

Step Four ASKING DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS

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OBJECTIVES

1. To conduct the first ethnographic interview.
2. To understand the process of developing rapport with an informant.
3. To collect a sample of an informant's speech by asking descriptive questions.

Ethnographic interviewing involves two distinct but complementary processes: *developing rapport* and *eliciting information*. Rapport encourages informants to talk about their culture. Eliciting information fosters the development of rapport. In this step we will examine rapport and discuss the nature of ethnographic questions, particularly descriptive questions.

THE RAPPORT PROCESS

Rapport refers to a harmonious relationship between ethnographer and informant. It means that a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information. Both the ethnographer and the informant have positive feelings about the interviews, perhaps even enjoy them. However, rapport does not necessarily mean deep friendship or profound intimacy between two people. Just as respect can develop between two people who do not particularly like one another, rapport can exist in the absence of fondness and affection.

It is impossible to identify universal qualities that build rapport because harmonious relationships are culturally defined in every society. And so the ethnographer must pay particular attention to friendly relationships in each cultural scene to learn local, culture-bound features that build rapport. For example, when I interviewed Kwakiutl informants in British Columbia, I observed that friends and kinsmen sat together in long periods of silence. Although difficult, I learned to sit in silence and to converse more slowly. The rapport I gained through adopting these local patterns of interaction contributed to successful interviews. What follows regarding rapport must be taken as general suggestions. Some will work well within our own society in many cultural scenes; other suggestions must be modified to fit local cultural situations as well as the peculiarities of individual informants.

Probably the only universal characteristic of rapport is that it changes and fluctuates over time. On first encounter a potential informant may appear eager and cooperative. During the first interview this same informant appears uncomfortable, anxious, and even defensive. A different informant, after several interviews conducted in a harmonious fashion, becomes suspicious and bored, even discontinuing further contact. Laura Bohannon, in her classic anthropological novel, *Return to Laughter*, graphically describes the fluctuating rapport she experienced with her informants. Yabo, an old man who showed initial antagonism, became the first informant to reveal the secrets of witchcraft. Kako, the chief, took the anthropologist into his homestead and expressed willingness to help from the start. However, circumstances changed and he soon refused to talk of anything significant, influencing others to ignore the anthropologist. Finally, this phase in the relationship passed and Kako again became a willing and helpful informant.

Although sometimes unpredictable, rapport frequently does develop in a patterned way. I want to suggest a model of the *rapport process* in ethnographic interviewing. This model will provide the beginning ethnographer with a kind of compass for recognizing when rapport is developing well and when it has wandered off course. It can provide a basis for identifying and correcting problems that arise in the ethnographer-informant relationship.

The rapport process, in cases where it develops successfully, usually proceeds through the following stages:

APPREHENSION → EXPLORATION → COOPERATION → PARTICIPATION

I want to discuss these stages by focusing on the interaction that goes on *during* interviews. In doing this, however, we should not lose sight of the wider context of field work. Most ethnographers will conduct participant observation at the same time, thus encountering key informants when they are working, visiting friends, enjoying leisure time, and carrying out ordinary activities. These encounters contribute to rapport as much as, or more than, the encounters during actual interviews. Under such conditions, the relationship may move more quickly to full cooperation. However, rapport still goes through a sequence of stages. Many times an ethnographer may want to conduct interviews with people not encountered during participant observation; rapport can still develop in a positive manner.

Apprehension

Ethnographic interviews always begin with a sense of uncertainty, a feeling of *apprehension*. This is true for both experienced ethnographers and the beginner. Every time I contacted a tramp and asked if we could talk, I felt apprehensive and sensed that each potential informant had similar feelings. Sometimes apprehension is slight; at other times informants express deep anxiety and suspicion. I recall one tramp who seemed overly anxious. I

explained my purpose and began asking questions but received only brief, curt replies. I felt increasing discomfort and made further attempts to put my informant at ease. "Are you with the F.B.I.?" he finally blurted out. I assured him I was a professor at the nearby medical school and had no connection with the F.B.I. or the local police department. He made me promise that I would not divulge his name to anyone, that all his statements could only be used anonymously.

Such extreme apprehension is rare, but some degree of uncertainty starting with the first contact through one or two interviews is common. The informant doesn't know what to expect, doesn't really understand the purposes and motives of the ethnographer. Both researcher and informant are unsure how the other person will evaluate responses. Informants may fear that they will not meet the expectations of the ethnographer. They may comment: "I don't know if I know enough," or "I'm not sure I can really help you, maybe you ought to talk to someone else about this."

The realization that ethnographic interviews begin with some uncertainty in the relationship can help the beginning ethnographer relax and accept this fact. At the same time, several things can help move the interviews through the stage of apprehension. The most important thing is to get informants talking. As we shall see later in this step, *descriptive questions* are especially useful to start the conversation and keep an informant freely talking. It does not usually matter what a person talks about; it does matter that the informant does most of the talking during the first couple of interviews. When an informant talks, the ethnographer has an opportunity to listen, to show interest, and to respond in a nonjudgmental fashion. These kinds of responses represent the most effective way to reduce an informant's apprehension. They communicate acceptance and engender trust. One of the most important principles, then, for the first interviews is to *keep informants talking*.

Exploration

Apprehension usually gives way quickly to *exploration*. In this stage of the rapport process, both ethnographer and informant begin trying out the new relationship. Together they seek to discover what the other person is like, what the other person really wants from the relationship. Exploration is a time of listening, observing, and testing. What does he want me to say? Can she be trusted? Is she going to be able to answer my questions? What does she really want from these interviews? Am I answering questions as I should? Does he really want to know what I know? These questions often go unspoken but exist nonetheless.

Apprehension, the first stage, arises in part from simple unfamiliarity with the terrain of ethnographic interviews. Exploration is the natural process of becoming familiar with this new landscape. Although each party begins exploring immediately, there comes a point where they leave behind the

feelings of uncertainty and anxiety to enter the fullblown stage of exploration. It may occur when each laughs at something said, when the informant seems to go off on an interesting tangent, or when the ethnographer mentally sets aside prepared questions to talk about something. When a sense of sharing occurs, a moment of relaxation comes. Both can then begin to explore the territory with greater freedom.

Informants need the opportunity to move through the stage of exploration without the pressure to fully cooperate. It takes time to grasp the nature of ethnographic interviews. It takes time to see if the ethnographer's actions will match the explanation offered during the first interview. Valuable data can be collected during this stage if the ethnographer is willing to wait for full cooperation. During this stage a certain tenseness exists and both parties may find the interviews exhausting.

Three important principles facilitate the rapport-building process during this stage. First, *make repeated explanations*. A simple statement may suffice: "As I said earlier, I'm interested in finding out how you talk about things, how you see things. I want to understand things from your point of view." One dare not assume that informants appreciate the nature of ethnographic interviews based only on the first explanation. Repetition before each interview, during interviews, and at the end of each will pay great dividends.

Second, *restate what informants say*. Using this principle, the ethnographer selects key phrases and terms used by an informant and restates them. Restating in this fashion reinforces what has been said by way of explanation. Restating demonstrates an interest in learning the informant's language and culture. Here are three examples of restatements typical of my interviews with tramps:

1. "Then you would say, 'I made the bucket in Seattle.'"
2. "So, if a man was a trustee, he'd do easy time."
3. "Then I might hear another tramp saying, 'He's a bindle stiff.' Is that right?"

Restating embodies the nonjudgmental attitude which contributes directly to rapport. When the ethnographer restates what an informant says, a powerful, unstated message is communicated—"I understand what you're saying; I am learning; it is valuable to me." Restatement must be distinguished from reinterpreting, a process in which the interviewer states *in different words* what the other person said. Reinterpreting prompts informants to translate; restating prompts them to speak in their own ordinary, everyday language.

The third principle states, *don't ask for meaning, ask for use*. Beginning ethnographers often become overconcerned with meanings and motives. They tend to press informants with questions like, "What do you mean by

that?" and "Why would you do that?" These questions contain a hidden judgmental component. Louder than words, they seem to shout, "You haven't been clear; you haven't explained adequately; you are hiding the true reasons for what you told me." Ethnographic interviewing differs from most other approaches by the absence of probing "why" and "what do you mean" questions.

Let me contrast the use of *why questions* and *meaning questions* with the strategy of asking informants how they use their ordinary language. An unfamiliar term emerged in my interviews with tramps; it was called "days hanging." I heard an informant say, "I had twenty days hanging so I pled guilty and asked the judge for the alcoholism treatment center." Another recalled, "Well, I left town because I had a lot of days hanging." Tramps could respond to direct questions and at first I asked things like, "Why did you have twenty days hanging?" "Why did you leave town?" and "What do you mean you had twenty days hanging?" However, this kind of questioning led directly to translations for my benefit. "Well, I had twenty days hanging because I'd made the bucket four times in a row." "I left town 'cause I knew I'd do hard time." And such translations required still more probing "why" questions—"Why did you have twenty days?" "What do you *mean*, did hard time?" Such questions communicated to my informants that they had not been clear. In a subtle, unspoken way, these questions pressured informants to use their translation competence.

As time went on I learned that instead of asking for meaning, it worked best to ask for use. Cultural meaning emerges from understanding how people *use* their ordinary language. With tramps, I would restate, then ask how the phrase was used. For example, I would say, "You had twenty days hanging. Could you tell me what you would say to the judge if you had ten or thirty or sixty days hanging?" Or I might ask for the way others used this phrase: "Would tramps generally talk about the days they had hanging before they went into the courtroom? What kinds of things would I hear them saying?" I might be more direct: "What are some other ways you could talk about days hanging?" or "Would someone ever say, 'I had twenty days hanging so I pled *not* guilty?'" Asking for use is a guiding principle that underlies all ethnographic interviewing. When combined with restating and making repeated explanations, ethnographic interviews usually move quickly through the stage of exploration.

Cooperation

In time, the rapport process moves into the next stage—cooperation. Informants often cooperate from the start of the first interview, but this stage involves more complete cooperation based on mutual trust. Instead of uncertainty, the ethnographer and informant know what to expect of one another. They no longer worry about offending each other or making mis-

takes in asking or answering questions. More and more, both persons find satisfaction in meeting together to talk. Informants may offer personal information and feel free to ask the ethnographer questions. Most important, both share in the definition of the interviews; they both know the goal is to discover the culture of the informant in the language of the informant. Now informants may spontaneously correct the ethnographer: "No, I wouldn't say 'the police arrested me,' but that 'a bull pinched me.' "

Participation

The final stage in the rapport process is *participation*. After many weeks of working closely with an informant, sometimes a new dimension is added to the relationship, one in which the informant recognizes and accepts the role of teaching the ethnographer. When this happens there is a heightened sense of cooperation and full participation in the research. Informants begin to take a more assertive role. They bring new information to the attention of the ethnographer and help in discovering patterns in their culture. They may begin to *analyze* their culture, but always from their own frame of reference. Between interviews they are on the lookout for information relevant to the ethnographic goals. Not all informants progress to this last stage of participation. If they do, they increasingly become participant observers in their own cultural scene. The ethnographer's role is then to help informant/participant-observers record what they know.

Building rapport is a complex process, one that every ethnographer must monitor when doing field work. In conducting ethnographic interviews, this process is facilitated by following certain principles: keep informants talking; make repeated explanations; restate what informants say; and don't ask for meaning, ask for use. When combined with asking ethnographic questions, rapport will usually develop in a smooth way from apprehension through cooperation and even into the stage of participation.

ETHNOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

In most forms of interviewing, questions are distinct from answers. The interviewer asks the questions, someone else responds with answers. This separation often means that questions and answers come from two different cultural meaning systems. Investigators from one cultural scene draw on their frame of reference to formulate questions. The people who respond are from a different cultural scene and draw on another frame of reference to provide answers. This kind of interviewing assumes that questions and answers are separate elements in human thinking. In the study of other cultures it frequently leads to distortions.

Ethnographic interviewing, on the other hand, begins with the assumption

that the question-answer sequence is a single element in human thinking. Questions always imply answers. Statements of any kind always imply questions. This is true even when the questions and answers remain unstated. In ethnographic interviewing, *both questions and answers must be discovered from informants*. Mary Black and Duane Metzger have summarized this point of view:

It is basic to communications theory that you don't start getting any information from an utterance or event until you know what it is in response to—you must know what question is being answered. It could be said of ethnography that until you know the question that someone in the culture is responding to you can't know many things about the responses. Yet the ethnographer is greeted, in the field, with an array of *responses*. He needs to know what question people are *answering* in their every act. He needs to know which questions are being taken for granted because they are what "everybody knows" without thinking. . . . Thus the task of the ethnographer is to discover questions that seek the relationship among entities that are conceptually meaningful to the people under investigation (1965:144).

There are three main ways to discover questions when studying another culture. First, the ethnographer can record the questions people ask in the course of everyday life. An ethnographer on a university campus in the United States might hear students asking the following questions about motion pictures: "Who stars in that one?" or "Is it rated R?" Other questions would probably be asked about particular courses such as: "Is that a sluff course?" or "When does it meet?" Some settings offer unique opportunities for discovering questions, as Frake has pointed out:

The ethnographer can listen for queries in use in the cultural scenes he observes, giving special attention to query-rich settings, e.g., children querying parents, medical specialists querying patients, legal authorities querying witnesses, priests querying the gods (1964a:143).

Second, the ethnographer can inquire directly about questions used by participants in a cultural scene. Black and Metzger have suggested three strategies:

1. To ask the informant, "What is an interesting question about _____?"
2. To ask the informant, "What is a question to which the answer is _____?"
3. To ask the informant to write a text in question-and-answer form on some topic of interest to the investigator (1965:146).

In my ethnographic research with tramps and cocktail waitresses I found it useful to create a hypothetical situation and then ask for questions. For example, I would ask a waitress-informant, "If I listened to waitresses

talking among themselves at the beginning of an evening, what questions would I hear them ask each other?" To which they might answer, "Who's the other bartender tonight?" or "Which section would you like to work?"

A third strategy for discovering questions simply asks informants to talk about a particular cultural scene. This approach uses general *descriptive questions* that are less likely to reflect the ethnographer's culture. Answers can be used to discover other culturally relevant questions. This approach is like offering informants a frame and canvas and asking them to paint a word-picture of their experience. "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" and "Could you describe a typical evening at Brady's Bar?" are examples of such *descriptive questions*. A variation on this approach developed by Agar (1969) in his study of heroin addicts in prison, is to ask two or more informants to role-play typical interactions from the cultural scene under consideration. As informants talk to each other, the ethnographer can record questions and answers. In the rest of this chapter I want to discuss in detail several kinds of descriptive questions.

DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS

Descriptive questions take "advantage of the power of language to construe settings" (Fraake 1964a: 143). The ethnographer does need to know at least one setting in which the informant carries out routine activities. For example, I needed to know my informants spent much of their time in jail to be able to ask, "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" I needed to know that cocktail waitresses worked evenings in Brady's Bar to be able to ask, "Could you describe a typical evening at Brady's Bar?" Because ethnographers almost always know *who* an informant is, they almost always know at least one appropriate setting to be used in a descriptive question. If one is studying air-traffic controllers, it is easy to ask, "What do you do as an air-traffic controller?" If one is studying the culture of housewives, it is easy to ask an informant, "Could you describe a typical day? What do you do as a housewife?"

There are five major types of descriptive questions and several subtypes (Figure 4.1). Their precise form will depend on the cultural scene selected for investigation. Descriptive questions aim to elicit a large sample of utterances in the informant's native language. They are intended to encourage an informant to talk about a particular cultural scene. Sometimes a single descriptive question can keep an informant talking for more than an hour.

One key principle in asking descriptive questions is that *expanding the length of the question tends to expand the length of the response*. Although a question like, "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" qualifies as a descriptive question, it needs expansion. Instead of this brief form, I might say, "I've never been inside the jail before, so I don't have much of an idea

FIGURE 4.1 Kinds of Descriptive Questions

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1. Grand Tour Questions
 - 1.1. Typical Grand Tour Questions
 - 1.2. Specific Grand Tour Questions
 - 1.3. Guided Grand Tour Questions
 - 1.4. Task-Related Grand Tour Questions
 2. Mini-Tour Questions
 - 2.1. Typical Mini-Tour Questions
 - 2.2. Specific Mini-Tour Questions
 - 2.3. Guided Mini-Tour Questions
 - 2.4. Task-Related Mini-Tour Questions
 3. Example Questions
 4. Experience Questions
 5. Native-Language Questions
 - 5.1. Direct Language Questions
 - 5.2. Hypothetical-Interaction Questions
 - 5.3. Typical-Sentence Questions
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what it's like. Could you kind of take me through the jail and tell me what it's like, what I would see if I went into the jail and walked all around? Could you tell me what it's like?" Expanding descriptive questions not only gives informants time to think, but it says, "Tell me as much as you can, in great detail."

1. Grand Tour Questions

A grand tour question simulates an experience many ethnographers have when they first begin to study a cultural scene. I arrived at the alcoholism treatment center and the director asked, "Would you like a grand tour of the place?" As we walked from building to building, he named the places and objects we saw, introduced me to people, and explained the activities in progress. I could not ask tramps to give me a grand tour of the Seattle City Jail, so I simply asked a grand tour question: "Could you describe the inside of the jail for me?" In both situations, I easily collected a large sample of native terms about these cultural scenes.

A grand tour usually takes place in a particular locale: a jail, a college campus, a home, a factory, a city, a fishing boat, etc. Grand tour questions about a locale almost always make sense to informants. We can now expand the idea of "grand tour" to include many other aspects of experience. In addition to *space*, informants can give us a grand tour through some *time* period: "Could you describe the main things that happen during the school year, beginning in September and going through May or June?" They can take an ethnographer through a sequence of *events*: "Can you tell me all the things that happen when you get arrested for being drunk, from the first moment you encounter the police, through going to court and being sentenced, until you finally get out of jail?" An informant can give the ethnog-

rapher a grand tour through some group of *people*: "Can you tell me the names of all your relatives and what each one is like?" Some large events such as a ceremony are made up of *activities* that can become the basis for a grand tour question: "What are all the things that you do during the initiation ceremony for new members who join the fraternity?" Even a group of *objects* offers an opportunity for a grand tour: "Could you describe all the different tools and other equipment you use in farming?" 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. Grand tour questions encourage informants to ramble on and on. There are four different types which vary the way such questions are asked.

1.1. Typical Grand Tour Questions. In this form, the ethnographer asks for a description of how things usually are. "Could you describe a *typical* night at Brady's Bar?" One might ask a secretary informant: "Could you describe a *typical* day at the office?" In studying Kwakiutl salmon fishing, I asked, "Could you tell me how you *usually* make a set?" Typical grand tour questions ask the informant to generalize, to talk about a pattern of events.

1.2. Specific Grand Tour Questions. A specific question takes the most recent day, the most recent series of events, or the locale best known to the informant. "Could you describe what happened at Brady's Bar last night, from the moment you arrived until you left?" An ethnographer might ask a secretary, "Tell me what you did yesterday, from the time you got to work until you left?" "Tell me about the last time you made a set, fishing for salmon." Some informants find it difficult to generalize to the *typical* but can easily describe a recent situation.

1.3. Guided Grand Tour Questions. This form asks the informant to give an actual grand tour. A secretary might be asked: "Could you show me around the office?" The ethnographer might ask a Kwakiutl fisherman, "The next time you make a set, can I come along and could you explain to me what you are doing?" Some subjects, such as a typical year or month, do not lend themselves to a guided tour.

1.4. Task-Related Grand Tour Questions. These questions ask the informant to perform some simple task that aids in the description. For example, I frequently asked tramps, "Could you draw a map of the inside of the Seattle City Jail and explain to me what it's like?" While performing this task, they added a great deal of verbal description. The map helped informants to remember and gave me a better understanding of the jail as they saw it. In studying the cultural scene of backgammon players, I asked, "Could you play a game of backgammon and explain what you are doing?" When informants perform tasks in the context of grand tour questions, the

ethnographer can ask numerous questions along the way, such as, "What is this?" and "What are you doing now?"

2. Mini-Tour Questions

Responses to grand tour questions offer almost unlimited opportunities for investigating smaller aspects of experience. Because grand tour questions lead to such rich descriptions, it is easy to overlook these new opportunities. One ethnographer, investigating the culture of directory assistance operators working for Bell Telephone Co., began with a grand tour question: "Could you describe a typical day in your work as a directory assistance operator?" After a lengthy description, she discovered that one recurrent activity was "taking calls." Each call lasted an average of 37 seconds. This led to a mini-tour question: "Could you describe what goes on in taking a call?" The informant was able to break down that brief period of time into more than a dozen activities, ones that were far more complex than the ethnographer realized when she asked the question.¹

Mini-tour questions are identical to grand tour questions except they deal with a much smaller unit of experience. "Could you describe what you do when you take a break at Brady's Bar?" "Could you draw me a map of the trusty tank in the Seattle City Jail?" "Could you describe to me how you take phone calls in your work as a secretary?" The four kinds of mini-tour questions (typical, specific, guided, task-related) use the same approaches as their counterparts do with grand tour questions.

3. Example Questions

Example questions are still more specific, in most cases. They take some single act or event identified by the informant and ask for an example. A tramp, in responding to a grand tour question, says, "I was arrested while pooling," and so I would ask, "Can you give me an example of pooling?" A waitress states, "There was a table of guys who really gave me a hard time last night." An example question: "Could you give me an example of someone giving you a hard time?" This type of question can be woven throughout almost any ethnographic interview. It often leads to the most interesting stories of actual happenings which an ethnographer will discover.

4. Experience Questions

This type merely asks informants for any experiences they have had in some particular setting. "You've probably had some interesting experiences in jail; can you recall any of them?" "Could you tell me about some experiences you have had working as a directory assistance operator?" These questions are so open ended that informants sometimes have

difficulty answering them. They also tend to elicit atypical events rather than recurrent, routine ones. They are best used after asking numerous grand tour and mini-tour questions.

5. Native-Language Questions

Native-language questions are designed to minimize the influence of informants' translation competence. Because descriptive questions are a first step to discovering more culturally relevant questions, they sometimes contain words and phrases seldom used by informants. This encourages informants to translate. Native-language questions ask informants to use the terms and phrases most commonly used in the cultural scene.

When I first began studying tramps, I only knew they were often incarcerated in the Seattle City Jail. "Could you describe the jail?" was a useful grand tour question, but I still was not sure that "jail" was a commonly used term. And so I asked a native-language question: "How would you refer to the jail?" When informants uniformly said, "Oh, most guys would call it *the bucket*," I was able to use this term in future questions. "How would you talk about getting arrested?" led to the term "made the bucket." Only then could I ask more meaningful descriptive questions like "Could you describe in detail what happens from beginning to end when you make the bucket?"

Native-language questions serve to remind informants that the ethnographer wants to learn their language. They can be used whenever one suspects an informant is translating for the ethnographer's benefit. They should be employed frequently in early interviews until an informant begins to state voluntarily, "The way we would say it is _____," or "Our term for that is _____." Every ethnographer can develop ways to insert native-language queries into each interview. I want to identify three useful strategies.

5.1. Direct-Language Questions. This type of native-language question simply asks "How would you refer to it?" when an informant uses a term. Sometimes it may take the form "Is that the way most people would say it?" For example, tramps often spoke of trying to find a place to sleep at night, so I would ask: "Would you say, 'I was trying to find a place to sleep?'" "No," they responded. "Probably I would say I was trying to *make a flop*." An ethnographer studying the culture of secretaries might ask the following native-language question:

SECRETARY: When I type letters I have to watch out for mistakes.

ETHNOGRAPHER: How would you refer to *mistakes*?

SECRETARY: Oh, I would call them *typos*.

The more familiar the informant and ethnographer are with each other's

cultures, the more important native-language questions become. I asked many direct-language questions of cocktail waitresses for this reason. An informant would say, "These two customers were really hassling me," and I would ask, "How would you refer to them, as *customers*?" To which she would reply: "I'd probably say those two *obnoxios*."

5.2. Hypothetical-Interaction Questions. Speaking takes place between people with particular identities. When an informant is talking to an ethnographer, it may be difficult to recall ways to talk to other people. The ethnographer can help in this recall by creating a hypothetical interaction. For example, an ethnographer could ask, "If you were talking to another directory assistance operator, would you say it that way?" Tramps not only interact among themselves but with policemen, or *bulls*. I often phrased hypothetical-interaction questions to discover how tramps talked to bulls as well as to other tramps.

Hypothetical-interaction questions can be used to generate many native-language utterances. I have interviewed children about school who could easily recall native usages when placed in situations such as the following: "If I were to sit in the back of your classroom, what kinds of things would I hear kids saying to each other?" "If a friend called on the phone to ask if you were going to bring your lunch, what would that person say?" It is even possible to construct the situation in more detail, as in the following question to a waitress: "Imagine yourself at a table of four male customers. You haven't said anything yet, and you don't know any of them. What kinds of things would they likely say to you when you first walked up to their table?" By being placed in a typical situation and having the identities of speaker and listener specified, most informants overcome any tendency to translate and recall many phrases used in ordinary talk.

5.3. Typical-Sentence Questions. A closely related kind of native-language question, this one asks for typical sentences that contain a word or phrase. "What are some sentences I would hear that include the phrase *making the bucket*," or "What are some sentences that use the term *flop*?" are two examples. The typical-sentence question provides an informant with one or more native terms and then asks that informant to use them in typical ways.

Descriptive questions form the basis of all ethnographic interviewing. They lead directly to a large sample of utterances that are expressed in the language used by informants in the cultural scene under investigation.

All ethnographic questions can be phrased in both personal and cultural terms. When phrasing questions *personally*, the ethnographer asks, "Can *you* describe a typical evening you would have at Brady's Bar?" or "How would *you* refer to the jail?" This tells the informant to present his own point

of view or her own particular language usage. When phrasing questions *culturally*, the ethnographer asks, "Can you describe a typical evening for most cocktail waitresses at Brady's Bar?" or "How would most tramps refer to the jail?" An informant is someone who can tell about patterns of behavior in a particular scene, not merely his or her own actions. I recall one novice ethnographer who asked a letter carrier about lunch. "I don't eat lunch" was the reply. The ethnographer later rephrased the question in cultural terms: "What do letter carriers do at lunch time?" This query brought a long response which included those who didn't eat lunch, those who brought lunches and ate together, those who ate at restaurants, and several other variations. The various things letter carriers did at lunch turned out to be important cultural information. But eliciting this information depended on phrasing the question in cultural terms.

In this chapter we have examined the rapport process and some of the principles that will facilitate the development of rapport. In addition, we have examined the nature of ethnographic questions and descriptive questions in particular. Descriptive questions form the backbone of all ethnographic interviews. They will make up most of the questions asked in the first interview and their use will continue throughout all subsequent interviews. With practice, a beginning ethnographer can easily gain skill in asking this type of ethnographic question.

Tasks

- 4.1. Review the examples given of the various kinds of descriptive questions and prepare several of each type for informants in the cultural scene you are studying.
 - 4.2. Conduct and record an ethnographic interview with an informant, using descriptive questions.
 - 4.3. Transcribe the recorded interview (or expand the condensed notes taken during the interview).
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