly toward workers about the availability of these social opportunities. Interviewers made lists of opportunities, which included formal social events during the work year, union meetings, the lunch room, bus stops, and factory courtyards.

After several interviews in which no new opportunities were listed, researchers decided that they had interviewed “to saturation” and were not likely to expand the list by continuing to interview factory-floor supervisors.

Saturation, or sufficient redundancy, generates a universe of domains, subdomains, and factors, but it does not tell us about the distribution within the varied segments of the population of information about these domains and subdomains. When researchers want to determine the extent to which particular characteristics, behaviors, ways of viewing domains, factors, or practices characterize members of the entire population, then it is crucial to achieve representativeness in samples—and that requires elimination of as much sampling bias as possible. Considerations in eliminating sampling bias include the degree to which researchers:

- define the target group precisely for purposes of the research, identifying all its possible segments;
- take care to collect data from a broad range of locations;
- eliminate categorical prejudices;
- find those segments of the target group that are hidden or difficult to locate;
- ensure the accessibility—or ease of recruiting for participation—of all segments of the population, even if they are not hidden.

It is easy to understand how lack of definitional precision regarding the target population could bias sampling. For example, investigations into the HIV/AIDS epidemic missed both women and heterosexual males in its early stages because North American and European researchers did not think such groups were susceptible to the disease and therefore did not include them in studies. Categorical prejudices have the same biasing effect on samples; they are the product of various forms of societal discrimination that affect who is included into, and who is excluded from, research studies. Studies of educational

levels in many developing nations often were inflated, for example, because the low educational levels of girls were not reported; as only the education of boys was considered important, girls often were left out of accounting procedures. Similarly, most medical research has been conducted with male populations. Researchers have justified this practice on the grounds that “women’s physiology is too complex” and used male-only studies as an allegedly simpler, although biased, alternative, which limits the utility of such research for treating women.

Similarly, sampling bias can result if researchers collect data from limited, rather than a broad, range of locations. Samples drawn from institutionalized populations will not, for example, accurately reflect behaviors of noninstitutionalized individuals. Although annual studies in the United States show that drug use among twelfth grade students is declining, such studies do not include in their samples students of the same age who have dropped out of school and among whom drug use may be considerably higher. The asthma patients least likely to follow medical instructions for control of their condition are those who do not attend clinics—which are convenient sites in which to recruit participants in studies of illness. Thus, a study of change in asthma-related behaviors that focused on clinic patients would produce results generalizable only to clinic users, not to the entire population of asthma sufferers.

Finally, samples can be biased because they do not include persons who are inaccessible, either because they come from segments of the population that are widely dispersed from mainstream segments, because contacting and recruiting them might be dangerous either for them or for the researchers, or because social taboos or customs surround them with obstacles to researcher access. People who have health problems that require them to be socially isolated in some societies (such as tuberculosis, leprosy, or AIDS), or whose sexual preferences are socially stigmatized, fall into this category. Studies of computer use and Internet access among schoolteachers in the United States, for example, tend to suggest high rates of usage; however, most such studies do not include isolated or rural communities. S. McLennan found that teachers from very rural schools



who participated in a heavily funded—and widely publicized—effort to encourage teachers to use the Internet in their instruction not only did not use the Internet but also, without exception, could not get online access to the Internet or even to electronic mail at their schools because the schools lacked sufficient equipment, telephone lines, or service providers in the area (McLennan 1997).

Segments of the population who live in dangerous areas are not likely to be sampled because of the risk to interviewers who must contact them. In the same way, Muslim women in purdah, who are forbidden to interact with outsiders, particularly men who are not members of their family, will be omitted from samples either because no record of their existence is available or because there is no way to meet with them to elicit information.

### *How Big Should a Sample Be?*

Although we think that it is far from the most important aspect of research design, among the first questions novice researchers ask is, “How big should my sample be?” This can be a difficult question to answer, especially when the size of the target population is unknown. How many homeless youth, for example, should be interviewed to represent a total population (of unknown size!) of homeless youth in San Francisco? How many preadolescents would be adequate to assess the impact of an arts program on children not identified as artistic or creative (from the entire universe of children not so identified by conventional tests)? The answers to such questions do not lie in simple formulae. Rather, they can be found in explorations of population characteristics, researcher logistics, and objectives of the investigation. Among the considerations researchers need to consider in selecting an appropriate size for their sample are:

- how much variability or diversity exists within the population;
- which kind of statistics the researcher plans to use and what level of significance is sought;

- how generous the resources available to the researcher are.

One simple rule of thumb is that the sample should be large enough to maximize variability within the group. This means that a sample size of four hundred is needed to represent not only variability but also to perform most common statistical procedures (Bernard 2000). However, as the following discussion indicates, this is far too simple a rubric.

In general, sample size is related to known heterogeneity in the target population: The greater the heterogeneity, the larger the sample needed to be representative of all diversity within the population. If the characteristics of a population are completely unknown, then sampling is inappropriate, because it might miss significant components of the population. In such cases, research focuses on identifying the *range* of characteristics first so that the number of components are known. If, however, the characteristics of the population are completely shared—that is, little or no variability exists in the population—then a single individual would suffice for the study. Such a situation exists hypothetically in the Human Genome Project; the objective of the project simply is to identify all human genes and all humans possess the same number and kinds of genes.

Resources also affect sampling. There may be neither the time, money, nor the personnel to study a sample of four hundred persons. In Book 1, we detail how researchers should design their studies around their available resources, and in line with logistical, definitional, and conceptual criteria. Logistical criteria pertain to the time, money, distance traveled, skills, and communication processes needed to recruit and track members of a sample. Definitional criteria refer to how the group will be bounded and who will be included in it. For example, eligibility for inclusion in a study measuring the energy expenditures of children may be bounded by age and ethnicity. However, who actually is included in the sample may be defined by how far the children live from the researcher. Conceptual criteria

refer to whether enough members of the target population actually can be found. A study of injection drug users' risk behavior in a small suburban Connecticut town might be important, but it also might be impossible to find a large enough group of drug users in the town to make the study worthwhile—not only because of the town's size but also because social taboos might cause the target population to be hidden. Researchers, and especially ethnographers, must temper their enthusiasms and match their sampling procedures to field realities and the capacities of their timelines and budgets.

Finally, researchers need to consider the statistical procedures they plan to use for their analysis. Sometimes, these procedures are mandated by specific funding sources; other times they are required to answer research questions. In any case, most statistical procedures other than simple descriptive statistics (percentages, means, modes, and distributions) require balance among the units or categories in the population studied as well as a minimum number of cases in each category or cell to be implemented. Researchers should know enough about the characteristics of their sample and of the variables they are using for analytic purposes to be able to select from among statistical procedures for one that is appropriate.



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 2, chapter 9, and Book 5, chapters 8 and 9, for further information on statistical procedures used in ethnographically informed quantitative research

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have addressed the principal issues involved in selecting and sampling persons and units for ethnographic studies. We also have begun to address areas in which studies can be biased or which cause invalid inferences to be made. In the final chapter of this book, we discuss important issues of reliability and validity in ethnographic research.

# 11

## DEFINING AND EVALUATING QUALITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

### INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS RESEARCH QUALITY?

In this chapter, we address the principal criteria for judging the quality of research.

A key determinant of research quality is its credibility; no research that is not credible or believable can be considered to be of high quality. Determining the “credibility” of a study involves assessing whether the study was done by rigorously following accepted disciplinary guidelines dictating how these particular studies should be carried out, or they should provide an acceptable rationale explaining why those guidelines were not followed. Credible—that is, high quality—research uses appropriate research designs and makes claims that both are supported by sufficient evidence and hold up to the scrutiny of the people who are studied (LeCompte and Aguilera-Black Bear 2012), as well as to that of professional peers (Campbell and Stanley 1963; Shulman 1988). High-quality research must contain a convincing argument made by the researchers concerning what they claim to have found. It also makes a contribution to or advances knowledge in a specific field and is useful and, hopefully, timely. These criteria are not difficult

*Introduction:  
What Is Research  
Quality?  
Reliability,  
Validity,  
Objectivity, and  
Subjectivity  
The Positivist  
Critique of  
Ethnography  
Why  
Ethnographic  
Characteristics  
Fit Poorly with  
Positivist  
Canons for  
Research Quality  
Validity  
Reliability  
Conclusion*

**Definition:**

Reliability refers to replicability of research results over time, different sites and populations, and with different researchers

**Definition:**

Validity is the degree to which researchers actually have discovered what they think their results show and the applicability of those results to other populations

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 3, for a discussion of positivism and experimental design

standards for ethnographers and qualitative researchers to meet. However, in the hard sciences, and in quantitative and experimental social science, research is held accountable to additional standards. In these fields the gold standard for quality of research results is the **reliability** of a study, or its replicability and stability over time, and its **validity**, or whether the results are actually congruent with what researchers intended to measure or study and whether they are congruent with reality as it is found for participants in the field. As we noted in Book 1, ethnography and qualitative research are preeminently *interpretive*. The canons of reliability and validity, however, most commonly have been defined according to principles deriving from the positivistic paradigm. As customarily defined, they are most suitable for experimental, quasi-experimental, and standardized survey research, not ethnography (Campbell and Stanley 1963; Shadish, Cook, and Campbell 2002). This is not to say that the standards of reliability and validity cannot be met by ethnographers, but that they must be conceptualized and applied in different ways. In the pages that follow, we discuss a set of terms that often are used in discussing research quality. These terms, *reliability*, *validity*, *objectivity*, and *subjectivity*, refer to quite different concepts, and because they often are misused, we take the opportunity to define them here.

### RELIABILITY, VALIDITY, OBJECTIVITY, AND SUBJECTIVITY

Recent scientific literature has been full of highly publicized studies whose claims proved *unreliable* because they could not be repeated by other scientists or because the methods used to conduct the studies were so unusual that they could be used no place else. Attempts to create cold fusion is such an example, as are many studies involving cloning and gene therapies. *Invalid* research means that results are rejected because the people studied believe the results are untrue for them, the results are considered inaccurate because important segments of the population or setting were omitted, or because the research used measurement instruments that do not actually assess what they are intended to assess. Another problem arises when the results obtained are

applicable only to the very small group of people studied. Such studies may be valid; they may generate interesting hypotheses for further study, and they may help us think differently about other groups that are similar to the one studied, but their results cannot be generalized with confidence beyond the study group. As we point out later in this chapter, however, ethnographic research is neither unreliable nor invalid.

**Objectivity** often is held to be another important component of research quality. However, the term is poorly understood by many researchers. Objectivity is neither about “fairness” nor “rigor” in execution of a study, nor is it about whether or not the researcher enters a study from a particular value stance or interacts with people from the study community. Objectivity requires the researcher to establish a neutral or detached stance toward the *outcomes* or results of a study regardless of their initial value stance. Even if they desperately hope for a particular outcome, researchers must act as though they do not care what the results will demonstrate. A researcher who did not maintain objectivity might implement procedures that were biased toward the desired results, overlook information that contradicted hopes about what a study would show, analyze data in ways that favored the hoped-for results, or even tamper with or destroy data that disproved desired results. Objectivity requires that researchers always be ready for results that did not turn out as they had hoped. In experimental research, objectivity can be enhanced by maintaining strict researcher control over all aspects of implementation of the study, including making sure that each participant is treated in exactly the same way as others and making every effort to avoid influencing events in the field by the researcher’s presence. However, it is easy to see that this degree of control and exactitude is neither possible nor really desirable in a study in which the point is to observe people engaged in their normal activities. Rather, for ethnographers, objectivity is achieved by the practice of **disciplining subjectivities** (Peshkin 1994). Subjectivities are biases or points of view that derive from the researcher’s own race, class, gender, position of privilege, or past experiences. Subjectivities are neither bad things nor research

**Definition:**

Objectivity is the detached or neutral stance taken by a researcher toward the content or direction of a study’s results or outcomes

**Definition:**

Subjectivities are biases or points of view that derive from the researchers’ own race, class, gender, religion, position of privilege, and other characteristics, as well as their past experiences



flaws. All researchers have subjectivities, and all researchers have occasion to choose topics to investigate on the basis of their subjectivities. We believe that no research can, therefore, be “value-free.” Most important, we also do not believe that the introduction of values in certain aspects of the research process constitutes a flaw. It is only when researchers’ subjectivities lead them to overlook, alter, or suppress evidence that subjectivities become problematic. Good research practice, in fact, requires that researchers’ values or subjectivities be made explicit. Only in this way can they be set aside or *disciplined*, so that they do not have an impact on the research results. Disciplining of researchers’ subjectivities involves a process of rigorously examining researchers’ own training, experiences, characteristics, likes, and dislikes, as well as their positionality so as not only to identify how subjectivities might lead them to exercise bias in their research but also to develop strategies for continuously exposing them. Ethnographers, therefore, can adhere to canons of objectivity and excision of subjectivities like good researchers in any field.



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 1, and Book 2, chapter 2, for different perspectives on researcher positionality

**EXAMPLE 11.1**

**NEGATIVE SUBJECTIVITIES LEAD A RESEARCHER TO AVOID CONTACT WITH A KEY PARTICIPANT**

One of the key participants in a curriculum reform project in the Navajo Nation school district Margaret LeCompte was studying was the assistant superintendent for curriculum. He was responsible for developing and implementing a new culturally responsive program for the district, and without information he could provide, LeCompte would not be able to carry out the evaluation of the program for which she had been hired. Unfortunately, LeCompte disagreed with the assistant superintendent not only on political issues—a topic of much discussion in that year of a presidential election—but also on the definition of a culturally responsive curriculum. She thought his ideas were wrongheaded and in violation of current theories of how to make such curricula effective. She also found his physical appearance very disagreeable, and his interactions with her to be contentious, arrogant, and dismissive. Unconsciously, she avoided scheduling interviews with him and tended to miss meetings that he chaired. Well into the evaluation, however, she recognized that her cultural, feminist, and political subjectivities were getting in the way of good data collection because she had amassed no information about the role the assistant superintendent had played, or not, in the reform efforts. Fortunately, she was still in the field and was able to schedule the needed interviews.

 **EXAMPLE 11.2****POSITIVE SUBJECTIVITIES IN CHOICE OF RESEARCH SITES AND TOPICS**

In his many studies of communities and their schools, noted educational anthropologist Alan Peshkin stated that he was particularly drawn to close-knit communities that were ethnically diverse and home to many immigrants. The child of Jewish immigrants to the United States himself, he grew up in New York City and found in its polyglot and multicultural population a setting in which he felt most at home. He identified a number of his own subjectivities as “I”s—the E Pluribus Unum I that highly valued the notion of a diverse, yet unified, society; the Justice-Seeking I that recoiled at instances of prejudice, unfairness, and discrimination, and so on. He found that his “I” selves led him to seek out settings and groupings where he felt most comfortable, and that in order to do good research, he had to discipline himself to explore settings and contexts that were out of his comfort zone. Thus, in a study of Los Angeles, he deliberately examined homogenous white and affluent neighborhoods as well as those inhabited by immigrants. He also contrasted his studies of secular public schools (a positive I) with a study of a private, fundamentalist Christian school (Peshkin 1988).

 **THE POSITIVIST CRITIQUE OF ETHNOGRAPHY**


Ethnographers have struggled for decades against critiques from positivistic researchers about criteria for research quality. This is because the methods, field conditions, and objectives of ethnographic research do not lend themselves to the same kinds of detachment and control over practice possible in clinical studies, experimental and epidemiological research, standardized surveys, and demographic research. All of these research approaches have procedures for controlling sources of bias and disruption in the field. By contrast, ethnographers cannot control what happens in the field; they can only document it. Other forms of research also focus on eliminating the influence of the researcher’s presence in the field on participants in the study, but that is nearly impossible for ethnographers, given their long-term, intimate relationships with participants. Some ethnographers have ignored this epistemological struggle, arguing that rules appropriate for experiments and surveys simply don’t apply to ethnography.



This is especially true for reliability; ethnographies cannot be exactly replicated for the simple reason that even if the same population is studied in the same way, the passage of time inevitably alters the site, populations, and overall environment. Other ethnographers claim that different research paradigms require different standards for quality. They have designed alternative criteria that they think are more appropriate for ethnography (see Lather 1986; Lincoln 1990; Smith 1990 for a review of this issue). These include “credibility,” “goodness,” “believability,” and “catalytic validity,” or the capacity of research not only to help researchers and participants understand each other better but also to transform their lives and work toward the elimination of social injustices (Lather and Smithies 1997; Madison 2005; Whyte 1991). Still others have adopted a middle ground, adapting, translating, and modifying positivistic rules to make them appropriate for ethnographic practice and attending also to the special qualities of ethnographic research and its impact on both researchers and participants (LeCompte and Goetz 1982; LeCompte and McLaughlin 1993; Schensul and LeCompte 1999). This last approach is the one with which we feel most comfortable, because we believe that neither simply dismissing the objections raised by other theorists nor inventing new criteria for quality allays what can be considered legitimate concerns. Further, the process of translating criteria in ways suitable for all approaches preserves a concern for the *quality* of investigation, which we believe must be of paramount concern in any scientific endeavor—including ethnographic research. We also have become increasingly concerned with the degree to which the standards for what is valid in studies may not include all stakeholders involved in a community. Particularly in research with minority and indigenous communities where researchers come from different cultural communities from that in which the investigation takes place, and especially if the work is not explicitly collaborative and informed by the values and commitments of the local community, studies that appear to conform well to standards of quality may, in fact, not generate very useful results.

### WHY ETHNOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS FIT POORLY WITH POSITIVISTIC CANONS FOR RESEARCH QUALITY

We begin this discussion by noting several characteristics of ethnography that affect its ability to conform to traditional definitions of reliability and validity. We use both the conventional terminology to describe these threats to validity and reliability and descriptions that we believe more accurately portray their origins. None of them, in our opinion, compromises the credibility, usefulness, or truth value of ethnographic research or diminishes the rigor of the knowledge that ethnography creates. Here we list three of the principal ways in which ethnography deviates from more controlled and standardized forms of research.

**Cross Reference:**  Book 1 represents a detailed description of differences between ethnography and other common approaches to social science research

### WHY ETHNOGRAPHERS CANNOT ADHERE CLOSELY TO STANDARD CANONS FOR VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

- Ethnographers cannot use measurement instruments to distance themselves from participants because the most important data-collection strategy ethnographers use is participant observation, in which their own eyes and ears, closely attuned to and engaged with the participants, are the “instruments” used to gather information.
- Ethnographers study human events in natural settings and as they occur over time. Therefore, they cannot impose rigid laboratory controls on the behavior and environments of their studies.
- Ethnographers cannot replicate their studies exactly, because no human events or circumstances remain static over time.

#### *The Researcher as Instrument*

Ethnographers often speak of the ethnographic researcher as the primary “instrument” of data collection. By this, they mean that all information collected in a study is filtered through the perceptual apparatus and subjective



opinions of the researcher. Such filtering is true to some extent of all research, but it is especially salient in ethnographic research where who researchers are, their stance toward the persons or organizations studied, their agendas for the research project, and whatever personal, professional, or disciplinary biases and perspectives they bring to the field have the potential for affecting research questions, data collection and analysis, and interpretation of results.

### *Lack of Control over Field Conditions*

Ethnographic researchers lack the kind of control over the conditions of research that characterize clinical, experimental, or even cross-sectional survey or epidemiologic research. Ethnographers always must be open to surprises—sometimes unpleasant ones—when expected events fail to occur, unexpected events DO occur, and virtually everything one hoped to find in the field turns up missing or gone awry. Rather than bewail their lack of control, ethnographers address these difficulties by documenting exactly what happened, to whom, where, and to the extent possible, and why the events occurred. It is important to remember that there may be more than one story; different participants may describe what happened and why differently.

### *Issues of Replicability*

In addition to the fact that ethnographers study a continual flow of events whose instances never can be replicated, such “messy” field conditions are exactly what make ethnographic results “unreliable” in the sense that traditional researchers use the term. However, as we shall point out, this lack of replicability does not affect the value of ethnographic results, and, in fact, can be accommodated for by careful explication of field conditions, researcher actions, and methods for data collection and analysis. In the pages that follow, we discuss both validity and reliability as attended to by ethnographers, the principal concerns that ethnographers have about them, and how they can be addressed. We give particular attention to how these criteria


for research quality can be translated into practices appropriate for ethnographers.


## VALIDITY

Establishing validity requires researchers to assess whether constructs devised by researchers accurately and authentically represent or measure the categories of human experience. It also calls for determining the extent to which conclusions effectively represent empirical reality—within and outside of the original study site. In the pages that follow, we discuss these issues in terms of both internal and external validity.

### *Kinds of Validity*

In general, *validity* is concerned with accuracy and dependability of instruments and observations (Kreuger 1988, 41) and with the degree to which results obtained by researchers make sense to and are shared by the people studied and can be generalized to other populations (Goetz and LeCompte 1984, 210). There are several kinds of validity, all of which affect the extent to which research is judged credible and of high quality. **Internal validity** refers to the extent to which scientific observations and measurements—such as surveys and interviews—authentically represent the reality in which the people studied live—as they define it—or the degree to which the responses obtained from respondents are a valid reflection of how those respondents felt and thought about the topic (Gaber and Gaber 2010). **Construct validity**, another form of internal validity, involves the degree to which the questions or measures used really assess what they are assumed to measure. It pertains more specifically to instruments like tests, questionnaires, and interview guides, although it also is relevant to the questions researchers ask in interviews. For example, lack of construct validity can be found in the standardized tests used in the United States to assess all pre-baccalaureate educational programs regardless of their content; because such tests actually measure only proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics, they lack construct

**Definition:**  Internal validity refers to the correspondence between research measures and the reality of the field situation

**Definition:**  Construct validity refers to whether instruments such as tests, surveys, and interview guides measure what they are assumed to measure

**Definition:**

External validity refers to the applicability of results or claims in a study to other groups

validity for programs in the fine arts, which are designed to teach proficiency in the arts. In the same way, questions have to mean the same to researchers as they do to research participants; that is why researchers who want to interview “exotic” groups such as snowboarders will find that their questions do not make sense to these athletes unless the researchers first have studied the jargon that snowboarders use and their attitudes toward the sport. Good questions to snowboarders not only must use the same terminology as the research subjects but also do so in the same way that the snowboarders themselves do. **External validity** refers to the degree to which research results obtained in one group can be applied to other groups. External validity usually is most relevant in situations where researchers who have studied samples taken from larger groups wish to assert that the findings from the sample are close to what would have been found if the entire population had been studied. This can only happen when every segment of the larger population is represented in the sample itself, which in turn cannot occur unless prior ethnographic work has mapped out what all the various segments of the population are, and has, as we have described in earlier chapters in this book, determined the appropriate way to ask meaningful questions of this particular population.

### *Internal Validity*

Most methodologists agree that validity is a major strength of ethnographic research. It is easy to understand why ethnography has high *internal validity*, because ethnographers live with groups for a long period of time, getting to know people well. Ethnographers have sufficient time to learn the language, specialized word usage, and speech patterns of informants so that interviews can be phrased close to or in the actual language of the informant. They have time for continuous data collection and analysis and opportunities to refine constructs in ways that ensure a match between scientific categories and participant realities. In much the same way, since participant observation is conducted in natural settings, it reflects the reality of informant life experiences better than the contrived, manipulated, or controlled

settings common to experimental and quasi-experimental research. Finally, as we note in both Books 5 and 6, analysis and interpretation of ethnographic data incorporates self-monitoring and reflection, which requires the ethnographers to expose their own actions and interpretations to constant inspection and all phases of research activity to continual questioning and reevaluation. All of these features contribute to the degree to which ethnographers can “make sense” of the world in which the people studied live, and do so in ways that “make sense” to those people themselves.

Notwithstanding these strengths, questions of validity still arise in ethnographic research. Though the concept of validity is as critical to ethnographic quality as it is to any scientific research, the way it is applied to different stages of the ethnographic process varies from its application to informed and experimental studies that are informed by positivism.

**Cross Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 4, for a discussion of the kinds of research designs that are informed by positivism



### *Internal Validity in Selection and Interviewing of Key Informants*

Ethnographers must make sure that the key informants they choose actually do understand their own culture well. Even though good ethnographers recognize that no single informant will be able to produce a comprehensive portrait of their own culture, the ethnographer must feel confident that the information provided is valid, however incomplete. One issue is that what informants say can vary over time. In the exploratory or semistructured phases of a study, researchers can expect that different respondents will produce different answers to the same question; this variation does not compromise the study. Since informants may never have thought much about the topics under consideration, their answers can be refined and modified over time. They can change their minds as time passes, as they acquire further information, and as they are influenced by critical events. Ethnographers do not consider this to be a problem; indeed, because the exploratory phases of research involve a search for the range of response within the target population, it may be preferable that respondents do produce different responses, so that the researchers can elicit the maximum number of types.

### *Internal and External Validity in Ethnographic Surveys*

Questions of validity with reference to selecting and interviewing key informants are quite different from those pertaining to selection of respondents for and the development and implementation of an ethnographic survey. First, surveys must address topics with which the respondents are familiar. The questions themselves must have construct validity—that is, they must make sense to community participants—and be addressed to concepts that the community understands. Second, since confirmatory surveys seek to determine if what key informants say generalizes to the larger population in a study, the quality of such surveys rests on their external validity. As such, they are held to the same criteria that any standard survey is held to. Probabilistic sampling should be used to the extent possible, the survey must include individuals from all sectors within the community, and each respondent must be asked the same questions in the same way.

### *Internal Validity in Research Design*

Another often ignored aspect of internal validity is that its presence rests on the appropriateness of the research design used, both for the context of the study and for the research question for which it is being used. If, for example, researchers plan to use a data-collection method such as a group interview, which requires forms of interaction or ways of divulging and communicating information that people in the community deem inappropriate in the culture or context of the research, the results will not be valid.

#### **EXAMPLE 11.3**



#### **CONDUCTING MIXED- AND SAME-GENDER FOCUS GROUPS ON MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUNG SRI LANKAN ADULTS**

Research on sexuality and relationships among youth and young adults in an urban area of Sri Lanka showed that the sexual vocabularies of young men were very well developed. The vocabularies of young women, on the other hand, were

extremely limited, and young women were very reluctant to discuss issues related to sexuality even in the context of a face-to-face interview with a Sri Lankan interviewer of the same gender. Researchers Stephen and Jean Schensul, Tudor Silva, Bonnie Nastasi, and Chellia Sivayoganathan debated the feasibility of joint discussions. Focus groups with youth suggested that it would be problematic to hold such discussions in mixed groups.

Consequently, the group intervention that was conducted following the formative research phase of the study was offered separately to groups of young men and women. The young women's intervention was held behind closed doors guarded by another female researcher to make sure that no men overheard the discussion. Only after achieving some comfort with the topics of "relationships," "reproductive health," and "sexuality" did young women agree to discuss and solve dilemmas related to sexual decision making in a mixed group. After these problem-solving sessions, both women and men requested that joint meetings be held much earlier in the intervention. Interventionists' careful attention to the protection of women's privacy in the early stages of the intervention made further developments in this sensitive cultural arena possible later on. Premature mixing of groups would have resulted in the loss of female participants and their data, jeopardizing the internal validity of the study (Nastasi et al. 1998–1999).



### *Internal Validity in Ethnographic Conclusions*

Researchers often cannot determine whether their results make sense to and are experienced as valid to research participants until close to the point at which the research is completed. However, it can be quite a long time between initial data collection and the point at which an ethnographer finally develops a cultural portrait sufficiently coherent to establish consistent patterns, be internally valid, and "make sense" to the research participants and the researcher. Thus, ethnographers may have to wait longer than most other investigators to be confident that their results really are valid. The process can be facilitated, however, if member checks with participants are conducted throughout the research process and the perspectives and concerns of participants are integrated into the study as it unfolds.



### *Threats to Internal Validity*

In the pages that follow, we discuss the following major threats to internal validity in ethnographic research, and we describe some ways of reducing their impact.

#### **THREATS TO INTERNAL VALIDITY**

- Cultural scenes studied by ethnographers are not stable over time; people studied grow up, move away, and die, especially given the long duration of many ethnographic studies.
- Participants can withhold information or lie; what they say and do is affected by their perceptions of who researchers are, what they want to know, and how and with whom researchers interact in the community.
- Some components of the population or setting may be omitted from the study.
- Researchers can report what turn out to be false or premature conclusions.

### *Cultural Scenes and Their Inhabitants Undergo Change*

These threats to internal validity are commonly referred to as problems having to do with *history*, *maturation*, and *mortality* (Campbell and Stanley 1963; Shadish et al. 2002). History refers to changes over time in the overall social scene. Maturation refers to progressive development in individuals. Mortality refers to losses or gains in the group that the researcher is studying because of death or moves or because the respondent drops out of the study. All of these issues are serious concerns for positivists, who try to reduce possible changes in the population and site by controlling all aspects of the study, including the passage of time and the attrition of subjects. They do this to ensure that the results they obtain are not a function of the changes themselves. However,

the effects of such issues are exactly the kinds of things ethnographers investigate. ***Ethnographers are concerned with separating what remains constant in a culture or group from what is subject to change.*** Instead of trying to stop time, they study the *effects* of history by documenting historical changes. Instead of worrying about the impact that maturation has on humans and events, ethnographers consider it to be one of the normal human processes that ethnographers seek to describe. In much ethnographic research, maturation is considered not only to be a normal part of human life but also a very interesting topic for research in itself. Ethnographers use their prolonged presence, exposure to multiple contexts in the field, and indigenous definitions of the progress of individual development or maturation to help them sort out the implications and impact of history and maturation in their studies. Maturation does become a problem for ethnographers when they are conducting semistructured or definitional research and ethnographic surveys; its threat in these instances is addressed by conducting interviews and observations within a specified time period rather than conducting long-term, trend, or panel studies.

Ethnographers also consider mortality to be a normal aspect of human life that is unproblematic in exploratory or descriptive research whose objective is obtaining new information on a topic. If key informants or data sources disappear, ethnographers simply find other sources of information. Mortality does become an issue when changes in units or individuals over time are the focus of a study—as in the case of intervention studies and innovative programming. Losing a significant number of cases between a first interview or observation and the second can influence the outcome of an intervention or the prediction of future behavior—that is, it might be difficult to distinguish the results of the intervention or actual changes in people’s attitudes and behaviors from changes attributable to the loss of specific individuals. ***The best strategy for preventing threats because of mortality is to allocate sufficient time and resources—and to sample widely enough—to minimize attrition or the loss of cases.***

Key point



Key point



### *Participants Can Give False or Misleading Information in the Researcher's Presence*

This threat to internal validity commonly is referred to as the impact of *observer effects*. It derives from the fact that people tend to act differently when they know they are being watched than when they are unobserved. Observer effects are a problem in any research, but as ethnographers are preeminently observers, they find such effects to be serious indeed. Key to the reduction of observer effects in ethnography is the degree of trust and comfort that informants and people in the community feel with the researcher and the degree to which the researcher does or does not influence the normal flow of behavior or information in the setting. Sometimes, what people in the study think about researchers depends on their past relationships with other researchers; they may not trust a present researcher because a previous one mistreated them.



#### **Cross Reference:**

See Book 1, and this book, chapters 1, 2, and 4, for more information on creating a high level of trust in ethnographic research

Ethnographers generally go to considerable lengths to enhance their own comfort level and respondents' trust levels, including arranging a comfortable setting, offering food or other social activities, assisting with transportation and other aspects of daily life, using a translator if required, and drawing on the support of respected community members to reassure participants of researcher dependability.

In more structured kinds of data collection such as ethnographic interviews and observations, ethnographers try to consider (and control, to the extent possible) a variety of factors so as to minimize observer effects. These include:

- The familiarity and comfort level respondents have with the researcher
- The length of time the researcher has been in the field
- What the participants think about the researcher
- The gender of the researcher in relation to participants and the topic
- Whether or not the topic is one that participants will readily discuss in public, with strangers, or at all

Ethnographers also can engage in a number of other strategies that both enhance internal validity and reduce observer effects in their interviews. They can take care to:

- Pilot-test interview questions to make sure that participants understand them.
- Ensure that people feel comfortable in the interview setting.
- Ensure that members of the field research team are people whom respondents trust or with whom they feel comfortable.
- Situate the interview in an appropriate location.
- Clarify any ambiguity in questions.
- Conduct member checks, or check research results with participants for interpretive comments before they are published or disseminated.

How participants relate to one another may simultaneously be influenced by, and be independent of, the presence of the researcher. In addition to the effect of observers on participants in ethnographic field settings, observer effects may include the potential influence of participants on one another. Communities and groups have their own interaction dynamics that operate independently of the researcher's presence, even though they ultimately have an effect on what the researcher observes. If researchers introduce topics that trigger controversial topics, interaction among informants or between the researcher and informants can become so charged that members in a group discussion or event may behave in an uncomfortable or untypical way, become aggressive, or even leave. In such cases, the researcher should change the topic, end the discussion, or create other transitions.

Another way observer effects can distort the internal validity of the data is if the researcher uses inappropriate or unfamiliar questions, language derived from the researcher perspective, or terminology and jargon from theoretical frameworks and concepts that have little direct relevance to the participants in the study. This kind of impact constitutes an observer effect because participants can feel as though the researcher were speaking a language foreign to the community. Thus, internal validity is enhanced if researchers first develop deep knowledge of the cultural context, fully understand the research used to design the study, use focus groups to generate questions and domains



before developing more structured interviews and observations, and then pilot-test observations to make sure that they are observing behavior relevant to the research questions and interview questions for comprehension, cultural coherence, and acceptability.

Further, as LeCompte and Goetz note, researchers must guard against incorporating influences from their own ethnocentrism and disciplinary and personal biases into the instruments they use and the constructs they create (LeCompte and Preissle 1993). This can be facilitated by the process of introspection and the “disciplined subjectivity” we have described in this chapter, by triangulating initial impressions and all sources of data with other sources in the setting, and by seeking out data from comparable studies in other settings.

Careful execution of methods can enhance the likelihood that multiple researchers in a single study will agree on what they observe; this kind of interobserver agreement—or interrater reliability—is one of the best indicators of internal validity. Some useful procedures for enhancing such agreement include:

- Obtaining verbatim accounts from respondents
- Taking careful field notes and recording discrepancies among different sets of observations
- Making use of teams of researchers and striving for high levels of interrater reliability across sites or situations in coding field notes
- Using field consultants and key informants to verify observations and serve as a reality check for the principal investigator’s initial conclusions
- Considering results in light of other researcher’s findings
- Using electronic or mechanical devices such as video cameras and tape recorders for recording of data

#### *Segments of the Population or Setting May Be Omitted from the Study*

Threats to validity stemming from the omission of population or context segments are called *selection* effects.

As we noted in Book 2, incomplete representation of the population, or selection bias, can affect *internal* validity by distorting research results in favor of the group that is represented. Prior ethnographic research will help ethnographers to identify all the sectors to be represented and enrolled in the study or sought and interviewed in the field. However, the *external* validity of an ethnographic study may be compromised because ethnographers cannot always obtain a representative sample of participants from the target population of concern. Thus, exactly who is represented should be described and reasons for any omissions must be presented in the results. ***We recommend obtaining demographic data from all key informants and participants in the early stages of the research process so that membership in the sample can be matched against the target population.***

**Key point**

### *Researchers May Arrive at False or Misleading Conclusions*


Conventional researchers refer to this threat as the possibility for *spurious conclusions*. It is relatively easy in the enthusiasms of early fieldwork for ethnographers to jump to premature conclusions based on insufficient data. During initial fieldwork phases, researchers notice the unusual, the controversial, and surface patterns that recur most frequently. As we note in Books 3 and 6, the first individuals with whom the researcher establishes relationships may be atypical and not represent community perspectives accurately. Ethnographers can correct this problem by corroborating results over time, testing associations between independent and dependent variable domains over time, triangulating with alternative data sources and conducting interviews with multiple groups so as to check results from each against the other, seeking indigenous explanations for causality or historical sequences, and observing causal sequences in field settings. This is especially important when the researcher's observations of events and why they happen do not correspond to local residents' interpretations of cause and effect.

**EXAMPLE 11.4****COMPETING EXPLANATIONS FOR “TROUBLE” IN A SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Both witchcraft and failure to conform to culturally appropriate patterns of reverence for nature and for other human beings are common explanations for why “things go wrong” in the Navajo Nation. In the school district where LeCompte worked, these explanations for such “natural disasters” as floods and leaky roofs, and for human problems, such as the suicide of a popular high school student and the failing grades of a disproportionately large number of students, coexisted with more “rational” and bureaucratic explanations generated by researchers and school administrators. Both indigenous explanations and others blaming shoddy construction, an inclement weather cycle, dysfunctional families, and a bus schedule that caused many students to miss classes—and thereby exceed the number of allowable absences—needed to be considered in setting policy for the school district (LeCompte and McLaughlin 1994).

### *Threats to External Validity*


External validity addresses both the extent to which the results obtained in one study also hold true for other populations and whether or not theoretical frames, definitions, and research techniques used in one study can be applied by other researchers to comparable studies. Some researchers argue that ethnographic studies are so unique that neither their results nor their techniques can be applied anywhere else. Some ethnographers also develop idiosyncratic terminology to describe the special conditions they find in their research sites. However, these practices threaten the scientific value of their studies, since one of the hallmarks of good research is the extent to which it increases our knowledge of human life in general, not just knowledge of a particular small group. As a consequence, we advocate a position that both recognizes the uniqueness of the cultures ethnographers study but also makes it possible for other researchers to make use of their results. LeCompte and Goetz advocate making sure that the results ethnographers generate are presented in a way that makes them **comparable** to results obtained in other studies (LeCompte and Goetz 1982). This means using, to the

 **Definition:** Comparability exists when, to the extent possible, a study uses terminology, procedures, and interpretations that are commonly used in the scientific disciplines and in the same way that they are used in those disciplines

extent possible, terminology and interpretations that are well known or have a history in the scientific disciplines. This assures that a basis for comparison with other studies exists. Where this is impossible and new terms must be created, they should be carefully defined and the reasons for their use fully explained.

LeCompte and Goetz further suggest that the theories, constructs, and methods used in a study should be **translatable** (LeCompte and Goetz 1982). This means that they must be commonly understood and well explained; as is the case with terminology or results, deviations from common practice must be explained well so that other researchers will be able to assess their value and appropriateness. Further, translatability and comparability require that researchers clearly describe their site, study population, and roles in the field so as to facilitate comparison.

Below we describe the principal threats to external validity. We have described them as threats especially germane to ethnographic research, but they also pertain to any research design whatsoever.

**Definition:**  Studies that are translatable use commonly understood and well-explained theories, constructs, and methods and assure that populations, sites, and researchers' roles are explicit

### THREATS TO EXTERNAL VALIDITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

- Using concepts, instruments, or methods that are inappropriate for the group under study because they were developed for use with another, very different group.
- Describing concepts, instruments, methods, or results used for one group in so idiosyncratic or unique a way that they cannot be used for, or applied to, any other group. This is called *construct effects*.
- Failing to document unique historical experiences of groups and cultures in the study, especially if they seriously affect the results obtained in the study. This is called *history effects*.
- Creating a researcher-informant relationship, or a researcher role within the community, that might



seriously affect the setting or results without carefully documenting both the relationship and its effects. This creates *observer effects*.

- Unique characteristics of the research setting also may affect research results. These might be called *setting or context effects*. Cross-group comparison of constructs may be invalid because of the unique historical experiences and environment of groups and cultures in the study. Ethnic/culture, social/race, and gender composition are important factors here, but urbanization, acculturation, and other historical processes create unique conditions that the researcher should document clearly.

The fact that researchers interact with the setting and people in it in ways that alter the cultural scene under study is not by itself a problem for ethnographers. In some cases, and especially in applied ethnographic research, this interaction is appropriate, because the researcher acts in close collaboration with the community and has its approval to engage in investigations and even to introduce change. However, adequate evaluation of the research results requires that what these observer effects and influences are be documented carefully. The best way to do this is to describe clearly all settings, setting-observer interactions, activities of the researchers, and the effects of those activities and to conduct observations in a variety of settings and with multiple trained observers who can observe each others' effects on the setting, participants, and one another.

Construct effects can be addressed by careful prior fieldwork and pilot-testing, especially when researchers plan to adopt or adapt instruments originally generated in a different study and for different populations. Ethnographers commonly engage in this practice; it is entirely appropriate and efficient, but only if the prior precautions as described are taken. All of these strategies provide information that allows outside readers and other researchers to assess the quality—and validity—of the research, and they also serve as a check on bias in the study at hand.

## RELIABILITY

*Reliability* is concerned with whether the research results can be replicated by another researcher using the same methods. *Internal reliability* refers to the degree to which other researchers would match previously generated constructs with a particular data set in the same way as did the researcher who originally compiled it. *External reliability* addresses whether or not independent researchers would discover the same phenomena or generate the same constructs as an original researcher, if they did studies in the same or similar settings (cf. LeCompte and Goetz 1982). We have alluded to many of these issues in our discussions of researcher subjectivities, sampling procedures, instrument development, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

### *Internal Reliability*

*Internal reliability* is more often called “interrater” or “intercoder” reliability. It refers to the consistency and accuracy with which different researchers examining a given data set identify and code the same items within it. It is particularly important in projects where all members of a team of researchers engage in coding the data, because all of the individual coders must agree on how data should be coded and apply the codes consistently to each particular type of information across all members of the team. Consistency ensures stability and accuracy of the concepts and identification procedures. Interrater reliability also can be a check on the biases and consistency of an individual researcher; Margaret LeCompte’s dissertation chair required that she find two individuals who would recode LeCompte’s field notes and interviews, using LeCompte’s own codebook and set of definitions. If other coders—albeit coders who were trained by LeCompte in the use of her own codebook—coded the data in the same way that LeCompte herself had done, then the dissertation committee could rest assured that LeCompte really did see what she said she did in the data.

### Cross

#### Reference:



See Book 2, chapter 8, for a further discussion of sampling issues and reliability

### Cross

#### Reference:



Instrumentation and data collection are discussed in Books 1, 3, and 4; chapter 7 in Book 1 and all of Book 5 address issues of analysis and interpretation of data

### *External Reliability*

While critics often argue that lack of replicability is a serious problem for ethnographers, we believe that this criticism is unwarranted, given the different purposes that ethnography has in comparison with more controlled and standardized research. In truth, duplication of results across groups and administration of interventions is not the desired outcome of exploratory and definitional research such as is much of ethnography. Rather, its intention is to provide exploratory information leading to theory formulation, more valid instrument development, and explanation of quantitative results. Under such conditions, finding differences is more important than similarities.

Notwithstanding, as we have mentioned earlier, ethnographers should attend carefully to the canons of comparability and translatability described earlier. They should make it possible for other researchers to use their research approaches with similar populations and settings and compare results for variations and similarities. This is the province of comparative ethnographic research, or ethnology. Giving much thought in advance to the structure of the questions to be used in exploratory research can go a long way toward ensuring that other researchers could approximate the research *process* used in a study—though not necessarily obtain the same results. Likewise, assuring that comparisons and translations are possible is facilitated by careful training of interviewers, team interviewing, taking of rigorous field notes, and audiovisual documentation. Other ways of enhancing external reliability include:



**Cross  
Reference:**

See Book 6, chapter 2, on the researcher's role, for a discussion of what these issues are and how they affect results

- Describing clearly both the nature and the context of the researcher's relationships with the study population and the research site, researchers may see and interpret things differently depending on the position they hold in the community
- Clarifying and describing clearly who the key informants in the study are, the groups that they represent, and the status position they hold in the community in the study

- Making clear how, where, with whom, and when observations were made
- Providing details of quota and other sampling techniques, as well as instrument construction and testing, so that readers will be able to identify and duplicate the primary sources of information for the study
- Identifying clearly the social contexts and situations of the research, including conditions under which ethnographic surveys were administered. This enhances the possibility of comparisons and replicability and permits readers to identify limitations and gaps in the data-collection process that could affect results and their interpretation
- Defining concepts, constructs, domains, factors, and variables (at the theoretical/conceptual level) and describing how items, patterns, and structures were defined and constructed (at the operational/empirical level) clearly at all levels to avoid idiosyncratic interpretation and limited replicability
- Establishing interrater reliability when developing coding categories and coding text data
- Clarifying methods and procedures for analyzing ethnographic data so that others can duplicate the work. As Goetz and LeCompte (1984) note, “Because reliability depends on the potential for subsequent researchers to reconstruct original analytic strategies, only those ethnographic accounts that specify these in sufficient detail are replicable” (217)

**Cross****Reference:**

See Book 1, chapter 7, Table 7.1; also Book 2 for further discussion of these issues



Delineating clearly all the steps in conducting an ethnographic study, including data analysis and links to interpretation, are central to ensuring the external reliability of a study.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have discussed the most important tenets for judging the quality of research results. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, the most common criteria discussed in this chapter are more or less traditional ones, but they are those most commonly known



to the scientific and nonscientific public. For that reason, they also are those to which the work of ethnographers is most often held accountable, and about which funding agencies, evaluators, and boards of trustees tend to ask questions. We believe that readers of the *Ethnographer's Toolkit* should be familiar with them so that they will have ready answers to such queries.

We also believe that some of the more recent definitions of validity, in particular, are relevant to the work that applied ethnographic researchers, including users of this *Toolkit*, do. Applied ethnographers quickly learn that doing work in communities means that there are few really "correct" answers to any given problem, and there never is any single completely correct set of procedures for arriving at solutions. Rather, arriving at workable and appropriate solutions to problems requires the kind of negotiation, sharing of power, and joint decision making advocated by critical theorists and postmodern researchers. Research projects that can create this kind of shared process are indeed valid, both for communities and for investigators. Further, research that stimulates local communities and groups to identify and solve their own problems is, indeed, "catalytic" and, in that sense, has the "catalytic validity" (Lather and Smithies 1997) we described in the introduction to this chapter. Finally, if theory, methods, analytic procedures, and results are clearly described—as they were implemented in local contexts—the potential for reliability and generalizability is enhanced.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

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**Margaret D. LeCompte** received her BA from Northwestern University in political science, and after serving as a civil rights worker in Mississippi and a Peace Corps volunteer in the Somali Republic, she earned her MA and PhD from the University of Chicago. She then taught at the universities of Houston and Cincinnati, with visiting appointments at the University of North Dakota and the Universidad de Monterrey, Mexico, before moving to the School of Education at the University of Colorado-Boulder in 1990. She

also served for five years as executive director for research and evaluation for the Houston Independent School District. She is internationally known as a pioneer in the use of qualitative and ethnographic research and evaluation in education. Fluent in Spanish, she has consulted throughout Latin America on educational research issues. Her publications include many articles and book chapters on research methods in the social sciences, as well as her cowritten (with Judith Preissle) *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research* (1984, 1993) and coedited (with Wendy Millroy and Judith Preissle) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education* (1992), the first textbook and handbook published on ethnographic and qualitative methods in education. Her collaborative work in research methodology continues with this second edition of the *Ethnographer's Toolkit*. Dr. LeCompte is deeply interested in the educational success of linguistically and culturally different students from kindergarten through university, as well as reform initiatives for schools and communities serving such students. Her books in these areas include *The Way Schools Work: A Sociological Analysis of Education* (1990, 1995, and 1999) with Kathleen Bennett deMarras and *Giving Up on School: Student Dropouts and Teacher Burnouts* (1991) with Anthony Gary Dworkin. Her diverse interests as a researcher, evaluator, and consultant to school districts, museums, communities, and universities have led to publications on dropouts, artistic and gifted students, school reform efforts, schools serving Native American students, and the impact of strip mining on the social environment of rural communities. Her most recent research involves explorations in the politics and finance of public universities. A Fellow of the American Educational Research Association, the American Anthropological Association, and the Society for Applied Anthropology, she also was awarded the Spindler Prize for advances

in the field of anthropology and education by the Council on Anthropology and Education of the American Anthropology Association, an organization that she also served as president. She has been editor of the journals *Review of Educational Research* and *Youth and Society*. A founding member and the first president of the University of Colorado-Boulder chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), she also served as vice president of the Colorado Conference of the AAUP and was active in faculty governance at the University of Colorado. As professor emerita, she continues to use action research strategies in the service of improving the intellectual life in higher education.



**Jean J. Schensul**, founding director and now full-time senior scientist, Institute for Community Research, Hartford, is an interdisciplinary medical/educational anthropologist. Born in Canada, she completed her BA in archeology at the University of Manitoba and her MA and PhD in anthropology at the University of Minnesota. From 1978 to 1987, as deputy director and cofounder of the Hispanic Health Council in Hartford, Connecticut, she built its research and training infrastructure. In 1987, she became the founding director of the Institute for Community Research, an innovative, multimillion-dollar community research organization, conducting collaborative applied research in education, cultural studies and folklore, participatory action research, and community intervention research in the United States, China, and India. Dr. Schensul's research cuts across the developmental spectrum, addressing contributions of ethnography to disparities and structural inequities in early childhood development, adolescent and young adult substance use and sexual risk, reproductive health, and chronic diseases of older adulthood. She is the recipient of more than twenty National Institutes of Health research grants, as well as other federal, state, and foundation grants. In addition to conferences, workshops, over eighty peer-reviewed journal articles, many edited substantive special issues of journals including *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, *AIDS and Behavior*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, and the *American Journal of Community Psychiatry*, her collaborative work in research methodology is reflected in a book (with Don Stull) titled *Collaborative Research and Social Change*, the widely celebrated seven-volume series, the *Ethnographers' Toolkit*, with Margaret LeCompte, and in other articles and book chapters on ethnography and advocacy, community building, and sustainability of interventions. She has served as president of the Society for Applied Anthropology and the Council on Anthropology and Education and is an elected board member of the American Anthropological Association. In recognition of her work as a scholar-activist she has been awarded two senior anthropology awards, the Solon T. Kimball Award for anthropol-

ogy and policy (with Stephen Schensul) and the Malinowski Award for lifetime contribution to the use of anthropology for the solution of human problems. Dr. Schensul holds adjunct faculty positions in the departments of Anthropology and Community Medicine, University of Connecticut, and she is codirector of Qualitative Research and Ethnography, Interdisciplinary Research Methods Core, Yale Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS.



A fiber artist, quilter, teacher, curator, and lecturer, **Ed Johnetta Fowler-Miller** is acknowledged to be one of the most creative and colorful improvisational quiltmakers in the United States. Widely exhibited in the United States and internationally, her quilts can be found in many important museums and corporate and private collections including The National Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.; Nelson Mandela's National Museum in Cape Town, South Africa; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut; and the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum in Golden, Colorado. Her home state of Connecticut awarded her its most prestigious artistic award, The Governor's Art Award, as well as the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Arts first Presidents Award; Leadership of Greater Hartford's Arts and Cultural Award, Vision Award for Arts; and Cultural and Capital Community College Heritage Award. The Home and Garden Station featured Ed Johnetta on the Modern Masters series; she appeared on Debbie Allen's series *Cool Women*, Public TV, Tokyo, Japan; and her woven creations were worn by actress Phylicia Rashad on *The Cosby Show*. The Sunday *New York Times* featured her in the Best of the Best series, and most recently, she appeared on HGTV's *Simply Quilts*. In 2009 Ed Johnetta represented the United States and the Women of Color Quilters Network at the largest quilt festival in the world in Yokohama, Japan, and in 2010 she represented the United States in Costa Rica, where she lectured and taught workshops. She has exhibited her work across the United States and lectures and offers workshops in New England, elsewhere in the United States, and worldwide. More information can be found at <http://www.edjohnetta.com>.



**Graciela Quiñones-Rodríguez** is a gourd carver/lutier/multimedia artisan/performer and Master Teaching Artist. She draws most of her inspiration from indigenous and traditional Puerto Rican imagery and symbols to create *higüeras* (gourds), clay/wood figures, and folk string instruments (*cuatros*, *tiples*, and *bordonuas*). She has been a resident artist in numerous schools and libraries throughout Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York. She has

received fellowships and awards from the Commission on the Arts, the New England Foundation for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her works have been on exhibit in Puerto Rico, the Smithsonian Institution, University of Massachusetts, Wisconsin, New York, and several exhibit sites throughout Connecticut. She is a member of Urban Artists Initiative and the Connecticut Cultural Heritage Arts Program. Graciela Quiñones-Rodríguez is a licensed clinical social worker, currently working at the Storrs campus of the University of Connecticut.