

Doing Anthropological Research

A practical guide

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'be a proper anthropologist' and help plough fields at the homestead where he was staying. The dry, hard soil was being turned over using hand-held hoes in anticipation of rains likely to fall that afternoon. Against the humoured protests of his hosts he persisted until, before long, his hands were bleeding. Looking up he realized he was not only delaying progress in a field that really needed to be ploughed before lunch time, he was also embarrassing his hosts in front of curious neighbours who were wondering why this foreigner was being made to plough a field! Clearly, participant observation can be a rich source of information, but there are theoretical, ethical and practical limits to 'going native'. In this case, it is hard to see what data could be gained about rural, chiefly authority through delaying and embarrassing your hosts, but if the research sought to explore how means of production produce particular kinds of bodies, attitudes and dispositions, then ploughing a field may have been a central aspect of fieldwork. Participant observation might also offer opportunities to catch utterances and opinions not expressed in other contexts. In some situations, demonstrating your willingness to work hard and show your inadequacies might be an important way of generating questions for later interviews, but also of 'breaking the ice', lowering social barriers, and opening up access to new informants, encounters and events; just as Wacquant's boxing training gave him access to informants he might otherwise never have interviewed.

Interviews

If participant observation alone is not enough you will probably spend much time doing interviews. Interviews come in all shapes and sizes – from highly formalized, structured and strictly time-limited interviews with individual people, to very casual, unstructured conversations with several people, to the kinds of focus group discussions that development researchers tend to adopt. In practice, there are many shades of grey between these poles. In general, informal interviews will be relatively free-flowing whereas structured interviews will involve specific questions prepared in advance. Our purpose here is not to go through the many techniques a researcher can use, but we do encourage you to consult further reference books as you develop your own repertoire (see Chapter 2 and the companion website for examples).

At its most informal, an interview can appear much like a normal conversation. Often the boundary between interviews and the kind of casual conversations common to participant observation is blurred. Sometimes a chance conversation can turn into something akin to an interview, and as long as everyone involved is aware of what is going on, these kinds of encounters-cum-interviews are to be encouraged (see discussion of informed consent in Chapter 6). Many ethnographers admit that much of their ethnographic data emerges from these kinds of conversations, and they are what 'deep hanging out' is often all about. As a rule of thumb, one way of differentiating between a very informal interview and such chance encounters is that an interview is pre-arranged, whether five minutes or five days beforehand. This highlights one central

advantage of interviews over participant observation: because they are pre-arranged, interviews offer the fieldworker much more of an opportunity to direct conversation toward the issues, themes and concerns that are of interest to them. By agreeing to be interviewed or to have a conversation, an interviewee has in effect given a green light to the researcher to steer a conversation towards the kinds of data that they are interested in, and they have agreed to devote a certain amount of time to answering your questions. This does *not* in any way absolve a fieldworker from the normal ethical requirements of research, or the social niceties of conversation. We should always respect an informant's wishes regarding confidentiality and their right not to speak on particular subjects. The onus remains on the researcher to generate a situation whereby informants feel free to communicate freely, on their own terms and to their own limits. Yet because an interview is rarely a chance encounter, it allows researchers to come prepared, whether with a vague notion of what he or she wants to cover, or carrying a highly structured list of questions.

Interviews are a good method for gathering verbal data quickly and fieldworkers will use interviews for different purposes at different moments in their research. Early on, interviews with key informants may be directed to obtaining very basic general information. Later on, interviews can become more focused upon particular questions raised by the research (and by other methods), and may be much more formalized. Later interviews can also be much less formalized, if, for example, once basic social or historical information has been acquired, a researcher is looking for richer, evocative ethnographic material about how informants experience or find meaning in particular social situations. Informal, free-flowing interviews can be very useful for gaining deep information on people's life histories, but are likely to be different from an interview with an official about government policy.

The nature of an interview may also depend upon the accessibility of a particular informant, their social status, and your relationship with them. If, like Dwyer, Csordas or Wacquant, your informant is someone you have known well over a long period, you may be able to hold a series of informal interviews. If you are interviewing someone you will be unlikely to talk to again, a busy civil servant or politician, for example, then that interview is likely to be more structured and involve much more pointed questions. How you organize your interviews and whether you ask very open-ended questions or more directed ones, will depend upon what you are trying to achieve, and the context of your relationship with the interviewee. It is often said that an interviewer should try to avoid asking 'leading questions' – questions that prescribe a particular type of answer, or provoke simple yes/no responses. This is good advice for many situations, but like all good advice it should sometimes be taken with a pinch of salt. It is more important to know what you are looking for. If you want rich meaningful data about how an informant understands, thinks about, is motivated by, or experiences something, it is much better to ask open-ended questions that encourage your informant to say as much as they want, in the way that they want. But if you need to know a specific

detail, like who said or did what to whom, when and why, then a more pointed, or leading question might be required.

Much depends upon your informant's specific situation, the broader social, cultural, political and historical context of the interview, and the material being discussed. Sometimes this context will be (and will remain) not only beyond your control, but also beyond your knowledge and awareness. There are many 'unknown unknowns' in fieldwork. There are usually many factors which you may never be aware of, and which will determine how 'good' the interview is, how responsive your interviewee, and the kinds of answers you elicit. Be sensitive to the possibility that your informant is under pressures that you might not be aware of, and avoid putting them in uncomfortable or unretrievable positions with your questions. The formality of some kinds of interviews can often hamper natural conversation, however, sometimes informants themselves insist upon a level of formality that the interviewer might find surprising or difficult. Much also depends on your informant's personality traits, mood and motivations. 'Perfect informants', interviewed in 'perfect settings' and with 'perfect' techniques (if such a possibility even exists!) can still lead to poor, uncommunicative interviews. All researchers will be familiar with the frustration of interviews that just 'did not really work'. They are part of the process, and fieldworkers are advised to reflect upon the manner, form and progress of particular interviews not only because it will help you to refine your techniques, but also for the valuable contextual data that they may reveal.

As with surveys and questionnaires, there is a sense that the strength of more structured interviews is the authoritative stability implied by their apparently systematic nature. This is debatable, nevertheless it is clear that in some contexts, very structured interviews with set questions may be appropriate. For instance, when interviewing possessed spirit mediums in northern Zimbabwe, David Lan found it necessary to:

Establish the degree to which the answers given to questions (mine and others) by the spirits were conventionalized, the degree to which the answers would be different depending on which *mhondoro*/medium was questioned and on the circumstances in which the questioning took place. The partial solution I found to this attempt to estimate the individual creativity of the mediums was the simple expedient of asking all *mhondoro*/mediums the same set of questions irrespective of which tradition of *mhondoro* they belonged to, as well as to put the same questions to numbers of other people whether or not they were reputed to have particular knowledge of the past of the ways of mediums, women as well as men, children as well as adults.

(Lan 1985: 232)

David Lan's reasons for taking this structured approach may well relate to the unusual nature of his informants – ancestral spirits possessing mediums – and the very unclear 'agencies' that involves. His was an attempt to stabilize and

bring order to a complex social/cultural situation where it was not at all clear which or whose voice was speaking. Although Lan's was a fairly unique research situation (but not *hugely*, for anthropology), and a fairly unusual approach (only partially successful), this example highlights an important point about interviews: not only can they be difficult to control, it can also be difficult to be clear about the nature of the material being elicited. This returns us to Turner's point about separating participants' interpretations from those of the anthropologist, and again emphasizes the importance of taking into account 'significant contexts'. Interviews rarely provide 'thick description', and working out the 'significant contexts' of an interview – the matters being discussed, the manner of conversation, the manner of the informant/s and the interviewer, and the assumptions embedded in his or her questions/research agenda – is vital to the interpretation of the material being generated. This returns us to a) the importance of combining research methods; and b) the importance of reflexivity about the methods and techniques you use, and the cultural, social and political assumptions embedded within your research project. As a fieldworker you should reflect upon who you are choosing to interview and why, where and how you choose to do this, and what you tell an informant about the kind of information you are looking for. This is not only about refining your techniques in the field, although that is very important; it is also about the status of the knowledge that is generated.

Box 5.1

Participatory and multimodal research methods

The strengths of ethnographic research lie in the fact that it is socially embedded and interactive rather than detached and extractive. Since different people interact, learn and express themselves in different ways, to ensure that a variety of people have a voice in your research you may need to facilitate this using a variety of participatory methods. Whereas some people will gladly tell you their autobiographies or respond eloquently to your direct questions, most will not. You may, however, learn a lot by walking with them through a village or across a landscape; constructing a model with them to depict a remembered or anticipated scenario; playing a group audio-visual activity with them (such as putting together a video or photography show) that may lead to an informal focus group discussion; or getting them to show you their pictures or possessions. 'Participatory' means involving others collaboratively in generating knowledge. 'Multimodal' means using a variety of methods and sensory channels to do this. Inspired in part by anthropology's mix of methods and by the idea of non-extractive, collaborative learning, from the 1970s development planners developed a raft of methods for facilitating participatory