
❧ Participant Observation ❧

A Guide for Fieldworkers

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Informal Interviewing in Participant Observation

Most researchers who use participant observation as part of their approach to research also use a number of more structured data collection methods. The other techniques used include mapping and counting, informal interviewing, semistructured interviewing, formal interviewing, formal elicitation frameworks, and very structured interview schedules and questionnaires. In this chapter we will explore the more informal end of the interview continuum, particularly the collection of data from conversations and very informal interviewing.

The type of "interviewing" that is part of participant observation is usually informal, and is usually more like a casual conversation among acquaintances. After all, the goal of the technique is for the researcher to participate in naturally unfolding events, and to observe them as carefully and as objectively as possible. The researcher is looking for new insights into the point of view of the participants. The basic rule in carrying out interviewing or conversing during participant observation is that the researcher is intent on following the lead of the informant, exerting only minimal impact on the topic and flow of the interaction. The goal is to get out of the way of the participants or informants and let them talk (Bernard 1995).

This is not, however, the same as participating in a conversation in a nonresearch setting for at least two reasons. The first is that, ultimately, the researcher is interested in some phenomena more than others (answering the research question or questions). The second is that the researcher will be writing notes about the conversation and, knowing this, he or she is likely to conduct the interaction in a different way than if this were not the case. In other words, the researcher is likely to be directing conversation and asking many more questions than would usually take place in a casual conversation among acquaintances. Because verbal interaction between the researcher and those with whom he or she interacts in the project has some of the characteristics of an interview, ethnographers should know about different kinds of interviews and be able to use some of the techniques commonly used in interviewing.

Types of Interviews

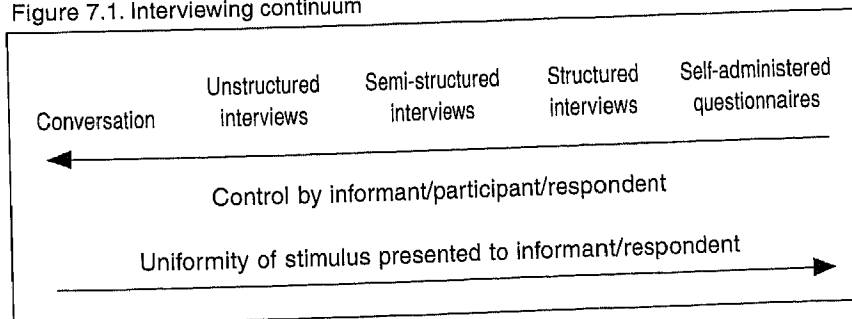
There are a number of types of interview and they can be classified along two continua. The first continuum is the degree of control by the researcher and informants (Dohrenwend and Richardson 1965; Spradley 1979; Bernard 1995). At one extreme, the end in which there is the least control by the researcher and the most by the informants, lies the pure observer, who observes but does not participate in the conversation (on the internet, this is a "lurker"). At the other end of the continuum is the precoded written questionnaire filled in outside the presence of the researcher. In this case, the form and content are completely controlled by the researcher, with no accommodation for the concerns or understandings of an individual respondent. A respondent can only choose one of several precoded responses or not to answer at all.

The second continuum is the degree to which the stimuli (questions) presented to each informant are uniform. At the conversation end, each conversation is unique, there is no intent or attempt to raise the same topics, or to ask questions in the same way with each participant in the conversation. At the other end, it is presumed that the self-administered questionnaire presents each respondent with an identical stimulus (the questionnaire).

Between the extremes on both continua lie most of the forms of interviewing carried out by qualitative researchers (see figure 7.1). Bernard's (1995) category of informal interviewing includes much of the verbal interaction in which the participant-observer engages with informants and other participants. Bernard defines informal interviewing as being characterized by

a total lack of structure or control. The researcher just tries to remember conversations heard during the course of a day "in the field." This requires constant jotting and daily sessions in which you sit at a typewriter, unburden your memory and develop your field notes. (1995, 209)

Figure 7.1. Interviewing continuum



We would call the situation he describes in the quote as *conversation*, and in another, closely related category we would put *informal interviewing*. In "remembered" conversation the researcher is observing informants as they go about their daily activities and are interacting and conversing in culturally patterned ways. As Bernard notes, the researcher makes notes, tries to remember verbatim passages of conversation, and records those in field notes.

In *informal interviewing* the researcher follows the lead of the participants but asks occasional questions to focus the topic or to clarify points that she/he does not understand (Spradley 1979). In this case, the informant may be more aware that she/he is explaining something to the researcher, training them in his/her culture. In both conversation and informal interviewing, the researcher is not necessarily directing the topics for discussion, but is following, or following up on, points raised by another person during the natural flow of conversation.

Other forms of interviewing are more directive and are clearly understood as interviews by both the researcher and the informant. In *unstructured interviewing*, the researcher typically has a plan for the interview and may have a brief interview guide that includes the topics to be addressed as an aid to memory, but he or she presents topics in an open-ended way and exerts as little control over the interaction as possible. In *semistructured interviewing*, the interview guide includes a list of questions and prompts in order to increase the likelihood that all topics will be covered in each interview in more or less the same way. A somewhat more structured approach would include a guide with opening questions and suggestions for prompts to be used as needed.

When a formal set of questions is used in an open-ended way, we can refer to the result as *structured interviewing*. In this, the questions asked by the interviewer are scripted although the responses of the person can be relatively open-ended. Finally, the step before questionnaire use is the use of an *interview schedule* (often precoded) and administered face to face by the interviewer. With the administration of an interview schedule there is still an interaction between the researcher and respondent, and the respondent can have a small amount of impact on the interchange, but the researcher is clearly in charge and usually attempts to administer the interview in the same way to each respondent.

Both of the dimensions in figure 7.1 have an impact on the nature of the data collected. The extent to which the researcher, as compared with the informant, controls the flow of the interaction has an impact on the degree to which the content of the interaction reflects issues and information that are salient to the informant. Even the best of open-ended interviews—that is, those who intervene minimally in the interaction—direct the content to some extent. If the goal is to understand the way partici-

pants view a phenomenon, then it is important to allow the flow of conversation to reflect those aspects that are salient to the informants. On the other hand, the degree to which information gathered from different individuals is comparable across individuals is dependent on, among other things, the degree to which they were responding to similar stimuli (questions and probes). While individuals may interpret and respond to even precoded questionnaires differently, the likelihood that the responses of different individuals can be considered comparable is higher than in a more unstructured interview. When different individuals are engaged in free-ranging conversations, even when the topics discussed are similar, there is no way to assess the extent to which the individuals are responding to the same ideas or questions.

Noncomparability of responses is most important when there is a wide range of disagreement about information or interpretations. For example, in recent work, Bill has had conversations with a wide variety of people from industry, government, nongovernmental organizations, communities, and universities about the social and environmental effects of shrimp farming (aquaculture). Responses from these different stakeholders reflect considerable disagreement about the effects, and sorting out claims and counterclaims has been important for policy purposes (see DeWalt et al. 2000). At the same time, if several informants in different contexts voice similar ideas or concerns, it is in fact powerful evidence that the issues are salient and that understandings are widely shared. In research in Mexico in the early 1970s, for example, Kathleen found that the phrase "The illnesses no longer understand the herbs" ("*Las enfermedades ya no entienden las hierbas*") kept coming up in conversations about health with different people and in different contexts over the course of several months (DeWalt 1976). It appeared that this was a widespread interpretation of medical change in the community and the consequences (the need to seek biomedical treatment rather than use traditional medical remedies) were becoming consciously appreciated by people.

On the other hand, when conversations or unstructured interviews do not turn up information about a particular topic, the lack of information is not interpretable. That is, if a description or comment by one informant is not voiced by another, it does not mean that that issue is not salient to the second person. It only means that it did not come up in conversation with that person. If asked directly, the second informant may or may not have articulated something similar. The absence of information in the conversation and in the record is not interpretable in any way.

More structured approaches to interviewing are more likely to yield data that are comparable. Clearly there is a trade off. Most research projects will include several different types of interviews. A common strategy is to begin with less directive approaches. Later, the researcher can follow up

themes of particular interest in a more structured way, with a sample of informants.

While any one researcher may employ all of the types of interviewing mentioned in the course of fieldwork, when in participant observation mode the investigator will be engaging in conversation and informal interviewing. Even conversation, however, will probably not be as completely "non-directive" (Whyte and Whyte 1984) as Bernard's definition suggests. Because researchers always have their research questions in the back of their minds, they are likely to consciously or unconsciously direct interactions toward their interests. Even showing a bit more interest in some topics rather than others will direct conversations toward those topics. The interests of the researcher will always have an impact. The trick is to use this impact to encourage informants to discuss more fully the topics that relate to the research question, but to direct the content of the conversation as little as possible beyond that.

One of Bill's first experiences in doing research exemplifies some of the important points about interviewing. During one summer, he was hired as a research assistant by the Labor Education Center at the University of Connecticut to examine discrimination in the construction industry. He was sent out with a semistructured interview and showed up at a job site, pen at the ready, to begin interviews. It did not take long before he realized that the direct questions he was asking about numbers of, and attitudes about, minorities on the job site and in the union were being met with silence and/or hostility. After discussing the problems and potential solutions with the researchers directing the project, Bill changed strategies to use informal interviewing. Keeping the main objectives of the research in mind, he abandoned the use of an interview schedule and through informal conversations was able to gather much more information about perceptions and attitudes. He did explain the general purposes of the work to the people he interviewed and was able to make jot notes to help him recall information. After the interview, he entered as much of the information as he could on the original interview guide.

It is important, thus, to understand that different kinds of interviews are more appropriate depending on the populations being studied as well as the research questions of interest. Self-administered questionnaires are obviously useless in nonliterate populations but we have both seen examples of researchers committing errors that are nearly as silly. Most typically, this involves researchers who put together complicated and impressive (at least on paper) structured or semistructured survey interviews that, when they are actually used, generate results that are nearly meaningless. We agree with Chambers (1983, 51-52) who wrote, about surveys in rural development, that "they are more limited, less reliable, and less able to generate insight than is commonly believed. By capturing

and enslaving so many researchers, especially social scientists, they also raise questions of cost-effectiveness and opportunity cost, of alternative uses of those same resources of staff and funds." In many cases, more participant observation and informal interviewing can generate more meaningful and interpretable results, more insight for the researcher, and be much less intrusive for the population being studied.

Interview Techniques

Even at the least intrusive, researchers should be aware of the techniques of interviewing and be able to use those that are the least directive. The following discussion of techniques can be used in conversation and informal interviewing and also in more structured interviewing, such as unstructured, semistructured, and formal interviews. However, we have included for discussion only those that are least intrusive here. For discussions of how to effectively conduct more structured interviews, the reader is directed to Babbie (1973) and Dillman (1978).

Active Listening

The most fundamental technique for being a good interviewer is active listening. Active listening is, first and foremost, listening. As Doc said to William Foote Whyte early in research in Cornerville:

"Go easy on that 'who', 'what', 'why', 'when', 'where' stuff, Bill. You ask those questions, and people will clam up on you. If people accept you, you can just hang around, and you'll learn the answer in the long run without ever having to ask the questions." (Whyte and Whyte 1984, 69)

Doc's advice underscores the most important aspect of conversation and informal interviewing in participant observation: The researcher is *quiet*, primarily a listener, and, more importantly, is gaining information in the terms used by participants and in a progression of thought that is natural to them. However, active listening is also "active." By this we mean that the researcher is more actively aware of the conversation than in conversations in a nonresearch setting. The researcher is making mental notes about what is said, who said it, and what it might mean in the context of the project. In other words, the participant observer is "on," with heightened awareness of the context and increased attentiveness to detail. He/she may be making mental notes of specific words and information, or may be taking jot notes during the conversation. The researcher is not only attending to verbal communication, but is noting nonverbal cues as well. The researcher is also trying to communicate that he/she is

interested in what the informant is saying and respects the ideas and opinions of the informant (whether or not the researcher agrees with them).

Being an active listener also means using the least directive types of probes and prompts in order to facilitate the conversation. Probing is used when the researcher feels that something is left out, that the informant might say something more about an issue if encouraged in some way (Yow 1994). There are several ways of using probes to facilitate a conversation or informal interview that stop well short of asking even the simplest of questions (Wiese 1974; Enelow and Swisher 1979; Mishler 1986; Yow 1994). Some of the least directive probes are meant merely to communicate that the researcher is listening and interested.

Sensitive Silence

We think of sensitive silence as silence with an edge. The researcher is engaged in a conversation in which she/he is not saying anything but shows attentiveness to the interaction through body language and eye contact (Yow 1994). The researcher/interviewer may be leaning in toward the participants. She/he assumes a position in the most intimate level of closeness that is appropriate to the expectations of personal space in the culture, the particular setting of the interaction, the degree to which the researcher knows the participants, and the gender of the participants.

Appropriate personal space differs in different cultural settings (Hall 1959, 1974). One of the aspects of learning the rules that a participant observer has to deal with early in research in a new setting is how to judge personal space. It generally takes a few weeks of pulling away from people who the researcher feels are "too close" or backing people into corners as they try to get farther away from the researcher to develop a tacit feel for personal space. Also, appropriate space is likely to be different for men and women, in mixed or same-sex groupings, and for people who know each other as compared with relative strangers. Again, the researcher attempts to adopt the most intimate space appropriate for gender and degree of acquaintance.

The degree to which eye contact is facilitating or offensive is also influenced by cultural differences. For most North Americans and Europeans, attentive eye contact is facilitating. It denotes interest in what is being said and suggests that the researcher would like to hear more. In our experience, this is also true in the Latin American contexts in which we have worked. However, it is also true that in mixed gender settings, in North America strong eye contact can sometimes be mistakenly interpreted as an invitation to more intimacy. Again, it is important to figure out relatively early in fieldwork what degree of eye contact is appropriate and facilitative.

Researchers should not underestimate the difficulty of remaining silent either in conversations or in informal interviews. It is probably the most difficult technique to use. For North Americans, especially, silence that continues several seconds is threatening and very difficult to maintain. Our colleagues who have worked with Native American communities in the United States assure us that the tolerance for silence is much greater in those cultural settings. Our experience in Latin American settings suggests that remaining quiet even a second or two encourages our informants to continue with their discussion, without active intervention by the researcher. In years of teaching interviewing techniques to first-year medical students, Kathleen found that remaining silent is the most difficult thing they have to learn. Not many are successful.

Researchers speak when they should be quiet for a number of other reasons as well. The most common is that a comment by an informant reminds the researcher of another issue, also interesting, and the researcher breaks in with a question or comment about the second issue before the informant has finished his/her comment on the first issue. Sometimes the new idea seems so compelling that, without thinking, the researcher jumps to the new idea. The new idea may seem to be closer to the core interests of the project. The researcher may feel that he/she will forget to follow up on the second idea later. (As we age, we realize that this particular problem increases in salience for us.) In all of the cases, the researcher can and should focus on not interrupting and waiting for the informant to come to the natural end of the first idea before moving on. Make a jot note of the idea so that you do not forget it and come back to it later. A single word in the margin is often sufficient to act as an aid to memory.

In the following excerpt from a taped conversation with Mrs. L, she and the researcher are talking about what Mrs. L plants in her garden. The reader can see that this section of conversation has a very choppy, jumpy feel to it. The reason is that the researcher keeps interrupting Mrs. L and does not allow her to finish her sentences. We join this conversation speaking of tomatoes.¹

Mrs. L: . . . yes, pulp in them, and they're just great, I think. Then I too, raise the big yellow ones, and I also raise the big purple ones. I like some of that old kind . . .

Q: You save that [seeds]?

Mrs. L: Oh, yes . . .

Q: What else do you raise besides the lettuce, radish, and tomatoes?

Mrs. L: Well, I . . .

Q: What else did you put out?

Mrs. L: I hadn't put out anything, but I will put out peas. . . . I have onions out now. But I will put out the sweet onions later . . . maybe 200 of them.

Q: You don't use the sets?

Mrs. L: Yes, I do . . .

Q: You use onion sets?

Mrs. L: I put out . . . oh . . . !

Q: Is that for your own use?

Mrs. L: Oh, I like to divide with my neighbors . . .

Q: And your son?

Mrs. L: Yes, he has a garden, too. He lives right over there. They have a garden. . . .

Some researchers, especially inexperienced interviewers, are nervous enough in a new setting to—frankly speaking—blather. Blathering often takes the form of sharing far too much (unasked for) personal information, often in response to a comment by the informant. (Please note that in conversations in nonresearch contexts, we often offer such information as part of the conversation. However, let us say again, even in a conversation-like situation in a research setting the researcher is not engaging in a common conversation.) New researchers often feel that offering unrequested personal information and opinions is part of keeping up their end of the conversation. However, it is very poor interviewing style.²

After years of training and supervising social science graduate students, and medical students learning communication and interviewing skills, critiquing our own and colleagues' audiotaped interviews and field notes, we have come to the conclusion that the most common mistake made by interviewers using any type of interview strategy is not keeping quiet and letting the informant speak. Even after years of experience, we are humbled by listening to our own taped interviews in which we cut off informants, or say something that changes the subject before the informant is ready to end. We are far better than we were, but our assessment is that every researcher can improve on their use of silence as a research tool.

The Uh-huh Prompt

The uh-huh prompt is no more sophisticated than using nonintrusive verbal cues to let the informants and participants know that the researcher is listening. Many of us do say something that sounds like "uh-huh" or "hmm-hmmm" or a grunt (Bernard 1995). Or, we use a real word such as "yes," "OK," or "really" (when speaking in English, of course). The intent of the "uh-huh" prompt is to add a verbal component to active lis-

tering that says: "I'm listening," "I'm following you," "I'm with you," "Please go on." Many of us do this unconsciously when we are concentrating on a conversation. (It would probably be impossible for Kathleen *not* to give verbal prompts in any language in which she is working.) If an interview or conversation is recorded, transcribing the uh-huh prompt can slow down the transcriptionist (Yow 1994). However, a transcription that detailed is not necessarily the goal in informal interviewing. The uh-huhs can be passed over, not transcribed, if they pose a constraint.

The following passage is from a semistructured interview with a woman in rural Kentucky talking about her childhood and her relationship with her younger sister. The "Really?" comment by the interviewer is an example of a word being used as a neutral verbal prompt.

Mrs. W: Yes, but I was older than her. Well, I'm seventeen months older than her, but we started school together. When we got up to third grade, they wanted to pass me on to the fifth, and I can remember crying. I didn't want to . . . and my mom would tell me that I was older and I should . . . if I'd started I'd be in the fourth (grade). . . . I consented. Well, I didn't have much choice, I guess. So I went into the fifth grade, and left my sister in the third . . . and I cried! And we always took our lunch together. Mom fixed our lunch, in an 8-lb. Lard bucket. That's what we took our lunch in, and although I was the oldest (I love to tell this on my sister!) . . . I was the oldest, but she was always bigger than me, after we got any size, and she always made me mad! So when it came lunchtime, she got the lunch bucket (I had to carry it to school!) and I had to carry it home in the afternoon. But when it came lunchtime, she got the lunch bucket and she got to eat what she liked best, and I ate what was left!

Q: Really?

Mrs. W: Well, this went on the first year. The second year we had a different teacher, and the teacher was kin (he was a cousin of my mother). So, he realized . . . it didn't take him long to realize what my sister was doing to me. . . . We started off the second year, and of course, we always had watermelons and cantaloupes and everything we raised in the garden . . . so my mother came by school and brought us a piece of watermelon for our lunch. And you know how that would look! Well, you don't . . . but I do! Oh, it would look so good, besides a biscuit and whatever we had, jam or jelly, that's what we would take, or a biscuit and sausage. Sometimes my mother would fry Irish potatoes for breakfast and we would take Irish potatoes on our biscuit, which was real good.

In a later segment of the interview with Mrs. L:

Q: Now that you have sold the cattle, you have some land which is idle, which is not being used?

Mrs. L: Yes, too much.

Q: And what are you going to do with it?

Mrs. L: Well, I really don't know . . . you don't rent to anybody. You know, there's nobody who wants to farm anymore. I don't have too much here. I have about 76 acres here, and then I have some more acreage, oh! it's just about half a mile from here. And you know, the hay wasn't even cut off of part of that last year . . .

Q: Yes?

Mrs. L: I lost my . . . something like 2000 bales of hay, it just wasn't put up. The people I had rented to, or my son rented to . . . they're good people. But it rained, and their tools were old, and they would break down and this, that and the other, and they just never did get it done. Now, they weren't liable, but they just . . . just didn't get it done.

In both of the examples above, the researcher is using a single neutral word to let the informant know that she is listening and is ready for the informant to continue.

An important caveat in using the "uh-huh" prompt is that the particular sound used may mean different things in different cultural settings. For example, it took Kathleen some time to realize that the "huh-huh" sound (the one that means "no" in English) is the correct prompt for "yes, continue" in Ecuador.

Repetition Feedback

Enelow and Swisher (1979) suggest a series of relatively nondirective ways of providing feedback to informants that facilitate further discussion and clarification but do not direct or lead the conversation. The first is repetition feedback. Repetition is just that. The researcher repeats the last word or phrase uttered by the informant. Sometimes the phrase is given a questioning inflection. The following is an excerpt from a taped conversation in which the informant is describing breakfasts when he was a child. The interviewer repeats his last word to encourage him to continue with the description.

Mr. B: Well, when we was at home, we usually had some kind of meats and my mother always did fix some potatoes.

Q: Potatoes?

Mr. B: Uh, huh. And then biscuits.

And later in the same interview:

Mr. B: Yes. . . . see, they dried them . . . called them "shucky beans."

Q: Shucky beans?

Mr. B: What they would do, is all these beans had strings on them, and that string come off of them, you know what I'm talking about, then take twine and thread and a darning needle, and go right in the middle of these beans and string them on this string, and get a stringful and hang them up. And they could dry. (laughs)

And in another interview:

Mrs. P: I put them (broccoli seeds) in my tobacco beds, and I put them out just like I would my cabbage. Of course, they're something you've got to spray everyday. (laughs)

Q: Everyday?

Mrs. P: Well, almost. You have to keep after them continuously. There's a little old white moth . . . they're coming to put an egg down and make a worm in your broccoli. And when I see one, I don't want anymore of it then. (laughs)

A danger with overuse of repetition is the researcher begins to sound like a parrot. Used appropriately, however, it can facilitate the expansion of an idea or discussion.

Summary Feedback

Summary feedback is similar to repetition, but the researcher summarizes the last set of statements articulated by the informant. Again, the goal is to let the informant know that the researcher has heard what was said, and to encourage the informant to continue and expand on the comments. Summary feedback also provides a check on the understanding developed by the researcher. It is an invitation to the informant to clarify any misconceptions held by the researcher.

In the following passage, Mrs. L says she cans a good deal of tomato juice, but cannot drink it. The researcher is puzzled so she summarizes what she heard, hoping for clarification:

Mrs. L: Velveeta . . . that's not the best, I don't think, to cook with, but . . . either that or chunk cheese, I put it in macaroni or spaghetti and stuff like that. I still think cheese is great to cook with! There's several things that I buy now that I don't use to buy. I have plenty of tomato juice for juice. Now that's something that I can't drink. It gives me this (indigestion) . . .

Q: So you have tomato juice put up that you can't drink.

Mrs. L: I can't drink it very often, although I use it for soups and all that and the other. I still love cream of tomato soup . . . I still love that. It's awfully good!

In this exchange, Mrs. L makes it clear that there are other uses of home-canned tomato juice that the interviewer did not know about.

Summary feedback can be more elaborate. The researcher may take the opportunity to summarize a good deal of information to not only prompt the informant to add to the information, but also to check a series of events. For example in talking about her life, the interviewer said the following to Mrs. L:

Q: So before your father died your family lived on their own farm. When he died you were 7 years old and your mother took you and your sister and brother to live with your grandparents. When she remarried, you stayed with your grandparents on their farm, while your younger brother and sister went with her and her new husband.

Mrs. L: Yes, I helped my grandmother on the farm until she died. I was 14 and then I took over the housework for my grandfather.

Asking Questions in Interviewing

Even in conversations, and certainly in informal interviews, the researcher will occasionally be asking questions. All of us ask questions in normal conversation. We are interested in knowing more about what our companions are talking about; we need clarification when we do not understand a term or a concept; or the conversation has reached a natural conclusion and the opportunity comes to raise another topic. In conversations and informal interviews, researchers use questions for all of these reasons. Some techniques for effective use of asking questions follow.

Tell Me More

The "tell me more" question is as simple as saying "Then what happened?" "What did you do, then?" "What else?" and "That's interesting, tell me more." It is one step beyond the "uh-huh" prompt. The goal is to prompt the informant to continue with the same issue, not to introduce a new topic. In a slightly different form it is the "What did you think about that?" question. The "tell me more" question is short, succinct, and is generally followed by the use of silence. In the following quotation Ms. W is talking about her family when she was a child. She said that they moved frequently and described a home on the river bottom. The researcher is following up.

Q: When you moved away from the river bottom, where did you go then?

Mrs. W: We went to Monticello. I'm telling you about my home town. That's where I went to school at. Monticello. And Pleasant View, up above Monticello.

For Clarification

Questions are used to clarify words, ideas, chronologies, in short, anything that the researcher does not understand. Early in fieldwork, many things may need clarification. Actually, it is probably a good idea early in fieldwork to avoid asking for too much clarification. Asking for clarification breaks the flow of conversation and can end up in changing topics. Many things that are unclear or not entirely understood early in fieldwork will probably become clear just through experience. In the following quotation the researcher asks what the informant means by "not too good."

Mrs. L: Yes, it's much better . . . much better. Or I always thought it was. I made some. I made about 12 half-gallon jars of kraut. It's not too good. I had some of it at dinner, and I didn't think it was too good.

Q: What do you mean, it's not too good?

Mrs. L: Well, it . . . I just didn't think it had the taste and the crispness that it . . . I like a good crisp kraut, and it looked like this is just not as crisp as I would like for it to be. But now, I tell you, they was a lot of hot sunshine on those cabbages, so I laid it to that. Although the ones I used seemed to be very tender, but now, that sunshine will do something to the cabbage. You know, the sunshine was unbearable, almost, for a while there, and I didn't get mine made hardly as early as I should. I don't recall what made me not get it done, but I didn't, and it's eatable . . . but . . . it could be better! (laughs)

Naïve Questions

A common problem for most people is that they become overzealous in trying to demonstrate their competence in their own cultural setting or in a different cultural setting. Rather than asking questions, these people make statements and then ask the person being interviewed for confirmation. Thus, they say, "People here make their living from farming, don't they?" or "Everyone here is Catholic, right?"

We are great advocates of asking dumb questions or naïve questions because, in our experience, some of the most interesting information that challenges our own assumptions about things has come as a result of feigning ignorance. During one of Bill's recent projects on shrimp farming in Mexico, his first evening in the state of Sinaloa he was eating dinner in a restaurant along the beach. Casually, he asked the woman seating customers (who was the manager) where they got the shrimp served in the restaurant. Although he expected a reply referring to some supplier or

place, the woman replied, "This time of the year they come from the estuaries—or at least people tell us that they come from the estuaries." Although Bill had not been in fieldwork mode until that point, he began following up with other naïve questions. In the course of a few minutes, among other things he learned that: (1) shrimp come from the high seas, estuaries, or shrimp farms; (2) all farmed shrimp is exported, not sold locally; (3) there are different closed seasons for shrimp from estuaries and from the high seas; (4) fishing for shrimp during the closed seasons occurs because there is little enforcement; (5) the marketing of shrimp is done by a very few people; and (6) several people who operated shrimp farms had been killed in the last few months, probably because of links to drug smuggling.

During the same project, Bill visited a number of different shrimp farms to talk with managers and owners. One of the topics in which he was interested was how much the farms were contributing to water pollution in the estuaries along which they were located. With many of these people, he used naïve questions like: "What happens to the water that is in the ponds?" "Do you have to change the water that is in the ponds?" or "Do you put anything in the ponds to make the shrimp grow faster?" At the time he was asking these questions, Bill knew enough about shrimp farming to make anyone's eyes glaze over within three minutes, but his purpose in asking dumb questions was to get a sense of the variability in technical operations on the farms and the degree to which those farms might be addressing pollution issues.

Our admonition to all of our students is to not be afraid to ask questions that may be seen to be naïve or dumb. In our experience, most people love to demonstrate and share their expertise. If you show yourself to be an interested "student" by asking questions, people will be patient enough to provide you with answers. Surprisingly, those answers will often expand your understanding or your knowledge far beyond what you thought you already knew.

Avoiding Confrontation

There are many times in our field research in which we have to bite our tongues to avoid getting into arguments or confrontations with people we interview. Invariably, we have found that these instances are generally with people from the elite or government sector who speak disparagingly about the characteristics of people in communities we have come to know. Bill recalls that, early in our field research in Temascalcingo, Mexico, he was ready to explode one day when a leader of a development project

was talking about how uncooperative, stupid, and ignorant the small farmers in the valley were.

As much as we might want, in situations like that, to provide our contrary opinions and perspectives, our general rule is to treat all conversations as data. That is, we should be active listeners who are recording other peoples' perceptions and attitudes, so therefore we should avoid confrontations in most circumstances. There are times and places to engage in arguments and battles, but it is not wise to do this in the midst of field research. The good interviewer will avoid questions and comments that will provoke a confrontation with an informant.

Changing Topics

In both conversation and informal interviewing, the time comes when it is clear that one topic has been exhausted and there is a chance to introduce a new topic. Again, introducing a topic is something that is used sparingly in the kinds of interviewing used in participant observation. In more structured interviewing situations, introducing a new topic is a much more common occurrence. In changing topics, we believe that the key is to introduce a new topic with an open-ended question. The "Tell me about . . ." question is an effective one. For example, the interviewer can use prompts like, "Tell me about what it was like growing up," "Tell me about the town," "Tell me what you think about X project," "Tell me what you do all day."

The rules for asking direct questions in these circumstances include:

1. Keep the questions as short as possible. Ask short questions. Avoid editorializing as an introduction to a question, unless it is necessary. It is better to ask: "What did you do today?" than to say "I know that you are a busy person and have a lot of things to do, can you tell me what you did today?"
 2. Ask open-ended rather than closed-ended questions whenever possible. A closed-ended question is one in which the informant can answer with one word or a phrase. The following are closed-ended questions that are unlikely to elicit much additional information: "Did you plant tomatoes?" "Did you go to the store today?" More information can be gained by saying: "Tell me about your garden," or "Tell me about where you get your food."
 3. Avoid "multiple-choice" questions. The multiple-choice question is rather like a closed-ended question in which the informant is given the choices. "Did you buy the red tomatoes or the yellow ones?" "Did you go to work today or stay home or go out
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shopping or work in the garden or . . ." The multiple-choice question often trails off at the end, and the informant may never be entirely sure when it has ended. Some informants may not offer up other alternatives to those presented by the interviewer.

4. Avoid "Chinese box" questions (questions within questions). An example of a Chinese box question is: "What time did you leave the house today and where did you go? Did you go to the senior center? Did you go to the grocery store?" Chinese box questions are exceptionally confusing to the informant. By the end of the question, neither the researcher nor the informant may remember what was asked.
5. Avoid leading questions at ALL COSTS! Leading questions are questions that suppose or suggest a specific answer. The most blatant types of leading questions are easy to spot. They often have a "did you/didn't you" phrase in them. "You went to the senior center today, didn't you?" "You don't plant a garden anymore, do you?" "You never smoked cigarettes, did you?" Some leading questions are subtler, however. We recently heard a tape of an interview of Woody Guthrie conducted by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax. Lomax is talking with Guthrie about his childhood and asks the question: "Where did you grow up? On a farm?" Guthrie's reply is "No, we lived in the city." Many of our informants will correct us when we try to lead them, but not all are as confident as interviewee Woody Guthrie.

To improve interviewing technique, there is no substitute for practicing research conversations or informal interviews under conditions in which the interaction can be audiotaped. While it is helpful just to review the tapes alone, it is even more effective to do so with an experienced colleague. It can be a painful experience, but one that is very rewarding.

Talking about Sensitive Subjects

In the somewhat more natural settings in which conversations and informal interviewing used as part of participant observation take place, trying to pursue a topic that is very sensitive to an informant can be problematical. What is common is that the researcher creates discomfort, either because he/she wants more detail than the informant is ready to share, or because he/she unknowingly commits a blunder with a comment or question intended only to show participation in the conversation. The quotation from Whyte's key informant cited earlier in this chapter was prompted by a question Whyte posed during a conversation with several people who were involved in organized gambling (Whyte and

Whyte 1984). He casually noted that the police were probably paid off. He reports saying this only to contribute to the conversation. The man with whom he was speaking denied that any police were involved and immediately changed the subject. Apparently talking about gambling was not a problem, but bribing police was. Whyte believes that he would have lost important contacts in the community if his sponsor, Doc, had not had such a strong position in the group and been willing to direct him in appropriate behavior. Hence Doc was willing to tell him to listen rather than talk about things he knew little about.

In more structured interviewing, in which the interviewer is trying to raise the same set of questions with a number of people, the problem of pursuing sensitive topics is a common one. For example, in a variety of research projects in Mexico, Honduras, and Ecuador, we and our students have carried out basic demographic surveys in small communities. As part of determining fertility, infant mortality, and other demographic indicators, we ask women how many children they have had, whether any of their children have died, and the age at which they died. The death of a child is obviously a painful subject to discuss and we and our students have several times stumbled into very emotional situations dealing with the health and death of children. Researchers doing social research must be prepared to deal with emotion and tears.

As important as dealing with subjects that prove to be sensitive to the informant is the problem of dealing with subjects that are sensitive to the researcher. It is not uncommon for informants and participants to talk about things that are very uncomfortable for the researcher. Bourgois (1995, 1996) writes about several instances in which he was made uncomfortable or even appalled by the conversation in which he was a part in El Barrio. In one case, the men with whom he was hanging out began to talk about the way they treated a kid with a physical disability when they were in school. Bourgois, whose son suffers from cerebral palsy, began to weep. Bourgois' reaction certainly had an impact on the flow of the conversation after that point.

In working with medical students over a number of years, Kathleen came to realize that many "bad interviews" were very frequently a result of the sensitivities of the medical students carrying out the interviews, not the willingness of the patients to share their experiences and thoughts. In one segment of the interviewing course, students, after practicing with each other and with actors playing the role of patients, were assigned an interview with a patient in the hospital. Students were to talk with patients about the chief complaints that brought them to the hospital, and conduct a social history. Segments of the audiotaped interviews were replayed and critiqued in small groups of students. Students were asked to characterize their impressions of the interview before replaying it for

their colleagues. One young woman came into class saying, "This was a terrible interview. I couldn't get her to talk about anything." Review of the tape, however, revealed that it was the student who changed the subject every time the patient tried to talk about the problem that brought her to the hospital. In this case, the woman had just had surgery for a particularly serious cancer and clearly was interested in talking about it. After Kathleen pointed out several places where the student had cut off the patient and changed the subject, the student blurted out, "Well, I don't like to talk about cancer. It scares me." (This is not an uncommon response; cancer scares a lot of people.) Kathleen suggested that the student find someone with whom she could talk about her problem of talking about cancer. "Oh, no" she said, "When I'm really a doctor I'll be able to talk about it." Unfortunately for the student, getting the degree or even the grant does not magically make it easy for researchers to talk about subjects sensitive to them. It is the researcher's responsibility to deal with his/her own sensitivities. Sometimes they crop up when we don't even expect it.

In another instance, a medical student was assigned to interview a man who had attempted suicide with a shotgun, but had survived in relatively good condition. The student came to class angry. He felt this had been a difficult interview and that he had gotten little information. In fact, this was probably not a good patient to assign, but when he was asked if he would consent to be interviewed, the man had been eager to talk to a student and to talk about his condition. In fact, his interest in talking about what brought him to this act was evident on the tape. The student, however, continually changed the topic and avoided any discussion of the suicide attempt. In the debriefing discussion, the student acknowledged that he had changed the subject. The reason, he said, was that he had no empathy or respect for the patient. The patient was clearly a failure. He could not even kill himself successfully. Ironically, the student said he would have had more sympathy and respect for the man if he had succeeded in the suicide.

As these examples show, and as we have emphasized earlier, we are continually amazed with how willing people are to share sensitive information. For example, in research on women's social power in Ecuador, Kathleen and her colleagues became interested in learning about violence against women by their male partners. This was a topic they approached gingerly because they felt that it might be difficult for the women to talk about it. In fact, it was difficult for the women, but it was also clear that it was in many ways cathartic for the women to discuss their situations. After Kathleen and her colleagues got beyond their own reticence to raise an issue they thought would be sensitive, they found that many women in rural Ecuador were very interested in talking about their experiences.

Concluding an Interview

Finally, active listening takes a good deal of concentration. It is tiring and most of us cannot sustain the heightened awareness it requires indefinitely. This is true of the people we interview as well as the person doing the interviewing. When we do use survey instruments, for example, our general rule is that anything much more than an hour is difficult for our informants to bear. With participant observation and informal interviewing, longer conversations can usually be sustained, but there does come a point at which the quality of information being obtained diminishes.

It is better to know when to "switch off" or end an informal interview rather than waste time after the researcher's (or informant's) attention begins to stray. When terminating an interview, it is important to let the person know how much we enjoyed talking with them and how much we appreciated their time. We should typically indicate that we hope to continue the conversation another time. Learning the proper etiquette for leave-taking, the appropriate phrases and behaviors, is among the first things that one should try to learn when working in any setting.³

Summary and Conclusions

The good participant observer should know and observe the skills connected with good interviewing. In this chapter, we have reviewed the various kinds of interviews, emphasizing that different kinds of interviews are appropriate for answering different kinds of questions. We have indicated that there are many circumstances and questions for which informal interviewing and participant observation are particularly appropriate.

Being a good interviewer requires practicing the skills of active listening and sensitive silence. Prompts and several kinds of feedback can be used to encourage the informant to elaborate on, and extend, the information they are conveying.

Informal interviewing also requires good techniques for asking questions. A good interviewer will ask questions in such a way as to be non-directive concerning the answers. Asking naïve questions, clarifying questions, and simple questions in a nonconfrontational way is important in eliciting information. We have to be prepared emotionally to deal with sensitive subjects, and to know when and how to conclude an interview.

Notes

1. The quotations used in this chapter are taken from taped interviews and conversations carried out as part of the project, *Nutritional Strategies of Older Adults in Rural Kentucky*.
2. In chapter 10 we discuss the ethical issues involved in personal sharing of information in the research setting. We believe that the researcher should be willing to share information honestly when it is asked for. It is part of being honest and developing trust, and is a form of reciprocity. However, the researcher does not need to insert personal information or opinions when they are not asked for. After all, the goal is to understand the participants' opinions.
3. Bill has occasional periods, especially during sabbatical years, when he does a lot of consulting. Although most of this is done in Latin America, the appropriate form of saying goodbye is different in different countries or different regions of countries. Saying goodbye to female friends in most Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America requires one kiss on the right cheek, in Brazil it requires a kiss on each side. In rural regions, handshakes among men are usually elaborated in different ways. Bill is typically flummoxed the first day or two until he gets his bearings about the local custom.