To Judith A. Hamera
and
Reighne Madison Dyson

D. SOYINI MADISON
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Critical Ethnography

Method, Ethics, and Performance

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3. Choose a current situation in world events in which two competing sides have been locked in enduring opposition and conflict. Speak from the position of each side with sincere, calm, and thoughtful persuasion and belief. Then, speak as the critical ethnographer in an effort to interpret the situation in order to make change.

Suggested Readings

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Methods

"Do I Really Need a Method?" A Method . . . or Deep Hanging-Out

Human reality as such is an interpreted reality, a social construction given shape and meaning by the various cultural discourses/texts that circulate within it. Those texts that carry the weight of cultural authority as "reliable knowledge" or "objective information" (e.g., expert opinions or news reports) exerts powerful influences on how common perceptions are formed and common sense is made.

—Mary S. Strine, "Critical Theory and 'Organic' Intellectuals: Reframing the Work of Cultural Critique" (1991)

One day a student in my Performance Ethnography course raised her hand and said, "My advisor told me that *methods* are not necessary and that all you really need in the field is *deep hanging-out.*" I had been teaching this course for more than 10 years, and I had recently come back from my fieldwork in West Africa. I have been asked all sorts of questions over the years related to the theory/method divide. However, I noticed that this particular student was more emphatic in her dismissal of methods. Although the course is offered in the Department of Communication Studies, students enroll from across the campus—students in sociology, education, history, folklore, and anthropology. The young woman came from another department outside the field of communication studies; she later expressed that it is only anthropologists who do "real" fieldwork. She was told to believe that self-reflection and intuition, good theory and politics, and in-depth knowledge of context and culture were all that was needed for "real" fieldwork. Another student in the course from sociology was completely irritated by her dismissal of methodology and adamantly expressed her discontent by stating, "If you don't have a methodology, you don't have anything! What do you think you are doing in the field?"

Over the years, it has become clear to me that certain disciplines have their own philosophy about the nature and definition of methods and their value. These tensions surrounding the disciplinary boundaries within and across the humanities and social sciences in defining the term *method* and its use have often resulted in a peculiar turf war: one side regarding fieldwork as more a matter of theory, subjectivities, and culture, with another side regarding it as more a matter of precision, validation, and evidence.

As stated in Chapter 1, method and theory are reciprocally linked yet necessarily distinguishable. At key moments in the ethnographic or qualitative process they are separable, and at other moments seamless. In my own work, there are moments when theory and method are at a discreet distance: for example, when it is time to design interview questions and log data. But it is theory that still informs the kinds of questions I will ask and the categories of data that take priority. Although I always have an overarching theory in my work that guides the purpose and direction of the study, when it is time to design questions, log data, and code information, I also rely more on concrete procedural models. These models are flexible and context specific, but they follow a basic formula and rather systematic technique. For example, when coding the mass of data on human rights from activists, stakeholders, field notes, and archival research, I employ a technique to order and categorize the morass of data from the general to the specific using a systematic method that is divided by domains, clusters, and themes.

Sometimes, theory will get in the way by actually obstructing method, but there are still other moments when the method is the theory. For example, in the interpretation and analysis of certain data, theory and method become one and the same. In my work with the personal narratives of indigenous human rights activists, a particular interview I examined required a method of analysis that articulated the connection between poverty and human rights abuses. My method of analysis was based on concepts from phenomenology, as well as from postcolonial and Marxist theory. Hence, my theory *was* my method, and my method was my theory. In terms of the theory-versus-method debate, the dismissal or privileging of one over the other raises important questions and considerations and is sometimes counterproductive. It is as

counterproductive as the disciplinary turf battles that erupt over which disciplinary tradition is more "authentic" or "rigorous" in conducting fieldwork or which field is more "deeply" ethnographic.

This chapter serves as a practical reference guide. It is geared toward those undergraduate and graduate students who want to know more about *practical methods,* understanding that methods are a *set of procedures or a process for achieving an end, a goal, or a purpose.* In this chapter, I hope to address the question, What is an ethnographic method?

Corrine Glesne (1999) claims that methodological procedures for all qualitative researchers are basically the same: (a) state a purpose, (b) pose a problem or state a question, (c) define a research population, (d) develop a time frame, (e) collect and analyze data, and (f) present outcome (p. 4). James Spradley (1979) lists a methodological sequence that is similar to Glesne's: (a) select a problem, (b) formulate a hypothesis, (c) collect data, (d) analyze data, and (e) write up the results (p. 15).

This chapter will expand upon the methodological sequences outlined by Glesne and Spradley by elaborating upon the particular challenges for critical ethnography.

"Who Am I?": Starting Where You Are

Start where you are. The experiences in your life, both past and present, and who you are as a unique individual will lead you to certain questions about the world and certain problems about why things are the way they are. It is important to honor your own personal history and the knowledge you have accumulated up to this point, as well as the intuition or instincts that draw you toward a particular direction, question, problem, or topic—understanding that you may not always know exactly why or how you are being drawn in that direction. Ask yourself questions that only you can answer: "What truly interests me?" "What do I really want to know more about?" "What is most disturbing to me about society?" You might probe even more deeply and ask yourself, as in the words of the writer Alice Walker (2003), "What is the work my soul must have?" (p. 238), and go from there.

"Who Else Has Written About My Topic?": Being a Part of an Interpretive Community

When you have a general topic in mind, you are then ready to contemplate questions or problems that might relate to your topic. At this stage, in order to be most effective, it is important to read and examine other studies or models related to the topic. Be very careful that other studies do not become an uncritical or replicated model: be careful that you do not simply summarize or repeat what has already been researched and that you do not entirely reject the value of what has already been researched—avoid a blatant negation without careful consideration. It is important to be both critical of other studies and to be inspired by them. Find the balance between comparison and contrast. Extend and augment the studies you admire, don't simply repeat them. Consider what is useful from the studies you don't admire, even if their usefulness is by contrast. You may be surprised by what you will learn from your unfavorable models, as well as how such models will help you in sharpening your critical skills and refining your topical question or problem.

Other models, favorable and unfavorable, provide ideas about content, form, and method, and, most importantly, you will enrich your knowledge base. By considering other examples, you expand questions and contexts relative to your project and learn by comparing what you wish to adapt from studies you admire and what you wish to contrast and differentiate from those you do not. Moreover, you become part of an interpretive community writing on a subject, a community of other researchers with which you will be in dialogue. You will refer to their work, to enlighten and to critique, and your ideas and arguments will sometimes be in accord and at other times in discord with theirs. Keep in mind that it is also your responsibility as a critical researcher and as a member of a particular interpretive community to know what others are imparting about a subject and community that you have made a commitment to interact with and to learn with and from.

The Power of Purpose: Bracketing Your Subject

After you have identified a subject that you are drawn to and that is of unique interest to you, and after you have examined illustrations that will further guide you toward a more specific question or problem, you are now ready to begin to bracket your subject and contemplate your purpose. At this stage, you want to capture more fully and more specifically the phenomenon you wish to study. This requires that you bracket the population you wish to study (Denzin, 2001; Glesne, 1999; Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

As you identify or bracket in clear terms the population of your study, you are simultaneously developing your research question and your purpose. Take care that you are framing an *identifiable* question or problem, not simply a subject of interests that is general and amorphous. You must be more precise at this stage in identifying a question or problem as it guides you

toward a path of inquiry and interest that is clear and directed. You will be more focused, self-assured, and motivated when you have a subject you feel strongly about and you can articulate for yourself and others. This does not mean that you are confined to this question and that there is no room for change, invention, or discovery along the way. In fact, in my experience, I have found that by clearly identifying a topic (while feeling free to alter and change), researchers feel more knowledgeable and skilled in changing or taking on different questions or problems, if necessary, than what their original questions or problems demanded. Once you get in the field, your question or problem may be enriched and augmented by what you experience on the ground. It may change into another domain completely or it may remain consistently vital and inspiring. What is important is to identify your question from the onset because, without a research question, your purpose will have less focus and certainty. Moreover, you will have less direction in formulating your ideas if you do need to alter or change the original question or problem.

The following steps serve to help you in the process of developing a specific research problem or question:

- After reviewing the literature and familiarizing yourself with other research models on the topic (including indexes, titles of references from bibliographies, quotations, etc.), note what sparks your interests and jot down titles, phrases, names, and places.

- Combine this list with your own interest and intuitive attraction toward an item, and then brainstorm questions about your subject of interest. Write, write, and keep writing. Take a break, and then write more questions.

- When you have exhausted writing down all the questions that come to mind, then consider the overarching themes that arise. This will take a bit of time, but enjoy the exercise. You will discover and learn from this step as you make connections and build clusters of ideas and meanings that surface and repeat themselves.

- For each cluster that you complete, create a topic sentence or a subject heading in the form of a question that best reflects the composite of questions within each cluster.

- After you have developed the summary or topical question for each of your clusters, you are now closer to the point of narrowing down your array of notes into a solid research question. Review your topical questions and contemplate how your research question will evolve from them. This is a process of prioritizing certain questions over others, eliminating overlaps, and blending questions together. Throughout the process, and most especially in this last step, keep in mind what it is that you, as a critical ethnographer, want to contribute or change for the cause of social justice. The formulation of your research question serves as an articulation of what it is you want to do and why.

Preparing for the Field: The Research Design and Lay Summary

The Research Design

"Gaining access" is a major concern in qualitative research. There has been a great deal of attention paid to the challenges of what is understood as *entry*. As a qualitative researcher you must consider how you enter the terrain of your subjects in ways that are appropriate, ethical, and effective. As you begin your preparations to enter the field, it is often advisable first to complete a *research design*. This is a plan that outlines, step by step, what you hope to accomplish relative to your fieldwork process and methods. A research design comprises key points to be addressed. Please understand that you are not expected to address each of these points in precise or full detail at the beginning of your study and before you actually enter the field—some points you may address more fully than others. Your research design is to help you organize and plan what you are about to encounter in the field in order to provide more focus, direction, confidence, and sense of purpose.

The following points comprise a research design:

- A restatement of your question or problem
- A description of your (a) data collection methods as coperformer in the field or participant observer; (b) type, style, and techniques of interview; (c) field journal and data logging techniques; (d) data coding process; and (e) theoretical frameworks for data analysis and interpretation
- A delineation of your ethical methods in placing the welfare of subjects first by protecting their rights, interests, privacy, sensibilities, and offering reports at key stages to participants, including the final report
- A description of your research population in terms of (a) geographic location, (b) description of subjects, (c) norms and rules, (d) significant historical and cultural contexts, and (e) expectations for key informants or coperformers within the population
- An outline of your time frame for (a) entering the field, (b) data collection and/or performance process, (c) departure and/or public performance, (d) coding and analysis, and (e) completion of written report and/or public performance at home site

Please remember that it is perfectly fine if you do not have the answers to all of the questions included in your research design. It may not even be necessary for you to have the answers to them all. The research design is intended to serve as a starting point, a map, or a guide in organizing and specifying your project. It helps lead the way.

The Lay Summary

Remember, the research design is of primary significance to you; however, the *lay summary* is more for the benefit of the subjects you will be meeting. It serves to assist them in understanding who you are, what you are doing, and what their role will be in the process. The lay summary will also address specific questions; however, unlike the research design, the information provided in the lay summary will be relatively more precise and predetermined. However, it is important to keep in mind that your lay summary *draws from the information in your research design*, and several points of information that you will be sharing with participants are already articulated in that design. Also, keep in mind that the purpose of the lay summary is to explain your project to the people who are central to it; therefore, they have the right to know, and you have the responsibility to explain your presence in their lives.[1]

The lay summary should address the following questions:

- Who are you? What is your background and where do you come from? You will explain your institutional affiliation or sponsorship, and, if necessary, information that might be significant relative to your cultural, ethnic, or personal identity.

- What are you doing and why? Why are you in this particular place? What exactly do you plan to do here and for what purpose? You will explain to participants (a) what motivated or inspired you to enter into this particular space of their lives, (b) your research methods or how you will collect your data, and (c) your desired outcome and what you specifically hope to contribute toward social change. (Note: You may refer to your research design in communicating these points to participants.)

- What will you do with the results of your study? What happens to the information you gathered here after you leave? You will describe the end product of your fieldwork; that is, you will explain what form the information you gathered is going to take (a book, a performance, a policy report, a classroom assignment, etc.). You will also explain how, where, and to whom this information will be given or distributed.

- How were participants selected? What mechanisms did you use to gain access to the people in the field with whom you chose to speak and interact? You will explain your method and how you came to locate and meet them: for example, through an introduction from a key participant or community liaison, with assistance from relevant institutions and networks, through word-of-mouth, via the "snowball effect" or the "grapevine," as well as by "hanging out" at local sites such as churches, social gatherings, rallies, and so forth.

- What are the possible benefits or risks to participants? What will participants gain and/or lose by your presence in their lives? You will explain what you hope your project will do to serve and contribute to the lives or population of your study. This means you will express what difference your presence will make upon a situation or experience that relates to or affects them. You will also express with honesty and humility the possible consequences that your project may have upon the situation and/or their lives. As you describe all the possible negative consequences, you must also speak in clear terms regarding what measures you will take to try to prevent such consequences from occurring. (This point is elaborated with more detail and examples in the section on ethics.)

- How will you assure confidentiality and anonymity, when necessary, for participants as well as the site? You will explain your ethical stance and your methods by outlining step by step how your research data—specifically, names, places, encounters, and identities—will be changed, altered, and safeguarded from the general public, other participants, and your institutional colleagues. (This point is also elaborated with examples and detail in the ethics section.)

- How often and how long would you like to meet for interviews and observations? You will inform participants of why you may need to meet with them on more than one occasion and the possible duration of each meeting. You will also inquire about significant times to meet that will enhance the data and address more fully your research question. You will also keep in mind that how often you meet is contingent upon what is convenient and appropriate for participants.

- How and in what manner will you ask participants' permission to record their actions, experiences, and words? After you have described the project, particularly after you have informed participants of possible benefits and consequences, of what will be done with the data, and of the purpose of the project, the *means* by which the data will be recorded will more than likely be less invasive, foreign, or even suspicious. The means by which you record your data are through notes, tape recordings, photographs, and videotaping. You will obviously ask permission to record, especially for photographs and audio or video recordings. It is often good practice, particularly with video recordings, and for participants who are reluctant to meet a day or two before the more formal interview. If time allows, have a conversation about more general subjects that are innocuous or that are of interests to them in order to develop more familiarity and ease with the videotape. It is also effective when using video to make arrangements for these individuals to be part of a group interview and discussion before you videotape them individually. Being part of a group for the initial taping buffers the focus and concentration on them as individuals. It gives them an opportunity to interact with and respond to others who are also being taped and to witness by comparison or contrast how others respond.

The lay summary, like the research design, serves only as a guide or a map. Remember that every situation is different and context specific. It is important to feel free to adapt and adjust the need of the lay summary to your particular project and situation.

Interviewing and Field Techniques

> *Unlike survey interviews, in which those giving information are relatively passive and are not allowed the opportunity to elaborate, interviewees in qualitative interviews share in the work of the interview, sometimes guiding it in channels of their own choosing. They are treated as partners rather than as objects of research.*
>
> —Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (1995)

Interviewing is a hallmark experience of fieldwork research (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The ethnographic interview opens realms of meaning that permeate beyond rote information or finding the "truth of the matter." The interviewee is not an object, but a subject with agency, history, and his or her own idiosyncratic command of a story. Interviewer and interviewee are in partnership and dialogue as they construct memory, meaning, and experience together. The primary aim of much social science research is to locate valid and reliable information, with the interviewer directing the questions and the interviewee answering them as truthfully as possible. This is not to suggest that validity and substantiation are irrelevant in critical ethnography, because they are indeed significant at many levels of inquiry. However, critical ethnography reflects deeper truths than the need for verifiable facts and information. The beauty of this method of interviewing is in the complex realms of individual subjectivity, memory, yearnings, polemics, and hope that are unveiled and inseparable from shared and inherited expressions of communal strivings, social history, and political possibility. The interview is a window to individual subjectivity and collective belonging: *I am because we are and we are because I am.*

The ethnographic interview may encompasses three forms: (1) *oral history,* which is a recounting of a social historical moment reflected in the life or lives of individuals who remember them and/or experienced them; (2) *personal narrative,* which is an individual perspective and expression of an event, experience, or point of view; and (3) *topical interview*, the point of view given to a particular subject, such as a program, an issue, or a process. It is important to note that these forms are not isolated from one another. They are separated here for definitional purposes, because they each have special albeit discrete characteristics from the others. But please keep in mind that each type will often and necessarily overlap with the others.

Formulating Questions

> *What is seen, heard, and experienced in the field, these are "the nuggets around which you construct your questions."*
>
> —Corrine Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction* (1999)

One of the most interesting and important challenges of the interview process is during the initial stages, when you are thinking about what questions to ask. There are those who have a natural talent for asking questions, while others are not so sure what to ask or how to ask it and need more guidance. Questions will naturally evolve the more time you spend in the field and the more experience you have with participants and with the context and culture in which they live or work. It is generally advised that researchers should have a basic level of understanding of the field—the general history, meanings, practices, institutions, and beliefs that constitute it—before they plunge full force into the actual face-to-face interviewing. Spending time closely listening, observing, and interacting in the field while compiling extensive field notes will provide a foundation of knowledge and experience upon which you may begin to craft your questions.

Greater knowledge and familiarity before you begin your interviews will inspire your questions. Your field notes will be an invaluable source and frame

of reference as you contemplate your questions; however, it also helps to have a few tried-and-true models and guidelines. Below are two models I have found to be particularly helpful in developing questions. They are drawn from Michael Patton (1990) and James P. Spradley (1979). Following these models is a list of "tried and true" methods that I have found most useful over the years.

The Patton Model

We will examine the Patton model using the example of a qualitative researcher conducting interviews with black students about so-called black isolation on the campus of a major state university.

1. **Behavior or Experience Questions.** Behavior or experience questions address concrete human action, conduct, or ways of "doing." It is helpful to think about behavior as comportment or as action in some form, and to think of experience as being more mindful or reflexive of the meanings of the action or behavior. *"I notice that most black students stick together and claim their own spaces and groupings on campus. They eat together in the dining hall; they congregate among themselves outside Wicker Hall on the quad; they sit together in classes and so forth. This is behavior that is obvious and that most people can observe. Could you describe other ways or behaviors that are not so obvious where black students come together?"* Keep in mind that this question is not asking *why* these students come together, nor is it trying to decipher meaning. It is asking the interviewer for more information on *action* or *behavior.*

2. **Opinion or Value Questions.** Opinion or value questions address a conviction, judgment, belief, or particular persuasion towards a phenomenon. Although opinions and values are very closely related and often interchangeable, an opinion question is usually considered more individually idiosyncratic, while a value question leans more toward guiding principles and ideals emanating from formal or informal social arrangements. *"In your opinion, why do you think black students behave in this way?* And a somewhat different question is, *What do you believe is the value of this behavior? Does it even have a value?"*

3. **Feeling Questions.** Feeling questions address emotions, sentiments, and passions. The interviewer is concerned not with the truth or validity of a phenomenon, but with how a person feels about it or is emotionally affected by it. *"How do you personally feel about this behavior?* And to add another twist to that question, *How do you feel about the need to come together as black students in these ways?"*

4. **Knowledge Questions.** Knowledge questions address the range of information and learning a participant holds about a phenomenon, as well as where this knowledge comes from and how it is attained. *"What are the historical roots of this kind of behavior? How does the larger society influence the desire for these students to behave in this way?"*

5. **Sensory Questions.** Sensory questions address the senses and human sensation. How does the body hear, taste, touch, smell, and see a phenomenon at the purely visceral level in its contact with the phenomenon? *"How does your body, your senses, react in these moments of contact and allegiance with other black students? Do you see, hear, taste, smell, or touch in ways that are different at these times than other times?"*

6. **Background/Demographic Questions.** Background and demographic questions address concrete and practical information concerning the distribution, location, and size of populations including births, deaths, and other significant information related to population statistics. *"What is the population of black students on campus and what part of the country do most of them come from? Are there more men than women? What is the ethnic breakdown of black students on campus in terms of percentages of African Americans, Caribbeans, Africans, Europeans, and so forth?"*

The Spradley Model

We outline the Spradley (1979) model using the example of a qualitative researcher conducting interviews with food service workers on campus and after a recent strike.

1. **Descriptive Questions.** Descriptive questions ask for a recounting or a depiction of a concrete phenomenon. The focus here is away from ideas, abstraction, and emotion. Although we often employ descriptive questions to move toward abstraction and emotion, we are concerned here with delineating or rendering a picture or image of a real or actual circumstance or object. For Spradley, descriptive questions can be subdivided into "tour," example, experience, and native-language questions.

- Tour Question: Spradley (1979) writes, "Whether the ethnographer uses space, time, events, people, activities, or objects, the end result is the same: a verbal description of significant features of the cultural scene" (p. 87). Like a tour, a cultural scene unfolds in its many and varied elements. Spradley makes a distinction between grand tour questions and mini-tour questions. *"Can you describe an average working day in the cafeteria? Can you describe the space of the cafeteria itself, that is, the various rooms, cooking areas, and lounges providing a grand tour of the cafeteria building?"*

- Example Question: Example questions ask the participants to provide an example of a response that may need more specificity or clarity. Spradley (1979) states that example questions "most often lead to the most interesting stories of actual happenings which an ethnographer will discover" (p. 88). *"Can you recount an example of a particular working day that you will never forget?"*
- Experience Questions: Spradley (1979) suggests that experience questions "are best used after asking numerous grand tour and mini-tour questions" (p. 89). You are, in essence, asking the participants how they experienced the scene or subject just described. *"How would you describe the experience that day when you and the other cafeteria workers decided to go on strike? What did you do exactly and how did you feel about it?"*
- Native-Language Questions: According to Spradley (1979), "The more familiar the informant and ethnographer are with each other's cultures, the more important native-language questions become" (p. 90). With these questions, you are addressing the larger meanings, implications, and symbolic value embedded in the respondent's everyday language. *"How do you and the other cafeteria workers come up with the various terms like, 'snub nose,' 'hungry giant,' 'green pill,' and 'mean spot' to describe students and their different attitudes? How do you use these terms among yourselves?"*

2. **Structural or Explanation Questions:** Structural or explanation questions are not to be confused with inquires of actual societal or cultural structures, as in institutions or systems of power. By structural questions, Spradley (1979) is really referring to questions that require *explanation.* So, structural questions are really explanation questions that complement and should be asked concurrently with descriptive questions. Structural questions "explore the organization of an informant's cultural knowledge" (p. 131), and they most often require contextual information, because such information "aids greatly in recall and will avoid the problem of making an informant feel he is being tested with a series of short questions" (p. 125). *"Can you help me understand how the workers came up with the idea of a strike in getting the administration to pay attention to your demands? Can you explain how making up your own words for students is important? What is your role at the university?"*

3. **Contrast Questions:** Contrast questions evoke unlike comparisons. They often require contextual clarification from the interviewer in asking the questions and further explanation or elaboration from the interviewee after answering it. Spradley (1979) outlines three principles that give rise to contrast questions: (1) the *use principle,* in which "the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by asking how it is uniquely and distinctly used rather than asking what it means" (p. 156); (2) the *similarity principle,* in which "the

meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is similar to other symbols" (p. 157); and (3) the *contrast principle,* in which "the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is different from other symbols" (p. 157). Contrast questions may take on a range of forms, from implicit or suggested contrasts to obvious and culturally understood contrasts. Questions may also constitute a contrast of two phenomena to several others, perhaps even referring to a listing of phenomena. *"How useful was the strike in getting people on campus to pay attention to the conditions and circumstances of laborers on campus? How did your campus strike compare to the strikes of other laborers, like the city garbage collectors two years ago? How was if different from the garbage strike?"*

Extra Tips for Formulating Questions

More Models

Other models for questions in addition to the series outlined above include the following:

1. Advice Questions. In searching for a point of view, personal philosophy, or disposition, you may ask advice questions as another choice for a model, using a formula such as, "What advice would you give to . . ." or "What would you say to others who. . . ." Advice questions are helpful in addressing some of the suggestions set forth by Patton (1990), such as behavior, feelings, knowledge, and opinion. *"What advice would you give to other campus laborers who are underpaid, overworked, and feeling disrespected by the campus community?"*

2. Quotation Questions. Repeating direct quotations from others and asking for a response is another effective model in addressing abstract issues, such as feelings and opinion. *"Someone once said, 'Rudeness is the weak man's imitation of strength.' What do you think?"*

3. Once-Upon-a-Time Descriptive Questions. Some descriptive questions aim for a narrated experience reflecting the drama of a story. These questions are most effective when the interviewer is relatively confident that the interviewee is capable of telling such a story, based on prior questions that reveal experiences, opinions, knowledge, and so forth. The interviewer referring to a context or situation already being discussed in the interview may then ask, *"Can you describe the time when . . ."* or *"Would you tell the story about the time when you. . . ." "Can you tell me about the time when*

you felt the most disrespected by a student and decided to let the person know how you felt?"

Initial Brainstorming

When you first begin trying to formulate your questions, a useful exercise is to reread your research question or problem over several times and then ask yourself, "If this is what I am to understand, then what is it that I need to know about it to answer the questions or address the problem?" You will then list everything of interests that comes to mind.

The Puzzlement

Lofland and Lofland (1984) suggest another helpful exercise to inspire questions: Ask yourself, "What is it about this thing that is a puzzle to me? What is it that I see before me?" List your questions about the puzzle: As you jot them down, you are "teasing" out the puzzlements (p. 53). Lofland and Lofland state that by sorting and ordering the puzzlements, "they take on general clusters and topics that have a global or comprehensive design" (pp. 54–55).

Attributes of the Interviewer and Building Rapport

Above and beyond techniques for designing interview questions and charting out the field study, one of the most important considerations is the ethnographer's own demeanor and attitude in the field. Much has been discussed regarding the importance of the ethnographic personality and what it means to look inward to refine and develop our own personal attributes as interviewers (Glesne, 1999; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Below is a list of considerations relating to the interviewer that will help in building a harmonious or productive relationship with subjects in the field, or what is commonly referred to as rapport.

Mindful Rapport

It is important to keep in mind in the beginning that rapport is the feeling of comfort, accord, and trust between the interviewer and interviewee. Being mindful of rapport throughout the interview is essential in helping to create for the participant the feeling of being respected and of being genuinely heard. Keep in mind that being a good listener is an art and a virtue.

Anticipation

It is common to have feelings of anticipation that may range from joyful excitement to nervous apprehension. It is important to turn the energy of anticipation into positive planning—reviewing field notes, developing and brainstorming questions, and understanding that a level of excitement and anxiety are normal.

Positive Naïveness

The idea of the *knower and the known* is provocative in its implications of identifying who knows and who is striving to know. As ethnographers, our knowing is always leveraged by a level of unknowing that we struggle to fill by asking the knowers (Spradley, 1979). In the field, we will invariably come across to participants as unsophisticated, innocent, and easy targets for deception. Positive naïveness is acknowledging that you do not know and that you must rely with humility on others and trust upon the knowledge of knowers. Keep in mind that we are capable of grasping what we do not know with integrity, intelligence, and conviction.

Active Thinking and Sympathetic Listening

Although it is conventionally understood that the ethnographer is the interviewer and the participant is the interviewee, in critical ethnography the rigid back-and-forth replay of question-answer-question is replaced by a more fluid and reciprocal dynamic, in which the interviewee and interviewer become what Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe as "conversational partners." The conversational quality that evolves from the interview is substantively meaningful and a key factor of rapport that is generated by active thinking and sympathetic listening. You are listening with an open heart and kind reception to what is being said and expressed to you; you are not motivated by judgment, but by understanding. As you fully engage the art of listening sympathetically, you are actively thinking about what is being expressed; you are not just present in body, but deeply engaged in mind. The meanings and implications of what is being expressed are significant, and your mind is alert, active, and thinking. Again, we are engaged in the performative dynamic of dialogue.

Status Difference

It is important to be aware of power differences and status. If you are oblivious to or refuse to accept the power and privilege you carry with you as a researcher, you will be blind to the ways your privilege can be a

disadvantage to others. If you cannot see or refuse to see the rewards of your status, you will also be blind to the complex inequities and veiled injustices of those whose status is unjustly subordinated. If this example of status difference does not apply to your project, and you are interviewing powerful people whose material and social status is greater than yours, you must still be aware of your status difference as a researcher. You have the power to tell their story and to have the last word on how they will be represented.

Patiently Probing

During the interview session, topics and questions will arise that will invariably lead you to feel that you need to gain a deeper or clearer understanding of what has been expressed. Perhaps an account seems contradictory and you feel you need to get at the veritable quality of the story. You need more information or a more lucid accounting, so you must probe further. Probing requires patience and understanding. No one likes to feel as though they are being tested or interrogated. Obviously, you are not a journalist or a judge; therefore, your probing must be done gently, with respect, and, when necessary, with assistance. Contextualize your probes with follow-up questions that aid memory and enhance dialogue.

The Gorden Model

In the awareness of our own attributes, we must also be circumspect about the attributes and elements that influence those we interview. Raymond L. Gorden (2003) makes an important contribution in his framing of "threats" that significantly affect those we interview. He sets forth a series of sociopsychological dimensions where participants generally feel threatened. Awareness of these dimensions and how they affect the interview are helpful to the researcher in understanding the subjective and idiosyncratic elements that shape responses. Each one will variously influence *what* is being said and *how* it is being said:

- *Degree of Ego Threat*. Gorden (2003) writes, "The respondent tends to withhold any information which he fears may threaten his self-esteem" (p. 159). Here is a situation in which the threat was not intended, but the response to the question brings feelings of embarrassment, shame, or belittlement. The participant may therefore avoid answering the question or respond in a manner that distorts reality in an effort to protect his or her self-esteem. When a threat to ego is recognized, the ethnographer may decide not to pursue the question or to buffer the threat with indirect words of comfort.

- *Degree of Forgetting*. It is important to keep in mind that memory is a factor in every interview, regardless of the topic or the identity of the participant. It is also important to understand that the purpose of the interview is often not simply to help the interviewee remember, but see *how* memory is expressed. In other words, it is not always the goal to get participants to remember facts and events correctly or as they "really" were. As critical ethnographers, we are not concerned with forgetting, but with memory itself and how individuals remember as they do. We honor the fact that each individual memory will be remembered in different forms and to different degrees.

- *Degree of Generalization*. As human beings, we capture experiences by generalizing them, as well as by specifying them. As researchers, we must be aware when generalizations take the form of "truths" that are really specific to a limited experience or are the result of a particular worldview. Just as generalizations are problematic in the truth claims they purport, specificity can be problematic in its oblivion to broader implications.

- *Degree of Subjective Experience*. As critical performance ethnographers, we are concerned with the construction and influences of subjectivity. We understand that the meaning of an event or circumstance cannot be devoid of the speaker's subjectivity, of the narration that brings the event or circumstance into being. What is significant for us is how experiences are expressed and enacted through the speaking subject. An experience or event that we wish to grasp as researchers will always be grasped through the degree of subjectivity encased in the expression of the telling (the participant's subjectivity), as well as the degree of our own subjectivity that is encased in our listening (the researcher's subjectivity). Subjectivity becomes all at once a vessel, lens, and filter of every telling.

- *Conscious Versus Unconscious Experience*. The unconscious is a powerful force in constituting what it means to be human. Consciousness comprises that which we are aware of and forms only an infinitesimal part of our psyche; the unconscious forms the greater part of our being. Freud (1927) compared the conscious and the unconscious to an iceberg, where consciousness represented the tip, preconsciousness was the medium between consciousness and unconsciousness, and the unconscious was the mass of the iceberg forming almost 90 percent of what is unseen beneath the water. It is helpful to be aware of the significance of the unconscious as we speak with participants. We are often witness to unconscious meanings, implications, and intentions as we actively and sympathetically listen. The power of the unconscious will be more forcefully recognized as you later begin to interpret and analyze the data. While it is important to keep the influence of the unconscious in mind, we must also keep in mind that c interpretations and questions are not meant to psychoanalyze the participant or to focus on deciphering consciousness from unconsciousness.

- *Degree of Trauma*. Deep fear, dread, and sorrow that leaves one traumatized by a past occurrence can manifest during the interview in the need immediately to shut down the questions or to respond to them in great length, detail, and emotion. Degree of trauma is further reason for the researcher to be prepared before scheduling the interview. Although degree of trauma cannot always be avoided, it is less difficult for both conversational partners to deal with trauma if the researcher is sensitive to and aware of the difficulties. This is an area that requires rapport; that is, dealing with trauma requires listening with sympathy, following the narrator's pace, demonstrating appreciation through eye contact and gestures of concern, explaining the reason for your question, and, if necessary, guiding the responses with gentle empathy.

- *Degree of Etiquette*. "Communication is given its form by taboos, secrets, avoidances, 'white lies' . . . and certain symbols and attitudes circulate only in restricted channels or between people in certain social relationships," says Gorden (2003, p. 163). When preparing for the interview process and in interacting in the field before you begin interviewing individuals, degrees of etiquette should be an important part of gathering information. There are elements participants will not express because of impropriety, and the reasons may be due to gender, race, age, or nationality, or to cultural civilities, habits, and taboos. It is important to understand when responses are affected or governed by norms of etiquette. What you think you are hearing as true to experience may actually be based upon how your gender or race is perceived in that culture or situation.

Interviewing is a dynamic process fundamental to ethnography. It is part technique, part ethics, part theory, part method, part intuition, part collaboration, and part openness to deep vulnerability. Della Pollock (1999) describes her positionality as interviewer and researcher on "birth stories" in her poignant book *Telling Bodies Performing Birth*:

> I made myself . . . vulnerable to being moved. Listening and writing. I saw myself as the register of someone else's power. Against the grain of current obsessions with the power of the researcher to shape, tame, appropriate, and control the worlds he or she investigates, in the course of talking with and writing about the many people who contributed to this project, I more often than not felt unnerved and overwhelmed, "othered," interrogated, propelled into landscapes of knowing and not knowing I would not otherwise have dared enter. (p. 23)

Interviewing does not *absolutely* require a set of predesigned questions and entering the field with an effective and detailed plan. It certainly helps a great deal (especially for the new ethnographer) if you do have them, but your project will not necessarily fail if you do not. What *is* required is genuine curiosity, sincere interest, and the courage to be "vulnerable" to another at the risk of being "the register of someone else's power."

You have walked down many paths and listened to many stories as an interviewer, and your most pressing questions are evolving into thickly described stories that are beginning to require some attention and deciphering. It's time to stop. What happens after the interviews have all been conducted? You now have an abundance of information and it all feels a bit unwieldy. You remember someone said something to you once upon a time about "coding and logging."

Coding and Logging Data

You are nearing the end of your fieldwork. You have conducted interviews, you have been listening and involved in the day-to-day processes that inform your research question, and you have a collection of data comprising field notes, interview tapes, and other relevant documents and artifacts collected and discovered during your stay. Now it is time to see what you have by bringing all the data together in some form or fashion of order. Coding or logging "allows you to recall the extra-ordinary complex range of stimuli with which you have been bombarded" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, p. 46). What do you do with this mass of information? Keep in mind that every project and every researcher is unique, so it is expected that you will pick and choose, select and sort, and blend and combine what is useful for you. Coding and logging data is the process of *grouping together themes and categories that you have accumulated in the field.*

Glesne (1999) suggests that, when you select and sort, you build what she describes as "code clumps . . . [by] putting like-minded pieces together into data clumps, you create an organizational framework" (p. 135). The following model draws from a combination of various coding procedures to outline a step-by-step method that can be revised as needed to serve your particular project:

- It is generally understood that you order the mass of data by beginning with generic categories: interview tapes, places, and people, as well as prevalent topics or key issues. You may also think of coding as *high-level coding*, concerned with more abstract ideas, or *low-level coding*, concerned with more concrete data (Carspecken, 1996). However, you must also ask yourself before you begin, "What is the best way to group or cluster all this material so that it will help me focus more clearly on my analysis or how I wish to present this material?"

- The process of grouping is not only about putting similar categories together; the very selections and act of grouping is creating a point of view or statement: "Code with analysis in mind. . . . Themes emerge from your coding, these themes guide your analysis" (Carspecken, 1996, pp. 146–153). If you perform or adapt the data for the stage, you may also code with scenes for your performance in mind, and you may also think about coding with your audience or readers in mind. The point is that coding is not *exclusively* about grouping similarities—although this is the *priority.* You must consider factors of analysis, presentation, readership, and audience that may alter and guide your "clumps."

- The precision and detail of interviewing will guide your coding (Carspecken, 1996; Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Keeping this precision is very important: The more specific and thematic your interview, the less complicated it will be to group and order your data.

- As your clumps or clusters begin to form, you will then begin a process of further ordering:
    a. You will examine each specific topic within that cluster.
    b. You will then compare and contrast that particular topic within that cluster.
    c. You will continue to examine and note the topics within each cluster.
    d. You will discover overlapping topics, marked distinctions, and topics that should be moved from one cluster to a different cluster. You will also discover that some topics should be eliminated from the study completely.
    e. After the topics within each cluster have been examined, you will then make adjustments for comparisons and contrasts across clusters, thereby creating linkages and themes.
    f. The evolution of your themes has now become more apparent.

- When you have completed logging or coding your data—or if you feel you need more direction and clarity during the process—it is often helpful to create a graphic or picture of your organizational framework. You may want to create a tree, cluster, box, or table of what you have developed. These graphics can be invaluable, displaying the connections, hierarchies, and distinctions with more clarity.

Note: About Computers

The Internet has become an invaluable resource and methodological tool for many ethnographers. The Internet can be used to "conduct searches about a topic, analyze census data, conduct interviews by 'chatting' or videoconferencing, share notes and pictures about a research site, debate issues with colleagues on listservs and in online journals, and download useful data collection and analysis software" (Fetterman, 1998, pp. 72–73). For many researchers, the Internet is far more efficient in terms of time, detail, precision, volume of information, and speed than the traditional methods I just outlined above. Although the Internet is, in many ways, an invaluable and productive resource, we must remember that ultimately the information and data collected is determined by the eyes and ears, and the heart and mind, of the ethnographer who determines "what to collect and how to record it as well as how to interpret the data from a cultural perspective" (Fetterman, p. 84). The best approach I have found is to combine the hands-on methods of the researcher with the Internet's capabilities relative to the nature and context of the project.

There are three major categories available through the Internet that can be of help to the ethnographer:

1. **Search Engines.** Search engines tell you where you can find information on a topic. They list sites and resources available on the World Wide Web related to your question or topic. The researcher may use a search engine for most all their informational needs. Search engines provide a wealth of information, such as, maps, demographic information, historical dates, current events, cultural attributes, and so forth. Search engines may include Google, Yahoo, MSN, and Altavista, to name a few. Some search engines may also serve the same purposes as reference pages (discussed below).

2. **Reference Pages.** Reference pages guide you to a vast amount of sources and serve a purpose similar to that of a reference librarian. References pages, such as *The New York Times* Navigator, can link you to sources. For example, the Federal Web Locator can link you to agencies and departments affiliated with the federal government, and LookupUSA is a comprehensive directory-assistance resource that can provide information on telephone numbers and addresses of households and business all over the country. Search engines and references pages will also link you to specific Web pages of individuals, groups, institutions, and businesses that will then provide more detailed information for that particular site.

3. **Database Software.** There is a variety of software available for qualitative researchers. These programs have the capabilities to (a) record information in the field, thereby serving the purpose of a tape recorder. In addition, as it records, it can also (b) transcribe, sort, and highlight patterns and themes

within the data. Beyond highlighting key texts within the data, the software can (c) categorize and cluster themes and subthemes. Therefore, database software for qualitative researchers has the capabilities to compare and contrast data, to code and sort a wide range of information in less time than the traditional hands-on approach. However, it is important to keep in mind again that the computer and the software do not have the researcher's eyes, ears, mind, and heart. You may choose to transcribe, thematically cluster, and contrast the data beyond what the software program prescribes. There will always be nuances, translations, and idiosyncratic categories that the computer and software is incapable of processing. Some of us still do not use computer software in our work for this very reason. However, if you choose to use database software, make sure it serves you and you do not serve it.

If you do wish to complete your coding process by computer, but not rely on it as a major source, Carspecken (1996) suggests a useful method that is more meaning-based, more hands-on, less intrusive, and more conducive to ambiguity than many of the computer software programs that are marketed for qualitative and ethnographic data. You begin with the file comprising your fieldwork data and a blank file. From this point you proceed along the following course:

1. When an item is worthy of a code, toggle it to the blank file and type a number, a letter, or a name to identify or name the code.
2. Continue in this manner, developing new codes and combining like codes until all the items are identified, ordered, and given a code name. Along the way, you will discover and create subcodes.
3. Group codes together into major overarching themes. You may choose from among various possibilities. Carspecken suggests that you group codes according to the purpose and focus of your study.

* * *

This chapter served to provide concise and pithy tips on ethnographic methods for the beginner as well as the seasoned ethnographer. Therefore, this information may be new for some and a reminder for others. I have attempted to respond to the question of what constitutes an ethnographic method by organizing it as a *process* constituted of three parts. Part One encompasses identifying where you are now and choosing a subject. Part Two encompasses preparing for the field (the lay summary and research design) and formulating questions. Part Three encompasses building rapport in the interview and, finally, coding and logging data. Each of these three parts enhances and overlays the other: They are not isolated from one another. Please remember, your method is not simply a means to an end. It is a meaningful and conscious enactment of learning from and entering into an ethnographic domain of immense possibilities.

Warm-Ups

1. How would you respond to the claim, "We really don't need methods; all we really need is good theory, good intentions, and deep hanging out!"

2. Write a short biography. It can be in the form of a poem, a song, a visual image, or a narrative. What concepts, experiences, or points of view are more dominant in your personal history than others? What patterns or motifs seem to be repeated more than others? Then read your biography to yourself or another individual. Write questions of the biography on your own or in collaboration with another individual.

3. Choose a controversial figure in world politics. Conduct a brief search on the history and background of this individual. Then, write a series of questions for that individual geared to further expanding or engaging what is being discussed in the news.

4. With a partner, perform the sections on the attributes of the interviewer, both in ways that coincide and contrast with the points discussed. Formulate a series of questions based on a characterization of your partner from the models offered. Be creative by combining and overlapping the question models.

5. Write a sample lay summary and research plan based on your research project. Have your partner read it back to you for both of you to collaboratively critique.

Note

1. The list provided here of components that constitute a lay summary are a compilation of ideas from the following six researchers and their works: Corrine Glesne (1999); Norman K. Denzin (1997, 2001); Phil Francis Carspecken (1996); John Lofland and Lyn H. Lofland (1984); and James P. Spradley (1979).

Suggested Readings

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