

sports heroes and newsworthy citizens, and you know famous television and radio interviewers such as Oprah, Barbara Walters, and Charlie Rose. Your fieldworking interviews might employ the same skills: establishing rapport, letting your informant digress from your questions, as well as carefully listening and navigating the conversation process.

This chapter will help you strengthen the everyday skills of listening, questioning, and researching people who interest you. You'll experience interactive ways to conduct interviews and **oral histories**. You'll look for and discover meaning in your informants' everyday cultural artifacts. You'll gather, analyze, write, and reflect on **family stories**. And you'll read some examples of how other fieldworkers have researched and written about people's lives.

The Interview: Learning How to Ask

Fieldworkers listen to and record stories from the point of view of the informant—not their own. Letting people speak for themselves by telling about their lives seems an easy enough principle to follow. But in fact, there are some important strategies for both asking questions and listening to responses. Those strategies are part of interviewing—learning to ask and learning to listen.

Interviewing involves an ironic contradiction: you must be both structured and flexible at the same time. While it's critical to prepare for an interview with a list of planned questions to guide your talk, it is equally important to follow your informant's lead. Sometimes the best interviews come from a comment, a story, an artifact, or a phrase you couldn't have anticipated. The energy that drives a good interview—for both you and your informant—comes from expecting the unexpected.

Expecting the Unexpected It's happened to both of us as interviewers. As part of a two-year project, Elizabeth conducted in-depth interviews with Anna, a college student who was a dancer. Anna identified with the modern dancers at the university and also was interested in animal rights, organic foods, and ecological causes. She wore a necklace that Elizabeth thought served as a spiritual talisman or represented a political affiliation. When she asked Anna about it, she learned that the necklace actually held the key to Anna's apartment—a much less dramatic answer than Elizabeth anticipated. Anna claimed that she didn't trust herself to keep her key anywhere but around her neck, and that information provided a clue to her temperament that Elizabeth wouldn't have known if she hadn't asked and had persisted in her own speculations.

In a shorter project, Bonnie interviewed Ken, a school superintendent, over a period of eight months. As Ken discussed his beliefs about education, Bonnie connected his ideas with the writings of progressivist philosopher John Dewey. At the time, she was reading educational philosophy herself and was greatly influenced by Dewey's ideas. To her, Ken seemed to be a contemporary incarnation of Dewey. Eventually, toward the end of their interviews, Bonnie asked

Ken which of Dewey's works had been the most important to him. "Dewey?" he asked. "John Dewey? Never exactly got around to reading him."

No matter how hard we try to lay aside our assumptions when we interview others, we always carry them with us. Rather than ignore our hunches, we need to form questions around them, follow them through, and see where they will lead us. Asking Anna about her necklace, a personal artifact, led Elizabeth to new understandings about Anna's self-concept and habits that later became important in her analysis of Anna's literacy. Bonnie's admiration for Dewey had little to do directly with Ken's educational philosophy, but her follow-up questions centered on the scholars who did shape Ken's theories. It is our job to reveal our informant's perspectives and experiences rather than our own. And so our questions must allow us to learn something new, something that our informant knows and we don't. We must learn how to ask.

Asking

Asking involves collaborative listening. When we interview, we are not extracting information the way a dentist pulls a tooth, but we make meaning together like two dancers, one leading and one following. Interview questions range between closed and open.

Closed Questions *Closed questions* are like those we answer on application forms or in magazines: How many years of schooling have you had? Do you rent your apartment? Do you own a car? Do you have any distinguishing birthmarks? Do you use bar or liquid soap? Do you drink sweetened or unsweetened tea, caffeinated or decaffeinated coffee? Some closed questions are essential for gathering background data: Where did you grow up? How many siblings did you have? What was your favorite subject in school? But these questions often yield single phrases as answers and can shut down further talk. Closed questions can start an awkward volley of single questions and abbreviated answers.

To avoid asking too many closed questions, you'll need to prepare ahead of time by doing informal research about your informants and the topics they represent. For example, if you are interviewing a woman in the air force, you may want to read something about the history of women in aviation. You might also consult an expert in the field or telephone government offices to request informational materials so that you avoid asking questions that you could answer for yourself, like "How many years have women been allowed to fly planes in the U.S. Air Force?" When you are able to do background research, your knowledge of the topic and the informant's background will demonstrate your level of interest, put the informant at ease, and create a more comfortable interview situation.

Open Questions *Open questions*, by contrast, help elicit your informant's perspective and allow for a more conversational exchange. Because there is no single answer to open-ended questions, you will need to listen, respond, and follow the informant's lead. Because there is no single answer, you can allow

yourself to engage in a lively, authentic response. In other words, simply being interested will make you a good field interviewer. Here are some very general open questions—sometimes called *experiential* and *descriptive*—that encourage the informant to share experiences or to describe them from his or her own point of view.

Open Questions for Your Informant

- Tell me more about the time when...
- Describe the people who were most important to...
- Describe the first time you...
- Tell me about the person who taught you about...
- What stands out for you when you remember...
- Tell me the story behind that interesting item you have.
- Describe a typical day in your life.
- How would you describe yourself to yourself?
- How would you describe yourself to others?

When thinking of questions to ask an informant, make your informant your teacher. You want to learn about his or her expertise, knowledge, beliefs, and worldview.

BOX 20

Using a Cultural Artifact in an Interview

PURPOSE

This exercise mirrors the process of conducting interviews over time with an informant. It emphasizes working with the informant's perspective, making extensive and accurate observations, speculating and theorizing, confirming and disconfirming ideas, writing up notes, listening well, sharing ideas collaboratively, and reflecting on your data.

To introduce interviewing in our courses, we use an artifact exchange. This exercise allows people to investigate the meaning of an object from another person's point of view.

and “diastolic,” as well as what appears to be a sensor light on one side and a panel that proclaims “pls” and “ekg.” Aha. Medical terms about blood pressure.

I am intrigued that it’s a Japanese watch with English language labels, owned by a Chinese woman who got it as a gift from an aunt who doesn’t speak English. It is a symbol of our global economy, our multinational world. I assumed wrongly that Lini must have bought it in the United States. “Oh, a Chinese person would buy this watch this way,” Lini told me. “Casio is a famous brand, and it’s more convenient to use these terms.” Her friends in China were fascinated by the watch’s special features, although Lini admits it isn’t that convenient for its medical value. She quickly discovered that the blood pressure features will only work with fresh batteries. But her friends enjoyed taking their heartbeats and blood pressure with it. She hasn’t yet shared it with her U.S. friends. I want to buy her some fresh batteries and check to see if it works for me!

In interviews, researchers sometimes use cultural artifacts to enter into the informant’s perspective. We might start by talking about something in our informant’s environment: a framed snapshot, a CD or DVD collection, an interesting or unusual object in the room—anything that will encourage comfortable conversation. When we invite informants to tell stories about their artifacts, we learn about the artifacts themselves (Lini Ge’s watch) and, indirectly, about other aspects of their world that they might not think to talk about. Artifacts, like stories, can mediate between individuals and their cultures.

Learning How to Listen

Although most people think that the key to a good interview is asking a set of good questions, we and our students have found that the real key to interviewing is being a good listener. Think about your favorite television or radio talk show personalities. What do they do to make their informants comfortable and keep conversation flowing? Think about someone you know whom you’ve always considered a good listener. Why does that person make you feel that way?

Good listeners guide the direction of thoughts; they don’t interrupt or move conversation back to themselves. Good listeners use their body language to let informants understand that their informants’ words are important to them, not allowing their eyes to wander, not fiddling, not checking their watches or their phones. They encourage response with verbal acknowledgments and follow-up questions, with embellishments and examples.

To be a good listener as a field interviewer, you must also have structured plans with focused questions. And you must be willing to change them as the

conversation moves in different directions. With open questions, background research, and genuine interest in your informant, you'll find yourself holding a collaborative conversation from which you'll both learn. It is the process, not the preplanned information, that makes an interview successful.

Etiquette for Conducting an Interview

In addition to preparing yourself with guiding questions and good listening habits, here are some basic rules of etiquette for conducting a successful interview. Always keep in mind that you are using someone's time.

- Arrange for the interview at your informant's convenience. Your interview should fit into that person's schedule, not vice versa. Put his or her needs first.
- Explain your project in plain language that your informant will understand. Don't bore or scare them with insider expressions such as "ethnographic" or "fieldsite research."
- Agree on a quiet place to talk. Avoid places like cafés that have a lot of ambient noise.
- Arrive on time and be prepared. Make sure your equipment works (pens, batteries, recording devices). Have your questions and notepad ready.
- Dress appropriately for the setting and for your informant. You'd wear something different to interview a lifeguard on the beach than your grandmother in her living room.
- Don't try to squeeze too much into a short time. Be sensitive to social cues and, if necessary, arrange for an additional interview.
- Thank your informant and follow up with a thank-you note, e-mail, or, if appropriate, a token of gratitude.

A Successful Interview

Paul Russ conducted interviews with five AIDS survivors for an ethnographic film, *Healing without a Cure: Stories of People Living with AIDS*, sponsored by a local health agency. He developed a list of open and closed questions to prepare for and guide his interviewing process. He knew that closed questions would provide him with similar baseline data for all of his informants. For this reason, he formulated some questions that had one specific answer:

Paul's Closed Questions

- "How many months have you lived with your diagnosis?"
- "When did you first request a 'buddy' from the health service?"
- "Does your family know about your diagnosis?"

But the overall goal of his project was to capture how individuals coped with their diagnoses daily, drawing on their own unique resources. He wanted to avoid creating a stereotypical profile of a “day in the life of a person living with AIDS” since he knew that no one AIDS patient’s way of coping could represent all other patients’ coping styles. Paul constructed open questions to allow his informants to speak from their lived experiences.

Paul’s Open Questions

- “What did you already know about AIDS when you were diagnosed?”
- “How did others respond to you and your diagnosis?”
- “What has helped you most on a day-to-day basis to live with the virus?”
- “Have people treated you differently since you were diagnosed?”

In the following excerpt from his hundreds of pages of transcripts, Paul talks with Jessie, a man who had been living with his diagnosis for eight years. For Paul, this interview was a struggle because Jessie hadn’t talked much with others about AIDS. And because Paul chose to study people whose lives were very fragile, he paid particular attention to the interactive process between himself and his informants. In the following transcript, Paul uses Jessie’s dog, Princess, just as another interviewer might have used an artifact to get further information:

- P: What was your reaction when you were first diagnosed?
(This is one of the questions Paul posed to each of his five informants. Because he was making a training film for public health volunteers, he wanted to record people’s initial reactions on discovering that they had a publicly controversial illness.)
- J: My first reaction? How am I going to tell my family. And I put it in my mind that I would not tell anyone until it became noticeable. And I wondered who would take care of me. . . . I knew sometimes AIDS victims go blind. I panicked a little bit, and I started thinking of all the things I have to do to make my life livable. . . . I started thinking about the things I could do to make it go easier. And I started thinking of things I would miss.
- P: Like Princess, your dog?
(Paul knew from previous talks that Jessie’s dog was an important part of his daily life.)
- J: I’ve had Princess for three years. I had another red dachshund, but she got away. I got Princess as a Christmas gift. . . . She comforts me. She knows when I’m not feeling right. She comes and rubs me. She goes places with me. If I’m in the garden, she’s right there. She can’t let me out of her sight. Sometimes

I talk to her, late at night, we just lay there. She seems like she understands. . . . I don't think she can live without me. If something happens to me, she'll be so confused. I think she'll be so lonely, she'll go off somewhere and just die. . . . I want to give her to somebody. Maybe an older person, someone I believe will take care of her.

(By talking about his dog, Jessie opened himself up to Paul. By following up on Jessie's comment about "things he'd miss," Paul deepened their interaction and intensified their talk. It was not the dog herself that was important in this exchange but what Princess represented from Jessie's perspective. Paul did not intend to make Jessie talk about his fear of dying, but it happened naturally as he talked about Princess. At this point, Paul found a way to ask another one of the prepared questions that he used with each of his informants. And Jessie's answer brought them back to Princess.)

P: What's your typical day like?

J: My typical day is feeding Princess, letting her out, doing my housework. I like to do my work before noon because I'm addicted to soap operas. . . . I like to work in the yard. I've got a garden. I have some herbs. And I like every now and then to pray. I go to the library. I do a great deal of reading.

(Paul continued to interview Jessie about his spirituality and his reading habits. He brought this interview around to another pre-planned question that he asked of all his AIDS informants.)

P: What advice do you have for the newly diagnosed?

J: Don't panic. You do have a tendency to blow it out of proportion. And find a friend, a real friend, to help you filter out the negative. Ask your doctor questions. Let it out and forgive. Forgive yourself, you're only human. And forgive the person you think gave it to you. Then you will learn that the key to spirituality is to abandon yourself. . . . I don't want a sad funeral. I want music, more music than anything else. I don't want my family to go under because of this disease.

Paul's interviews eventually became a training film for volunteers at the Triad Health Project and area schools that wanted to participate in AIDS support and education. In the film, Paul has the advantage of presenting his data, not just through verbal display but visually as well. As Paul conducts his interviews, we hear his voice and see his informants—their surroundings and artifacts, their gestures and body language, and the tones of voices as they respond to Paul.

It was essential to establish common ground with him because I felt I had nothing in common with Jessie. Perhaps this was because he did not come from where I came from and, perhaps, because he did not look like me. And while I've never considered myself prejudiced, I realize that we all have prejudices deeply buried inside no matter how intelligent or informed we are. In order to know him with some degree of intimacy, I had to be vulnerable and share myself. I had to address the baggage of race, class, education. I did this with all the informants in my project, and it scared me because being friends with someone who is facing mortality requires an emotional investment. I knew I had to establish a friendship.

While I was making a personal connection with Jessie, I also had professional distance. With everything that came out of Jessie's mouth, I was thinking about how it could be used in the final project. For me, interviewing is very active. It's not passive at all. You have to listen for meaning and listen for what's not being said. I had trouble getting Jessie to speak from the heart. His responses to early questions were pressed. I knew that if I were writing his story for a reader, I could project a much clearer sense of his identity than he gave me on camera. I knew that. But I wasn't writing his story. My mission was to record him telling his story in his own words. So I looked for opportunities to help him reveal himself to me. Princess was one of these opportunities.

Recording and Transcribing

Interviews provide the bones of any fieldwork project. You need your informants' actual words to support your findings. Without informants' voices, you have no perspective to share except your own. When you record and transcribe your interviews, you bring to life the language of the people whose culture you study.

The process of recording and transcribing interviews has been advanced by computers, software, and audio recorders that are small, relatively inexpensive, and easily available. It's no coincidence that interviewing and collecting oral histories have become more popular in recent years with these accessible technologies. With a counting feature to keep track of slices of conversation and a pause button to slow down the transcription process, even the most basic recorder becomes a valuable tool for the interviewer.

Your choice of recording device will partially depend on whether you need a recorder that is lightweight and handheld, high resolution, and low noise, or one that records to a memory card. You may find that an inexpensive recorder will suit your purposes just fine if you want to record one-on-one in a quiet space and transcribe it yourself before integrating the interview into your own text. However, if you plan to record in a noisy setting and make both the audio and written transcription available, you will need a higher-quality recording device.

How you are going to share your work is another consideration. Will you transcribe it into print only, or will you also distribute it as an audio file, podcast, or part of a multimedia presentation? How you will use your interview material will affect what kind of equipment you purchase or rent.

Advances in recording devices and software have cut down the tedium of sorting, classifying, and organizing huge amounts of data. But transcribing is tedious business nonetheless. Three or more hours might be required to transcribe one hour of recording. And editing your audio files (if you choose to do that) will require even more time. However, you learn an enormous amount about your informants and yourself as you listen, replay, and select the sections for your study.

You don't want to record everything you hear, nor do you want to transcribe it all. That's why it's important to prepare ahead—with research, guiding questions, and adequate equipment as well as knowledge of how to use it. The following guidelines will help make your recording and transcribing go smoothly.

- **Obtain your equipment** Before borrowing or purchasing quality equipment, research what's available. A digital counter that helps keep track of time, multidirectional microphones that minimize ambient noise, and functions that record separate tracks are some key features that will facilitate your research. Investigate what's available and appropriate to your research.
- **Prepare your equipment** Dead batteries and full memory cards can ruin your data collection. Always carry extras. Test your recorder before using it by stating your name, the date, the place of the interview, and the full name of your informant, and then playing this information back to yourself. If you use a microphone, check out its range before you begin. Most fieldworkers have stories of losing interviews because of equipment malfunction. Be prepared.
- **Plan to take notes** Consider how you will take fieldnotes during the interview so that you'll capture all the features of the experience and have a backup in case your recording equipment fails. You want to note the environment where the interview takes place, the facial and body language of your informant's responses, and any hesitations or interruptions that take place. Your fieldnotes will help supplement the actual recording. Also consider taking photos that you can use later to jog your memory.
- **Organize your interview time** Be considerate in setting up a time and place for the interview. Ask your informant what's convenient for him or her. Arrive a few minutes early and test your equipment as well as the space so that you don't have any extraneous noise or distractions. Remember to have a timepiece—be it a watch or a phone—so that you can keep track of interview time.