

# Step One

# LOCATING AN INFORMANT

## OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the characteristics of a good informant.
2. To locate the best possible informant for learning ethnographic interviewing skills and doing ethnographic research.

Although almost anyone can become an informant, not everyone makes a good informant. The ethnographer-informant relationship is fraught with difficulties. One of the great challenges in doing ethnography is to initiate, develop, and maintain a productive informant relationship. Careful planning and sensitivity to your informant will take you through most of the rough seas of interviewing. However, successful interviews depend on so many things it is impossible to plan for, or control, them all. For one thing, interviews are influenced by the identity of both parties. One young female ethnographer set out to interview an elderly man who seemed willing to talk; he proved to be a poor informant because he made sexual advances during most interviews. If a male student had been the ethnographer, the relationship might have easily developed into a productive one.

Sometimes unknown aspects of the informant's culture influence the relationship. One beginning ethnographer set out to investigate the culture of antique dealers. She made an initial contact with an eighty-year old woman who ran her own antique shop. After the first interview, their relationship began to deteriorate until finally, in desperation, she asked the woman why she didn't want to answer any more questions. "You should be paying me fifteen dollars an hour for all this," the woman said, clearly irritated. "I've taught others before and that's what they paid me for what I told them." This ethnographer, without knowing it, had encountered a cultural practice among antique dealers that became an unseen barrier to successful interviews. In some cultures, tacit rules act as a kind of taboo on asking questions. One student found his locksmith informant reluctant to talk for fear of revealing trade secrets.

The interaction of the personalities of informant and ethnographer also has a profound influence on the interviews. One assertive, talkative student found it difficult to listen to others talk. He located an informant who worked as a tugboat captain on the Mississippi River. This quiet, unassuming man willingly agreed to serve as an informant about

his life on the river. During the first interview, the student felt bothered by the long lulls in the conversation and unwittingly began to fill these gaps by talking too much. He asked more pointed questions and said things his informant interpreted as being pushy. The interviews went from bad to worse; the tugboat captain became noticeably uncooperative. Without realizing it, the student became a threat to his informant who began to feel, "If you know so much, why are you asking me?" Personality differences cannot always be anticipated. I have contacted tramps for ethnographic interviews and then, after one or two sessions, found it difficult to maintain a productive relationship with them. These same men would have made excellent informants for someone else.

Interviewing informants depends on a cluster of interpersonal skills. These include: asking questions, listening instead of talking, taking a passive rather than an assertive role, expressing verbal interest in the other person, and showing interest by eye contact and other nonverbal means. Some people have acquired these skills to a greater degree than others; some learn them more quickly than others. I recall one novice ethnographer who felt insecure about interviewing an urban planner. During the interviews she kept thinking about the next question she should ask and often looked down at a list she had prepared. Each time she lost eye contact with her informant, he interpreted it as lack of interest. She seldom nodded her head or encouraged her informant with such statements as, "That's really interesting," or "I never realized urban planners did so much!" Although she continued the interviews, rapport developed slowly because she lacked this specific skill of showing interest.

During the past ten years I have listened to hundreds of students discuss their relationships with informants. Many of their difficulties resulted from identity differences, cultural barriers, incompatible personalities, and lack of interpersonal skill. But the most persistent problems came from their *failure to locate a good informant*. By "good" informant, I mean someone who can assist the novice ethnographer in learning about that informant's culture while at the same time learning the interviewing skills. Based on the experience of undergraduate and graduate students, long discussions with professional ethnographers, and my own ethnographic interviewing, I have identified five minimal requirements for selecting a good informant: (1) thorough enculturation, (2) current involvement, (3) an unfamiliar cultural scene, (4) adequate time, and (5) nonanalytic. In the field, a skilled ethnographer uses many different informants and some will not meet these five requirements. But, in order to learn to conduct informant interviews, it is essential that the first informants selected meet all of these five requirements.

## THOROUGH ENCULTURATION

Enculturation is the natural process of learning a particular culture. Potential informants vary in the extent of their enculturation: good ones know their culture well. Sandy took a job as a cocktail waitress at Brady's Bar. On the first night everything seemed strange and she had to depend on others to guide her. "You'll work the lower section and give orders at this station," the bartender told her. "Here's the best way to arrange your tray," a waitress explained. "Change goes here, keep your bills under the ash tray." Late in the evening, the bartender told her, "It's time to make last call. Check your tables and see if anyone wants another drink." As Sandy encountered new situations and problem customers, the others continued to help enculturate her. "I had a table of guys like that once; I just ignored them." "If those jocks give you any trouble, just let me know." As the months passed, the number of unfamiliar situations decreased. Sandy no longer had to think when she took orders, repeated them to the bartender, or made change for customers. Even on the busiest nights her work became routine. She knew what to anticipate; she understood the language of this cultural scene; she could even instruct new girls who became waitresses. She had become thoroughly enculturated.

As a novice learning the role of waitress, Sandy did not know as much about this cultural scene. She was not able to identify all the range of customers, the kinds of hassles waitresses encountered, or the pecking order among bartenders. She was a good informant about only one thing: *the experience of learning to be a cocktail waitress*. But this information only made sense against the larger pattern of waitress culture. When Sandy became thoroughly enculturated she could talk about this culture in detail.

One of the great advantages (often unrecognized) in doing ethnography in small, traditional societies has been that informants were almost always thoroughly enculturated. Sometimes a marginal person would volunteer as an informant and his or her view of life might contrast with others in a village. But most of the time adults who spoke the native language could be counted on to know the culture well. In complex societies, with greatly increased communication and mobility, that changes. When ethnographers set out to study a cultural scene, they cannot assume that those they talk with actually know the culture well enough to act as informants.

Good informants know their culture so well they no longer think about it. They do things automatically from years and years of practice. The mail carrier who has delivered his route for sixteen years knows every name, street, and address so well he can carry on a conversation while sorting the mail. He is thoroughly enculturated. The substitute carrier who is learning a new route is not a good informant.

Some cultural scenes are learned through formal instruction as well as informal, on-the-job experience. The new policeman goes through an inten-

sive training program; the pilot attends flight school. But formal instructions alone do not constitute a high level of enculturation. A good informant is one who has had years of informal experience as well.

One way to estimate how thoroughly someone has learned a cultural scene is to determine the length of time they have been in that scene. I discovered tramps who were novices as well as those who had become veterans. George seemed like an experienced tramp; he was in his late sixties. I interviewed him several times about making a flop. He answered many of my questions but sometimes seemed confused and frequently admitted his ignorance. Finally, after several questions that he could only partially answer, he said, "Would you like to talk to my friend Bob? I've only been learning to be a tramp for four years—since I retired from the railroad. Bob, he's been teaching me to be a tramp." George introduced me to Bob, a thoroughly enculturated tramp, who became an excellent informant. After that, one of my first questions to a potential informant was "How long have you been a tramp?" or "How long have you been on the road?" or "How long have you been making the bucket in Seattle?"

In general, an informant should have at least a year of full-time involvement in a cultural scene. If it is a part-time interest, such as membership in the League of Women Voters or a hobby of collecting beer steins, at least three or four years of involvement is needed. But, these are only minimum time periods. The more thoroughly enculturated an informant, the better. A man who has worked for twenty-five years as a railroad engineer is a better choice than one who has been on the job for only two years. A fifth grader who has gone through each grade at her school is a better choice than one who transferred in during the fifth grade.

### CURRENT INVOLVEMENT

"I've found a great informant," a student ethnographer told me one afternoon, pleased to have located someone so easily. "He lives across the street and has worked as a milkman for seventeen years." The first few interviews progressed smoothly, but then she came to me with problems. "I asked him questions but he makes excuses and says he can't remember. When I ask for stories or examples, he can't think of any." After several minutes of discussion, I asked, "Can you visit his place of work or ride with him while he delivers milk?" Oh, he doesn't work as a milkman now," she said. "He changed jobs three years ago." This student had assumed that because her informant had been thoroughly enculturated at one time, it didn't matter that he didn't currently deliver milk. Her final description of this cultural scene reflected her informant's lack of involvement.

When people are currently involved in a cultural scene, they use their knowledge to guide their actions. They review what they know; they make

interpretations of new events; they apply their knowledge to solving everyday problems. When people stop using some part of their cultural knowledge, it becomes less accessible, more difficult to recall. Informants who leave a cultural scene forget the details and can only remember general outlines of the activities that went on. Most important, they stop speaking the language they once used. When asked about a former cultural scene, they may talk about it but do so using terms and phrases from a different scene.

Sometimes leaving a cultural scene involves a major change in perspective. An informant not currently involved may greatly distort that former culture. I encountered a dramatic example of this possibility not long after *You Owe Yourself a Drunk* was published. A sociologist sent me an unpublished review of my book he had written. He was sharply critical of the conclusions I had drawn from my study of tramp culture. Whereas my description rested heavily on the language of tramps, he believed it was inappropriate to accept their terms, phrases, insights, and definitions. "Drunks are notorious liars and manipulators," he wrote. "Spradley unfortunately takes the lies as facts and bases his conclusions on them." Near the end of the review, after disagreeing with my report that tramps did not like the coercive aspects of the jail, his perspective became clear. "Looking back," he wrote, "across my long career as a drunk, I believe I would have changed my irresponsible way of life much earlier had I been forced to." Even though this person once lived and traveled like many tramps do, he had left that way of life and now saw it in a very different light.

The ethnographer must look closely at the *kind* of current involvement a potential informant has. I met several men who had been tramps and were presently involved in trying to help tramps. But these potential informants now considered themselves to be "recovered alcoholics;" they had taken jobs as counselors in alcoholic treatment centers. Although they spent a great deal of time with tramps, the tramp way of life was *not* part of their present selves; it was a cultural scene they rejected. ✓

In a similar sense, a young teacher a few years out of high school is not a good informant for the student culture. And a college student who lives in a dormitory cannot act as a good informant on the culture of women who work as maids cleaning the same dormitory. Individuals who live and work in close proximity often believe they share the same way of looking at the world. The ethnographer wants to interview people who have expert knowledge, informants who have a first-hand, current involvement in the cultural scene.

### AN UNFAMILIAR CULTURAL SCENE

As I said earlier, much of our cultural knowledge is tacit, taken for granted, and outside our awareness. When ethnographers study unfamiliar

cultures, this unfamiliarity keeps them from taking things for granted. It makes them sensitive to things that have become so commonplace to informants that they ignore them. For this reason, many ethnographers begin their ethnographic studies on cultures very different from their own. The most productive relationship occurs between a thoroughly enculturated informant and a thoroughly unenculturated ethnographer.

In urban society, some cultural scenes are completely known to the ethnographer; others appear strange and exotic. Scenes range from those shared with family members or close friends all the way to immigrants who continue traditional customs and speak a foreign language. An experienced ethnographer with adequate time for research can select informants anywhere along this continuum. However, if you set out to learn to do ethnography following the steps in this book, it is another matter. When differences become too great, the field work problems can become overwhelming. Such is the case if you select someone who only speaks a foreign language you don't understand. When differences are not great enough, other problems emerge.

In the first place, when researching a familiar cultural scene, the language differences seem to be slight and are easily overlooked. I knew less about tramp culture than Brady's Bar which attracted mostly college students. When my tramp informants started using strange terms like *mission stiffs*, *airedales*, *dings*, *nose divers* and *making a frisco circle*, they immediately caught my attention. When waitresses, on the other hand, talked of *employers*, *customers*, *jocks*, *businessmen*, and *bouncers*, the terms did not catch my attention. Research at Brady's Bar took a great deal more careful analysis to discover its social organization.

The second problem that comes from studying a familiar cultural scene is that the analysis of field data becomes more difficult. I recall one beginning ethnographer, a physical education major, who against my advice chose a member of the swim team as an informant. "I'm not a swimmer," he said. "I know hardly anything about the swim team." But soon he brought in his field notes with the common complaint: "I can't find anything in what my informant says. There are different kinds of strokes and things they do at swim meets, but not much else." Looking at his field notes I quickly saw things he had missed because they were so familiar to him. Later, when he had completed his study, the cultural description was superficial and offered few insights. This student lived too close to the culture he had studied to really understand it. He took too much for granted because it was part of his own cultural knowledge.

Finally, an informant from a familiar cultural scene creates problems for interviewing. At the same time you study an informant's culture, your informant is gathering information about what you know. If informants believe your background has already taught you the answer to your own questions, they will feel you are asking dumb questions and that you may be

trying to test them in some way. When informants believe you are really ignorant, that you don't know anything about their way of life, these problems do not arise.

Many ethnographers do study familiar cultures. Anthony Wallace, an anthropologist, even used himself as an informant and produced an outstanding cultural description of driving an automobile.<sup>1</sup> Jeff Nash, a long-distance runner, has written about the culture of distance runners with great insight.<sup>2</sup> But, if you are starting out to learn informant interviewing, you can eliminate many difficulties by finding someone who knows about a cultural scene that is unfamiliar to you.

### ADEQUATE TIME

The approach presented in this book requires a series of ethnographic interviews interspersed with careful analysis. At a minimum, it will take six to seven one-hour interviews, so it is important to estimate whether a potential informant has adequate time to participate. The willingness or lack of it exhibited by a potential informant does not always give a good clue to whether that person has adequate time.

One student, a junior anthropology major, wanted to study the cultural scene of executives, so she approached a director for the Northern States Power Company. He seemed willing and interested but from the start she found it difficult to schedule appointments. When she phoned, she couldn't reach him; when she did, she had to schedule appointments far in advance and even then, he occasionally cancelled. Inadequate time for interviews continued to create problems throughout the project. Another student selected an informant who lived in a high-rise apartment for the elderly. She was seventy-five years old and spent her time visiting with friends, reading, and painting. She was available whenever this student wanted to schedule an interview and often invited him for tea and a visit.

Children usually make good informants and they have adequate free time. One ethnographer contacted a first-grade boy and interviewed him about his matchbox car collection. Her informant was eager to talk whenever she came and even brought his friends along who contributed important information. She not only carried out a sufficient number of interviews, but often observed her informants playing matchbox cars.<sup>3</sup>

Most of my informants among skid row men were confined to an alcoholism treatment center and had a great deal of free time. Interviews helped to break the monotony of incarceration. But when these informants went back to skid row they were busy trying "to make it"; they had much less time for interviews. Furthermore, their mobile style of life meant I never knew if I would see the same informant again.

In estimating the amount of time someone might give to interviews, it is

well to keep in mind that a busy informant keenly interested in the project will often *make* time. Because interviews involve the informant as an expert witness, they generate considerable enthusiasm. When one student decided to interview a college maid who had worked cleaning dormitories and campus houses for many years, this woman didn't know if she would have enough information to help him. But once in the role of informant, she realized that this student actually wanted her to teach him about her work. She grew excited about the interviews and gave freely of her time.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes a busy informant can be interviewed on the job, thus reducing the amount of extra time required. When the student interviewed the executive from the power company, she partially resolved the difficulties by traveling with him as he visited plants under his supervision.

One solution to the problem of inadequate time is to use *tandem informants*. A beginning ethnographer approached a young salesman in Len's Camera Store and he agreed to become an informant. But soon it became difficult to schedule interviews, so this ethnographer asked, "Could you suggest someone else I could talk to?" His informant introduced him to another salesman who had more time and also more experience. Without repeating the first steps in the interview series, he began where he had left off with the first informant. I have known others who completed a series of ethnographic interviews by using several informants in tandem. This required careful selection to insure that each informant shared the same cultural scene. If you select the president of a local company for interviews, it will be impossible to utilize additional informants since only one person fills that role. A member of a hot air balloon club, on the other hand, does not present such limitations; other members could also serve as informants.

In considering potential informants, then, high priority should be given to someone who has adequate time for the research. This criteria can be ignored if you select someone who will make time because of their interest in the project. If neither of these criteria can be met, select the kind of cultural scene in which you can easily contact and interview a series of different persons who share the same knowledge.

### NONANALYTIC

Some informants use their language to describe events and actions with almost no analysis of their meaning or significance. Other informants offer insightful analyses and interpretations of events from the perspective of the native "folk theory." Both can make excellent informants.

However, there is one type of analytic informant that is best avoided. An example will make clear the kind of analysis which can make interviewing difficult. My first encounter with this type of informant came unexpectedly. I had interviewed numerous tramps and was constantly on the lookout for

new informants who could talk about "making the bucket" in Seattle. Each week new patients from the city jail arrived at the treatment center and I reviewed their arrest records. Anyone arrested fifty to one hundred times suggested a man who could talk with authority about the jail. "You can't be a tramp if you don't make the bucket," I had learned from more than one informant.

Bob Johnson had a long arrest record. He had spent the last four years on skid row in Seattle, a good part of that time going through the revolving door of the jail. But something else struck me about Bob: he was a graduate of Harvard University and had gone on to do some graduate work in anthropology. I immediately contacted him and he agreed to an interview. His knowledge of life in the Seattle City Jail was detailed and current. I became excited about the possibilities of working with Bob as a key informant and at the end of our first interview I asked for his assistance.

"Could you think about the men who are at this center," I said, "and next week we can talk about the different *kinds* of men who are arrested and sent to the center."

On my next visit to the treatment center I invited Bob into my office. We chatted casually for a few minutes, then I started asking him some ethnographic questions. "What kind of men go through the Seattle City Jail and end up at this alcoholism treatment center?" I asked. "I've been thinking about the men who are here," Bob said thoughtfully. "I would divide them up first in terms of race. There are Negroes, Indians, Caucasians, and a few Eskimo. Next I think I would divide them on the basis of their education. Some have almost none, a few have some college. Then some of the men are married and some are single." For the next fifteen minutes he proceeded to give me the standard analytic categories that many social scientists use.

"Have you ever heard men referred to as tramps?" I asked. From numerous informants I knew this identity was the most important. "Oh, yes," Bob said, "some guys use that term."

"Are there different kinds of tramps?" I asked.

"I suppose so, but I'm not up on what they would be." Bob then proceeded to talk about intelligence, education, race, and other categories that usually interested social scientists. In later interviews Bob tended to analyze the motives men had for drinking and other behavior, but his analysis always reflected his background in college. He had great difficulty recalling how most other tramps would refer to things.

The ethnographer wants to discover patterns of meaning in what an informant says. This requires constant *analysis* of utterances, taking them apart to find the tacit relationships and patterns. Some informants can assist in analyzing their own culture—provided it is always from the perspective of the insider. In our society, many persons draw from psychology and the social sciences to analyze their own behavior. They mistakenly believe they can assist the ethnographer by offering these analytic insights. Such individ-

uals make poor informants for the novice ethnographer. Even the experienced interviewer must take special precautions such as using frequent "native language questions."

One student, a junior majoring in psychology, decided to study the culture of clinical psychologists. He approached someone who agreed to serve as an informant. But soon he discovered it was almost impossible for his informant to talk in his native language, the way he would talk to *other psychologists*. Instead, he constantly interpreted, analyzed, and explained to the student what psychologists are supposed to do.

Informants who are sophisticated in the social sciences can learn to respond to questions in a nonanalytic fashion. In studying cocktail waitresses, I collaborated with Brenda Mann who worked as a waitress during the study and served as a primary informant. She managed to set aside her social science background and respond from the perspective of Brady's Bar. In general, the beginning ethnographer will do well to locate informants who do not analyze their own culture from an outsider's perspective.

These criteria do not exhaust the ones that will make a good informant. However, if these criteria are met, the beginning ethnographer will eliminate some of the most vexing problems of learning to conduct ethnographic interviews. Having identified these general characteristics, we are now ready to undertake those tasks that will result in locating a good informant.

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## Tasks

- 1.1. **Make a list of potential informants (or cultural scenes). (A beginning ethnographer seeking a scene to study should list 40–50 possibilities.)**
  - 1.2. **Identify five or six of the most likely informants (or cultural scenes).**
  - 1.3. **Compare this list of potential informants on the five minimal requirements for a good informant. Place the selections in rank order.**
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## OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the basic elements in the ethnographic interview.
2. To formulate and use several kinds of ethnographic explanations.
3. To conduct a practice interview.

An ethnographic interview is a particular kind of *speech event*.<sup>1</sup> Every culture has many social occasions identified primarily by the kind of talking that takes place; I refer to these as speech events. In our society most of us quickly recognize when someone gives us a *sales pitch* for a used car or a set of encyclopedias. We recognize Johnny Carson's *monologue* on the Tonight Show. We can easily tell the difference between a *lecture*, a *job interview*, or a *friendly conversation*. Many of the cues to distinguish among these speech events remain outside our awareness, but we use them nonetheless. All speech events have cultural rules for beginning, ending, taking turns, asking questions, pausing, and even how close to stand to other people. In order to clarify the ethnographic interview, I want to compare it with a more familiar speech event, the friendly conversation.

## THE FRIENDLY CONVERSATION

Let's consider a brief example of a friendly conversation between two businessmen. Then we can identify some of the features of this speech event. Fred and Bob have known each other since college days; they live in the same city and see each other occasionally at the Rotary Club. It has been several months since they have talked. This conversation takes place in a large department store where they have by chance encountered one another.

BOB: "Hi Fred! How are you?" (Bob extends his hand while Fred hurriedly shifts a package to his left hand so he can respond.)

FRED: "Fine. It's good to see you." (A firm handshake is now underway, one that goes on for several seconds as they continue to talk.)

BOB: "How's the family? I haven't seen you since March. Did you have a good summer?"

FRED: "They're all doing fine. Jean just left for college a few weeks ago."

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- BOB: "That's right! How does it feel to have your oldest gone? Hardly seems possible. Billy's talking about the University of North Carolina for next year."
- FRED: "Did you have a good summer?"
- BOB: "Well things were pretty hectic at the office. We did get away for a couple weeks to the Smokies. Then Barbara and I had a long weekend up in D.C."
- FRED: "The Smokies? That sounds great. We've never been to that part of the country."
- BOB: "It was beautiful. But hot in August. We camped out for part of the time. If we go again I think we'd try to make it in September, maybe even after the leaves have started to turn. How about you? Did you get away?"
- FRED: "Yes, we spent three weeks in July up in Wisconsin."
- BOB: "Really! Where did you stay?"
- FRED: "Rented a cabin up in the northwest corner of the state. Did a lot of fishing. Best time was canoeing on the Brule River—nice rapids, but not too much for the kids. Had to rent two canoes, but we spent several days doing that river."
- BOB: "What kind of fish did you get?"
- FRED: "Bass, mostly, and panfish. John caught a musky and I think I had a northern pike on my line but he got away."
- BOB: "Say, how are things at the company?"
- FRED: "In May Al was transferred to Fort Lauderdale and that took a lot of pressure off. And since then sales have been up, too. Had a really productive week in early June—all the field men came in and I think that helped. How about you, still thinking of a transfer?"
- BOB: "Well, they keep talking about it. I've told them I'd rather wait till Danny finishes high school, but I don't think I could turn down a regional if it came along."
- FRED: "Look, I've got to meet Joan up the street in a few minutes; I'd better be off. It was really good to see you."
- BOB: "Yeah, let's get together sometime. I know Barbara would love to see Joan."
- FRED: "O.K. Sounds good. Take it easy now."
- BOB: "You too. Have a good day."

It is not difficult to recognize this exchange between Fred and Bob as a friendly conversation rather than a lecture, a sales presentation, or an interview for employment. The greeting, the casual nature of the encounter, the speech acts they used, and certain cultural rules they followed, all clearly define this speech event as a friendly conversation. In this example we can see at least the following elements:

1. *Greetings*. "Hi" and "It's good to see you," as well as the questions, serve as verbal markers to start the conversation. Physical contact expresses their friendship. When such people meet, they almost never begin talking without some form of greeting, usually both verbal and nonverbal. Some physical contact frequently emphasizes the closeness of their relationship.
2. *Lack of explicit purpose*. People engaging in friendly conversations don't have an agenda to cover, at least not an explicit one. They almost never say, "Let's talk about the vacations we each took this summer," or "I

want to ask you some questions about your work." They don't care where they are going in the talk as long as they *get somewhere*. Either person can bring up a wide range of topics; either person can signal they want to change the subject; either person can end the conversation. Both parties know the rules that make for this kind of purposelessness and flexibility.

3. *Avoiding repetition*. One of the clearest rules in friendly conversations is to avoid repetition. Friends will often say things like "Did I tell you about Al Sanders?" or "Have I told you about our summer?" This allows the other person to save us from the embarrassment of repeating ourselves without knowing it. Both friends assume that once something has been asked or stated, repetition becomes unnecessary. Repetition in the same conversation is especially avoided. We don't say, "Could you clarify what you said by going over it again?" This assumption, that it is good to avoid repetition, is not part of the informant interview.

4. *Asking questions*. Both Bob and Fred made inquiries about the other person. "How's the family?" "Did you have a good summer?" These questions allow them each to talk about personal matters; they also make it appropriate for the other person to ask similar kinds of questions in return. None of the questions required a lengthy answer, though some did elicit descriptions of their experiences.

5. *Expressing interest*. The questions themselves indicated interest in the other person. But both went beyond this to make statements like "That sounds great" and "Really!" Undoubtedly, friendly conversations are almost always filled with expressions of nonverbal interest. Frequent smiles, listening with eye contact, and various body postures all say, "I find what you're talking about very interesting, keep talking."

6. *Expressing ignorance*. People who repeat things we already know are considered bores. One way to protect friends from boring us or repeating themselves is to give messages that say, "Go on, I'm not bored, you're not telling me something I already know." These messages function in the same way as asking questions and expressing interest. "We've never been to that part of the country" is an expression of ignorance and an important means to encourage the other person to go on talking.

7. *Taking turns*. An implicit cultural rule for friendly conversations, turn taking helps keep the encounter balanced. We all have experienced violations of this rule and know how it leads to a sense of uneasiness or even anger. In other speech events, such as a sales presentation or interview, people do not take turns in the same way. Turn taking in friendly conversations allows people to ask each other the same kind of questions, such as "What did you do this summer?"

8. *Abbreviating*. Friendly conversations are filled with references that hint at things or only give partial information. It is as if both parties are seeking an economy of words; they avoid filling in all the details on the assumption that the other person will fill them in. This assumption leads to

abbreviated talk that is extremely difficult for outsiders to understand. Long-time friends have come to share a vast number of experiences and can fill in much of what is left unstated. They find it unnecessary to make explicit many of their meanings; the other person understands. Al Sanders refers to the name of Fred's boss. The "trouble" occurred when Al threatened to fire Fred from his job as sales manager if he didn't increase each salesman's quota, something an outsider would not know. Bob does not need to say, "You really mean that Al, the Vice President for sales, had called you in four times to talk about quotas and was putting pressure on you to put pressure on the sales force, something you were reluctant to do." A chief characteristic of this kind of conversation, then, is leaving out details that you think the other person will know without further explanation.

9. *Pausing*. Another element is the brief periods of silence when neither person feels it necessary to talk. The length of the silence depends on many personal factors. Pauses may function to indicate the parties wish to discontinue talking; they may be thinking in order to answer a question; they may wish to change the topic of conversation.

10. *Leave taking*. Friendly conversations never stop without some verbal ritual that says "The end." The parties must account for what they intend to do—stop talking. They must give some socially acceptable reason for ending. Such rituals are never direct except with very close friends. For example, we don't usually say, "I don't want to talk any more." Leave taking often occurs just before actual physical separation when the parties will not be able to talk further. However, sometimes they do remain together, as when friends ride the same bus; then the verbal leave taking might be "I'm going to catch 40 winks" or "I think I'll read a little."

There are other features of friendly conversations we could examine in this example. However, for understanding the ethnographic interview, these are sufficient to make the comparison.

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

When we examine the ethnographic interview as a speech event, we see that it shares many features with the friendly conversation. In fact, skilled ethnographers often gather most of their data through participant observation and many casual, friendly conversations. They may interview people without their awareness, merely carrying on a friendly conversation while introducing a few ethnographic questions.

It is best to think of ethnographic interviews as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants. Exclusive use of these new *ethnographic elements*, or introducing them too quickly, will make interviews become like a formal interrogation. Rapport will evaporate, and in-

formants may discontinue their cooperation. At any time during an interview it is possible to shift back to a friendly conversation. A few minutes of easygoing talk interspersed here and there throughout the interview will pay enormous dividends in rapport.

The three most important ethnographic elements are its *explicit purpose*, *ethnographic explanations*, and *ethnographic questions*.

1. *Explicit purpose*. When an ethnographer and informant meet together for an interview, both realize that the talking is supposed to go somewhere. The informant only has a hazy idea about this purpose; the ethnographer must make it clear. Each time they meet it is necessary to remind the informant where the interview is to go. Because ethnographic interviews involve purpose and direction, they will tend to be more formal than friendly conversations. Without being authoritarian, the ethnographer gradually takes more control of the talking, directing it in those channels that lead to discovering the cultural knowledge of the informant.

2. *Ethnographic explanations*. From the first encounter until the last interview, the ethnographer must repeatedly offer explanations to the informant. While learning an informant's culture, the informant also learns something—to become a teacher. Explanations facilitate this process. There are five types of explanations used repeatedly.

a. *Project explanations*. These include the most general statements about what the project is all about. The ethnographer must translate the goal of doing ethnography and eliciting an informant's cultural knowledge into terms the informant will understand. "I am interested in your occupation. I'd like to talk to you about what beauticians do." Later one might be more specific: "I want to know how beauticians talk about what they do, how they see their work, their customers, themselves. I want to study beauticians from your point of view."

b. *Recording explanations*. These include all statements about writing things down and reasons for tape recording the interviews. "I'd like to write some of this down," or "I'd like to tape record our interview so I can go over it later; would that be OK?"

c. *Native language explanations*. Since the goal of ethnography is to describe a culture in its own terms, the ethnographer seeks to encourage informants to speak in the same way they would talk to others *in their cultural scene*. These explanations remind informants *not* to use their translation competence. They take several forms and must be repeated frequently throughout the entire project. A typical native language explanation might be, "If you were talking to a customer, what would you say?"

d. *Interview explanations*. Slowly, over the weeks of interviewing, most informants become expert at providing the ethnographer with cultural information. One can then depart more and more from the friendly conversation model until finally it is possible to ask informants to perform tasks such as drawing a map or sorting terms written on cards. At those times it

becomes necessary to offer an explanation for the type of interview that will take place. "Today I'd like to ask you some different kinds of questions. I've written some terms on cards and I'd like to have you tell me which ones are alike or different. After that we can do the same for other terms." This kind of interview explanation helps informants know what to expect and to accept a greater formality in the interview.

e. *Question explanations.* The ethnographer's main tools for discovering another person's cultural knowledge is the ethnographic question. Since there are many different kinds, it is important to explain them as they are used. "I want to ask you a different type of question," may suffice in some cases. At other times it is necessary to provide a more detailed explanation of what is going on.

3. *Ethnographic questions.* Throughout this book I have identified more than thirty kinds of ethnographic questions (Appendix A). They will be introduced by stages; it is not necessary to learn all of them at once. The design of this book allows a person to master one form of ethnographic question and make it a part of their interviews; then the next form will be presented and explained. For now, I only want to identify the three main types and explain their function.

a. *Descriptive questions.* This type enables a person to collect an ongoing sample of an informant's language. Descriptive questions are the easiest to ask and they are used in all interviews. Here's an example: "Could you tell me what you do at the office?" or "Could you describe the conference you attended?"

b. *Structural questions.* These questions enable the ethnographer to discover information about *domains*, the basic units in an informant's cultural knowledge. They allow us to find out *how* informants have organized their knowledge. Examples of structural questions are: "What are all the different kinds of fish you caught on vacation?" and "What are all the stages in getting transferred in your company?" Structural questions are often repeated, so that if an informant identified six types of activities, the ethnographer might ask, "Can you think of any other kind of activities you would do as a beautician?"

c. *Contrast questions.* The ethnographer wants to find out what an informant *means* by the various terms used in his native language. Later I will discuss how meaning emerges from the contrasts implicit in any language. Contrast questions enable the ethnographer to discover the dimensions of meaning which informants employ to distinguish the objects and events in their world. A typical contrast question would be, "What's the difference between a *bass* and a *northern pike*?"

Let's turn now to an example of an ethnographic interview based on my own research on the culture of cocktail waitresses in a college bar. This example gives an overview of all three types of questions to be discussed in

later steps where I begin with descriptive questions, then move on to structural questions, and finally contrast questions.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

ETHNOGRAPHER: Hi, Pam. How are you?

PAM: Good. How are things with you?

ETHNOGRAPHER: Fine. How's school going?

PAM: Pretty slow; things are just getting started in most classes.

ETHNOGRAPHER: I'm really glad you could talk to me today.

PAM: Well, I'm not sure if I can help you. I just don't know what you want to know.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, as I told you on the phone, I'm interested in understanding your work as a cocktail waitress. You've had quite a bit of experience, haven't you?

PAM: Oh, yes! (laughs) But I don't know if that qualifies me to tell you very much.

ETHNOGRAPHER: How did you get the job at Brady's Bar?

PAM: Well, it was July, a couple years ago. I didn't have any waitress experience before. It was really a fluke that I got the job at all. I went to Brady's one night with some friends and they bet me I couldn't get a job so I just walked up to the bartender and asked for it and I got it! Started the very next week. I've only worked part time during school but full time during the summer.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You know, Pam, I've seen waitresses working in bars and restaurants, but as a customer. I'm sure my impressions of what they do is far different from the way that waitresses see the same things. Don't you think that's true?

PAM: Oh, yes! Very different. I found that out when I started.

## ANALYSIS

*Greetings.* This exchange of questions and words like "Hi," is a bit more formal than what might occur between close friends.

*Giving ethnographic explanations.* This begins here in recognizing they are going to "talk." Pam expresses doubts about her ability; she is unsure of the purpose of the interview.

*Asking friendly question.* This is not strictly an ethnographic question, but one that might be asked in a friendly conversation. It does provide information and helps relax the informant.

*Expressing cultural ignorance.* This can be done in many ways. Here the ethnographer places himself in the position of seeing waitresses but *not knowing* what their work is like. This paves the way for an ethnographic explanation. The ethnographer asks the informant to agree that the ethnographer is *truly ignorant*.

## THE DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH SEQUENCE

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, let me explain what I'm interested in. I would like to find out what it's like to work as a waitress. I guess what I want to know is if I got a job at Brady's Bar and worked there for a year or two, how would I see things? What would I have to know to do a good job and survive and make sense out of what goes on? I'd like to know what you do each night, the problems you have, just everything that goes into being a cocktail waitress.

PAM: Well, I could tell you some things, but I'm not sure I can answer all your questions.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, let me begin with a simple question. I've never been to Brady's Bar and I don't know what takes place there on a typical night. Even when I've been to other bars, it's usually for an hour or so, never an entire evening as a waitress would spend. Could you start at the beginning of an evening, say a typical night at Brady's Bar, and describe to me what goes on? Like, what do you do when you first arrive, then what do you do next? What are some of the things you would have to do on most nights, and then go on through the evening right up until you walk out the door and leave the bar?

PAM: Well, first I should say that there's no typical night at Brady's.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, that's fine, just go through any night and tell me what you think might usually happen.

Pam: It depends if I go on at 7 or 9 o'clock. I usually start at 9, at least lately.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K. Why don't you tell me what you would usually do, from the beginning of the evening at 9 o'clock when you come in, until the end when you go home.

*Giving ethnographic explanations.* He conveys the nature of the project without using technical terms like culture, ethnography, science, or cultural knowledge. It is put in everyday language that the informant will understand. Another important ethnographic element here is *repeating*. In several different ways the project explanation is repeated.

*Asking ethnographic questions.* Before asking, he states that he is going to ask one, thus preparing the informant. Then, *repeating* occurs in which the ethnographer asks the question in several different ways.

*Expressing cultural ignorance* prefaces the repetition of questions.

*Asking descriptive questions.* This is a special kind of descriptive question called a "grand tour question." It is asked, not in a simple statement, but with repeated phrases, expanding on the basic question. Expanding allows the informant time to think, to prepare her answer.

Pam's response gives the ethnographer an opportunity to *repeat* the grand tour question, thus giving Pam more time to think.

Pam's short answer gives the ethnographer another chance for repeating the descriptive question.

PAM: I usually get there at about 8:45.

I'll go to the kitchen and hang up my coat or sweater, then go back to the bar and sit for a while. I might ask for a coke and then pass the time joking with the bartender or some regular who is sitting nearby. If it's real busy, I'll punch in and go right to work. Anyway, by 9 o'clock I punch in and go to my waitress station and set up my tray. I'll take either the upper section or the lower depending on what the other waitress wants. Depending on what bartenders are working I might say, "Bob's on tonight, can I have the upper section?" But she has first choice since she came in at 7. The upper section is smaller and you get different types of people than in the lower section. You get more dates. My section was really popular last night. It was jammed. I couldn't even take my tray with me by the end of the evening, just carried one drink at a time.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Really! That must make it difficult.

PAM: (Nods her head)

ETHNOGRAPHER: You said that you would go to your waitress station and set up your tray. Could you describe for me what you do when you set up your tray?

PAM: Sure. You have a little round tray, like a pizza tray, two ash trays on it, one on top and one on the bottom. My tips go in the bottom and my loose change goes in the top ash tray. And the bills go under the ash tray, with the big bills on the bottom and the ones on top so you don't make the mistake of handing out a five or a ten.

Pam now begins to answer the grand tour question, easily describing the things she does at the bar each night. Some informants will talk for fifteen or twenty minutes without stopping; others pause to be sure they are doing the right thing. *Pausing* provides the ethnographer with a chance for *expressing interest*.

*Expressing interest.* In long responses to grand tour questions it is important to watch for every opportunity to verbally express interest.

*Restating.* The ethnographer begins to use Pam's words; this tells her it is important for her to use them.

*Incorporating.* As soon as possible, the ethnographer wants to move from questions that use his words to ones that incorporate native terms. Restating and incorporating are two of the most important elements and they often occur together in this way.

*Mini-tour question.* The phrase "set up your tray" was incorporated into a mini-tour question. This is a descriptive question that asks the informant to describe some smaller unit of an event or activity. Mini-tour questions can be asked almost any time, even before the grand tour question has been fully answered.

## THE DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH SEQUENCE

ETHNOGRAPHER: Oh, that's interesting and probably important for not losing money. I'd never thought of that.

PAM: Yeah, it gets dark and can be really hard to see.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K. Now, let's go back to my earlier question. You've punched in, gone to your section, set up your tray, and started to work. Could you describe what that would involve?

PAM: Well, first I'd look around and see if anyone wants anything. If someone is looking my way or looks like they want me, I'd go right to their table. Otherwise I'd just walk through the section, picking up empty bottles, emptying ash trays, cleaning up any empty tables. Then I'd watch and take orders and clean tables and all evening I'd be serving orders until finally I'd make last call and that would end the evening.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You've mentioned quite a number of things you do during a typical evening. You punch in, set up your tray, pick up empty bottles, take orders, clean tables, serve orders, and make last call. Now, would you say that these are all the things you do at Brady's Bar?

PAM: Oh, yes. Every night. That's about all I do.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Can you think of any other things you would do?

PAM: Well, I make change and sometimes I mix drinks.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You do? I thought only the bartender did that.

*Expressing interest.*

*Expressing cultural ignorance.*

*Restating.* The ethnographer picks up a whole series of terms the informant has used to describe what she's doing and repeats them. This serves to jog the memory of the informant, it helps return to the original question, and it helps her expand on the description. The ethnographer could have said, "What do you do next?" but by expanding the question and restating native terms, the informant will have an easier time answering it.

*Asking structural questions.* The ethnographer wants to introduce a structural question and begins by restating a list of activities that Pam has already mentioned. These make up a domain—things a waitress does at work—and the ethnographer wants to elicit a complete list of the terms in this domain. This question sequence begins with a *verification question*, then after Pam agrees, the structural question is asked.

*Expressing ignorance.* The ethnographer takes every opportunity to express his ignorance, to let the informant know he really doesn't know about the world of cocktail waitresses.

PAM: Well, if he has to go somewhere for a few minutes and it isn't too busy, he might ask me to get behind the bar and mix drinks for a few minutes. And another thing I do is help the other girl, if she wants.

ETHNOGRAPHER: I'm interested in the way waitresses would talk to each other at work. Could you give me a sentence a waitress might use to let you know she wants help?

PAM: Well, she might say, "Could you catch that table of guys over there?" but usually, if I'm not busy and I see her real busy in her section, I'd just go down and say, "Can I give you a hand?" Some girls will say, "Oh, thanks, I've really had a rush." But sometimes they'll say, "That's O.K., I'm almost caught up."

ETHNOGRAPHER: Now, I'd like to ask a different kind of question. I'm interested in the differences between some of your activities. What is the difference between *taking orders* and *servicing orders*?

PAM: Well, for one thing, you get more hassles taking orders than servicing orders.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Oh, really? Now that's something that as a customer I'd never know. But it's probably something every cocktail waitress knows?

PAM: Oh, yeah.

ETHNOGRAPHER: You know, you've mentioned several places in Brady's Bar, like the bar itself, the waitress station, the upper section, the lower section. I wonder if you could describe the inside of the bar to me. For instance, if I were blind and you took me into Brady's and took me

*Ethnographic explanation.* The ethnographer reminds the informant that he wants to know how she would use her native language (so she won't use her translation competence). *Asking a native language question.* This descriptive question asks for an expression related to what the informant is talking about—but in her native language.

*Explaining a question.* The ethnographer merely introduces it and says it will be different.

*Asking a contrast question.* All contrast questions restate and incorporate terms.

*Expressing interest.*

*Expressing cultural ignorance.* Here the ethnographer not only indicates it is something he wouldn't know, but something that every cocktail waitress would, i.e. it is common cultural knowledge to insiders.

*Restating.* In leading up to another question, the ethnographer uses the informant's language again to remind her of its importance.

throughout the bar telling me each place we were standing or you were looking at, what would it be like?

PAM: Well, when we first came in the front door, you'd be standing in front of a large horseshoe bar. On the left of the bar are a row of stools and behind the stools is a wall. On the right side of the bar are other stools and along that side are the two waitress stations. Then, on the right side of the bar, at the front is the lower section, to the back is the upper section. On the far side, against the wall, are the two restrooms and the door to the kitchen. And that's about it.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, that's great. I've really learned a lot today but it also makes me aware that you know a great deal more. We didn't get to discuss the details of taking orders or any of the different kinds of drinks. I'm sure there are a lot of other things. I'd like to go over my notes and I'm sure I'll think of other questions. It's really an interesting place and a lot more goes on there than meets the eye.

PAM: Yes, it's more complex than most people realize. In fact, I didn't realize there was so much that went on! (laughs)

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, could we meet again next week at this time?

PAM: Sure, that would be fine.

ETHNOGRAPHER: O.K. Thanks for coming today. This has really been interesting and I'm looking forward to learning a great deal more.

PAM: Well I enjoyed talking about it.

ETHNOGRAPHER: Well, I'll see you next week, then. Bye.

PAM: Fine. Bye.

*Misused question.*

*Creating a hypothetical situation.* This element is used frequently to place the informant in the scene and help her to use terms and phrases from her own language.

*Expressing ignorance.* This is a prelude to taking leave.

*Taking leave.* This element is very different from the friendly conversation. After expressing interest and that there is much more to learn, the ethnographer identifies topics he doesn't know about, things he wants to find out in the future. This helps the informant realize she knows more than she may think she knows, that she can teach the ethnographer a great deal more.

*Expressing interest.*

This brief ethnographic interview illustrates most of the elements that make up this kind of speech event. However, in order to include them in a

short space, the example distorts the normal course of such interviews. In particular, it appears that the ethnographer is jumping around from one topic to another, rather than allowing the informant to continue talking about what she does, about the difference between taking orders and serving orders, or about the spatial dimensions of the bar. In most ethnographic interviews, the informant would go on at much greater length on most topics and the ethnographer would not ask so many questions in such a short space of time.

More important for those learning to interview by following the steps in this book, the example includes many elements one would not use until after several interviews. So, rather than introducing descriptive questions, structural questions, and contrast questions into the first interview, each kind is slowly introduced over a number of interviews. This example had a specific purpose: to give an overview of the elements in an ethnographic interview. Later we will come back to the most important elements and explore them more fully. In Figure 2.1 I have summarized the basic elements.

In contrast to a friendly conversation, some striking alterations appear. In addition to an explicit purpose, the use of ethnographic explanations, and the use of ethnographic questions, we can identify the following changes.

1. *Turn taking is less balanced.* Although the informant and ethnographer take turns, they do not take turns asking the same kinds of questions or reporting on their experience. The relationship is asymmetrical: the ethnographer asks almost all the questions; the informant talks about her experience.

2. *Repeating replaces the normal rule of avoiding repetition.* Not only

**FIGURE 2.1 Elements in the Ethnographic Interview**

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1. Greetings
  2. Giving ethnographic explanations
    - 2.1 Giving project explanations
    - 2.2 Giving question explanations
    - 2.3 Giving recording explanations
    - 2.4 Giving native language explanations
    - 2.5 Giving interview explanations
  3. Asking ethnographic questions
    - 3.1 Asking descriptive questions
    - 3.2 Asking structural questions
    - 3.3 Asking contrast questions
  4. Asymmetrical turn taking
  5. Expressing interest
  6. Expressing cultural ignorance
  7. Repeating
  8. Restating informant's terms
  9. Incorporating informant's terms
  10. Creating hypothetical situations
  11. Asking friendly questions
  12. Taking leave
-

does the ethnographer repeat things the informant has said, restating them in her language, but questions are repeated. In a more lengthy interview, the ethnographer would ask similar questions over and over, such as, "Can you think of any other things you do on a typical night?"

3. *Expressing interest and ignorance occur more often but only on the part of the ethnographer.* Again, this aspect of the relationship is more asymmetrical than in friendly conversations. Especially at first, most informants lack assurance that they know enough, that the ethnographer is really interested, and these two elements become very important. Each can occur nonverbally as well as verbally.

4. *Finally, in place of the normal practice of abbreviating, the ethnographer encourages expanding on what each person says.* His questions are phrased and rephrased, expanding into paragraph length. And these very questions encourage the informant to tell more, not less, to go into more detail, not less. It takes many reminders for some informants to overcome the long-established practice of abbreviating.

In this chapter I have identified the major elements of the ethnographic interview. Because it involves a complex speech event, ethnographic interviewing requires practice to acquire the necessary skills. Practice also reduces the anxiety which all ethnographers experience when they begin interviewing a new informant. The tasks which follow are designed to reduce anxiety by making careful preparation and conducting a practice interview.

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## Tasks

- 2.1 **Conduct a practice ethnographic interview. (If you are in a group with others, interview a beginning ethnographer, then act as informant for that person.)**
  - 2.2 **Identify in writing the skills you managed well and those that need improvement.**
  - 2.3 **Write out several different project explanations to be used with one of the potential informants identified earlier. These explanations can reflect (1) a first contact, (2) beginning of the first interview, and (3) beginning of the second interview.**
-