
Ethnography

Principles in practice

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Martyn Hammersley and
Paul Atkinson



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Insider accounts: listening and asking questions

It is a distinctive feature of social research that the 'objects' studied are in fact 'subjects', and themselves produce accounts of their world. As we saw in Chapter 1, this fact is interpreted rather differently by positivism and naturalism. For the former these common-sense accounts are subjective and must be replaced by science; at most they are simply social products to be explained. For naturalism, by contrast, common-sense knowledge *constitutes* the social world: it must be appreciated and described, not subjected to critical scrutiny as to its validity, nor explained away. More recent ethnographic critics of naturalism retain an interest in insider accounts, though they adopt a variety of attitudes towards them. Some regard the role of the ethnographer as to amplify the voices of those on the social margins; and they therefore seek ways of representing insider accounts in rhetorically powerful ways. Here the ethnographer's role approaches advocacy. Others see the task as to deconstruct accounts in order to understand how they were produced and the presuppositions on which they are based. Here the ethnographer's role comes close to ideology critique. And associated with both these views, sometimes, is a tendency to reject that concept of the validity of accounts which implies a correspondence between them and the world.

Our position fits neatly into none of these categories. For us, there are two legitimate and equally important ways in which insider accounts can be used by ethnographers. On the one hand, they can be read for what they tell us about the phenomena to which they refer. We see no reason to deny (or for that matter to affirm) the validity of accounts on the grounds that they are subjective, nor do we regard them as simply

constitutive of the phenomena they document. Everyone is a participant observer, acquiring knowledge about the social world in the course of participating in it. And, in our view, such participant knowledge on the part of people in a setting is an important resource for the ethnographer – though its validity should not be accepted at face value, any more than should that of information from other sources.

However skilful a researcher is in negotiating a role that allows observation of events, some information will not be available at first hand. For this reason, ethnographers have cultivated or even trained people as informants (Paul 1953). Indeed, at one time the use of informants seems to have been the staple research method in cultural anthropology. The central concern was the collection of specimens of 'primitive' life, whether material artefacts or myths and legends, as an extract from the field diary of Franz Boas illustrates:

I had a miserable day today. The natives held a big potlatch again. I was unable to get hold of anyone and had to snatch at whatever I could get. Late at night I did get something (a tale) for which I had been searching – 'The Birth of the Raven'... The big potlatches were continued today, but people found time to tell me stories.

(Rohner 1969:38; quoted in Pelto and Pelto 1978:243)

As Pelto and Pelto remark: 'Most anthropologists today would be overjoyed at the prospect of observing a full-blown potlatch and would assume that crucially important structural and cultural data could be extracted from the details of the ceremony' (1978:243). While in more recent times ethnographers have shown rather different priorities and have come to place more reliance on their own observations, considerable use is still made of informants, both to get information about activities that for one reason or another cannot be directly observed, and to check inferences made from observations (Burgess 1985e).

Accounts are also important, though, for what they may be able to tell us about those who produced them. We can use what people say as evidence about their perspectives, and perhaps about the larger subcultures and cultures to which they belong. Knowledge of these perspectives and cultures will often form an important element of the analysis. Here the approach is along the lines of the sociology of knowledge (Berger and

Luckmann 1967; Curtis and Petras 1970), though, equally, we can frame it in post-structuralist terms: what is of interest here is the forms of discourse through which accounts are constituted. Also instructive is ethnomethodological work showing that accounts are not simply representations of the world; they are part of the world they describe and are thus shaped by the contexts in which they occur (Atkinson 1988).

Besides contributing to the analysis directly, this second approach to accounts can also aid our assessment of the validity of the information provided by particular informants. The more effectively we can understand an account and its context – the presuppositions on which it relies, who produced it, for whom, and why – the better able we are to anticipate the ways in which it may suffer from biases of one kind or another as a source of information. In this sense the two ways of reading accounts – what we might call ‘information’ and ‘perspective’ analyses, respectively – are complementary. The same account can be analysed from both angles, though in asking questions of informants we may have one or other concern predominantly in mind.

Separating the question of the truth or falsity of people’s beliefs from the analysis of those beliefs as social phenomena allows us to treat participants’ knowledge as both resource and topic, and to do so in a principled way.

UNSOLICITED AND SOLICITED ACCOUNTS

Not all insider accounts are produced by informants responding to an ethnographer’s questions: they may be unsolicited. All human behaviour has an expressive dimension. Ecological arrangements, clothes, gesture, and manner all convey messages about people. They may be taken to indicate gender, social status, occupational role, group membership, attitudes, etc. However, the expressive power of language provides the most important resource for accounts. A crucial feature of language is its capacity to present descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of almost infinite variety about any aspect of the world, including itself. Thus, we find that in everyday life people continually provide linguistic accounts to one another: retailing news about ‘what happened’ on particular occasions, discussing each other’s motives, moral character, and abilities, etc. Such

talk occurs most notably when some kind of misalignment is perceived between values, rules, or normal expectations and the actual course of events (Hewitt and Stokes 1976). The resulting accounts may be concerned with remedying the discrepancy, or with finding some explanation for it, for example by ‘categorizing someone as ‘stupid’, ‘immoral’, or whatever.

Ethnographers may find such accounts a useful source both of direct information about the setting and of evidence about the perspectives, concerns, and discursive practices of the people who produce them. Furthermore, there are some sites where the exchange of accounts among participants is particularly likely to take place; and these are often rewarding locations for the ethnographer to visit. For instance, Hammersley found the staff-room of the school he was studying an extraordinarily rich source of teacher accounts, notably about particular students, their actions, ‘moods’, characters, and likely prospects, but also about national political events. These accounts provided the basis for an analysis of the ideological framework on which teachers in the school drew in making sense of their world (Hammersley 1980, 1981, and 1991b).

Of course, accounts are not only provided by participants to one another, they are also sometimes given unsolicited to participant observers. Indeed, especially in the early stages of fieldwork, participants may be intent upon making sure that the researcher understands the situation ‘correctly’. Very often the aim is to counteract what it is assumed others have been saying, or what are presumed to be the ethnographer’s likely interpretations of what has been observed (Hammersley 1980; Hitchcock 1983).

Sometimes, ethnographers are unable to go much beyond observation and the collection of unsolicited accounts. Asking questions may be interpreted as threatening, and even where answers are provided they may be of little value; as Okely found in her research on Gypsies:

The Gypsies’ experience of direct questions is partly formed by outsiders who would harass, prosecute or convert. The Gypsies assess the needs of the questioner and give the appropriate answer, thus disposing of the intruder, his ignorance intact. Alternatively the Gypsies may be deliberately inconsistent... I found the very act of questioning elicited

either an evasive and incorrect answer or a glazed look. It was more informative to merge into the surroundings than alter them as inquisitor. I participated in order to observe. Towards the end of fieldwork I pushed myself to ask questions, but invariably the response was unproductive, except among a few close associates. Even then, answers dried up, once it appeared that my questions no longer arose from spontaneous puzzlement and I was making other forms of discussion impossible.

(Okely 1983:45)

Agar's experience was similar in his research on drug addiction, though the threatening nature of questions was not the only reason they had to be avoided:

In the streets, though, I learned that you don't ask questions. There are at least two reasons for that rule. One is because a person is vulnerable to arrest by the police, or to being cheated or robbed by other street people. Questions about behaviour may be asked to find out when you are vulnerable to arrest. Or they may be asked to find out when or in what way you can be parted from some money or heroin. Even if one sees no direct connection between the question and those outcomes, it might just be because one has not figured out the questioner's 'game' yet.

The second reason for not asking questions is that you should not have to ask. To be accepted in the streets is to be hip; to be hip is to be knowledgeable; to be knowledgeable is to be capable of understanding what is going on on the basis of minimal cues. So to ask a question is to show that you are not acceptable and this creates problems in a relationship when you have just been introduced to somebody.

(Agar 1980:456)

While questioning may occasionally have to be avoided or abandoned, it is sometimes possible to overcome initial resistance through modification of the way in which questions are asked. Lerner (1957) reports the defensive reactions he met when he started interviewing members of French elites, and the strategy he developed to deal with them:

Our first approaches to interviewing were modest, tentative, apologetic. Trial-and-error, hit-and-miss (what the French love

to call '*L'empiricisme anglo-saxon*') finally produced a workable formula. To each prospective respondent, the interviewer explained that his Institute had undertaken a study of attitudes among the elite. As Frenchmen do not respond readily to questionnaire, he continued, we were seeking the counsel of specially qualified persons: 'Would you be so kind as to review with us the questionnaire we propose to use and give us the benefit of your criticisms? In responding yourself, you could explain which questions a Frenchman would be likely to resist and why; which questions would draw ambiguous or evasive responses that could not be properly interpreted; and which questions could be altered in such a way as to require reflective rather than merely stereotyped answers.'

By casting the interviewee in the role of expert consultant, we gave him the opportunity to indulge in a favourite indoor sport – generalizing about Frenchmen.

(Lerner 1957:27)

As a result of the influence of naturalism, it is not uncommon for ethnographers to regard solicited accounts as less valid than those produced spontaneously. Thus, for example, Becker and Geer (1960) argue that it is important to ensure that conclusions about the perspectives of participants are not entirely reliant on solicited answers, otherwise we may be misled by reactivity, by the effects of the researcher's questions on what is said. Similarly, there is a tendency among ethnographers to favour non-directive interviewing in which the interviewee is allowed to talk at length in his or her own terms, as opposed to more directive questioning. The aim here is to minimize, as far as possible, the influence of the researcher on what is said, and thus to facilitate the open expression of the informant's perspective on the world.

Now it is certainly true that the influence of the researcher on the production of data is an important issue, but it is misleading to regard it simply as a source of bias that must be, or can be entirely, removed. For one thing, neither non-directive interviewing nor even reliance on unsolicited accounts avoids the problem entirely. Hargreaves *et al.* (1975) report the difficulties they faced in developing a non-reactive way of eliciting teachers' accounts of classroom events:

Our principal method was to observe a lesson and from these

observations to extract those teacher statements and/or actions which consisted of a reaction to a deviant act. . . . We then reported the reaction back to the teacher at a later stage, asking for his commentary upon what he did. . . . We often merely quoted what the teacher had said, and the teacher was willing to make a commentary upon his action without any direct question from us. On other occasions we reported the teacher's statement back and then asked why the teacher had said or done something.

(Hargreaves *et al.* 1975:219)

They comment that even where no question was asked the teacher's account was still shaped by what he or she assumed would be seen as 'an appropriate, reasonable and meaningful answer to our unspoken question' (Hargreaves *et al.* 1975:220).

In fact, even where the researcher plays no role at all in generating the account, one can never be sure that his or her presence was not an important influence. For instance, where the researcher is not a party to the interaction but is simply within earshot, knowledge of his or her presence may still have an effect. Sometimes this influence is only too obvious, as the following fieldnote from Hammersley's study of staffroom talk among secondary school teachers makes clear:

(The researcher is sitting in an armchair reading a newspaper. Two teachers are engaged in conversation nearby, in the course of which the following exchange occurs.)

LARSON: You ought to be official NUT (National Union of Teachers) convenor.

WALKER: I'm only in the NUT for one reason.

LARSON: (looking significantly at the researcher): In case you get prosecuted for hitting someone.

WALKER: That's right.

Of course, the influence of the researcher can be eliminated through adoption of the 'complete observer' or 'complete participant' role, but not only does this place serious restrictions on the data collection process, as we saw in the previous chapter, it also in no sense guarantees valid data. The problem of reactivity is merely one aspect of a more general phenomenon that cannot be eradicated: the effects of audience, and indeed of context generally, on what people say and do. All accounts

must be interpreted in terms of the context in which they were produced. Thus, Dean and Whyte (1958) argue that rather than asking, for example, 'How do I know if the informant is telling the truth?' we should consider what the informant's statements reveal about his or her feelings and perceptions, and what inferences can be made from these about the actual environment or events he or she has experienced. The aim is not to gather 'pure' data that are free from potential bias. There is no such thing. Rather, the goal must be to discover the correct manner of interpreting whatever data we have.

Of course, this is not to suggest that how we collect data, or what data we collect, is of no importance. The point is that minimizing the influence of the researcher is not the only, or always even a prime, consideration. Assuming we understand how the presence of the researcher may have shaped the data, we can interpret the latter accordingly and it can provide important insights, allowing us to develop or test elements of the emerging analysis.

There is no reason, then, for ethnographers to shy away from the use of interviews, where these are viable. Interviewing can be an extremely important source of data: it may allow one to generate information that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain otherwise – both about events described and about perspectives and discursive strategies. And, of course, some sorts of qualitative research rely very heavily if not entirely on interview data, notably life-history work (Bertaux 1981; Plummer 1983).

At the same time, it should be noted that there are distinct advantages in combining participant observation with interviews; in particular, the data from each can be used to illuminate the other. As Dexter notes from his research on the United States Congress, one's experience as a participant observer can have an important effect on how one interprets what people say in interviews:

[In my research] I sometimes appear to rely chiefly upon interviews, but in fact I was living in Washington at the time, spent much of my 'free' time in a congressional office, saw a good deal of several congressional assistants and secretaries socially, worked on other matters with several persons actively engaged in relationships with Congress (lobbying and

liaison), had participated in a number of congressional campaigns, had read extensively about congressional history and behaviour, and had some relevant acquaintance with local politics in several congressional districts. All these factors made my analysis of interviews somewhat credible. And, as I look back, interviews sometimes acquired meaning from the observations which I often made while waiting in congressional offices – observation of other visitors, secretarial staffs, and so forth. And, finally, most important of all, it happened that interviews with constituents, lobbyists, congressmen of different views and factions, could be and were checked and re-checked, against each other. Yet in the book we say little about all this; and in fact it is only now, that I realize how much these other factors affected what I 'heard'.

(Dexter 1970:15)

The effect may also work the other way. What people say in interviews can lead us to see things differently in observation, as Woods (1981) illustrates, discussing his research on secondary school students. The way in which the students talked about boredom cued him into the experience of it:

One of my outstanding memories from the enormous mass of experience at the school is that of pupils talking to me about boredom. They managed to convey, largely in a very few words, years of crushing *ennui* that had been ingrained into their bones. Great wealth of expression was got into 'boring, 'boredom', 'it's so bo-or-ring here'. The word, I realized now, is onomatopoeic. I could never view lessons in company with that group again without experiencing that boredom myself. They would occasionally glance my way in the back corner of the room with the same pained expression on their faces, and I knew exactly what they meant. This, then, provided a platform for my understanding of the school life of one group of pupils.

(Woods 1981:22)

Any decision about whether to use interviews, alone or in combination with other sources of data, must be made in the context of the purpose of one's research and the circumstances in which it is to be carried out. And here, as elsewhere, there

are no right and wrong decisions, only better and worse ones; and sometimes these can only be recognized with hindsight. What is important to remember, though, is that different research strategies may produce different data, and thereby, perhaps, different conclusions.

ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWING: SELECTING INFORMANTS

A crucial issue that arises once the decision has been made to collect data via interviews is: who should be interviewed? Sometimes, particularly in the context of participant observation, people select themselves or others for interview, as Cannon found in her research on women with breast cancer:

Liz told me that she thought Yvonne was ready for another interview, 'she's not stopped talking all weekend'. A number of times women rang me to ask me to see them because they 'needed someone to talk to' about a particular event.

(Cannon 1992:171)

Here the driving force was the therapeutic value of the interviewing, but self-selection for interview can occur for other reasons. Most obviously, it may arise where ethnographers encourage informants to keep them updated, hoping that they will initiate contacts to report any news:

One of my key informants, Sylvia Robinson, always came to tell me what was going on in the school. She told me what happened on days when I was outside school, she talked to me about aspects of school policy that had been discussed at school meetings that I did not or could not attend, attributing remarks to particular teaching staff. Furthermore, she always updated me and any other teacher within earshot of the latest gossip in the school.

(Burgess 1985c:149–50)

Such informants are of considerable use to an ethnographer, and 'interviews' with them may be initiated by either side.

Gatekeepers or other powerful figures in the field sometimes attempt to select interviewees for the ethnographer. This may be done in good faith to facilitate the research, or it may be

designed to control the findings, as happened in Evans's study of a school for the hearing-impaired:

In the course of time I learned from another administrator that Mr Gregory [the head of the school] would definitely require handling with kid gloves. This fact came to light when I asked the former if he could direct me to some key people on the high school campus. The naivete of the question, and the political dimensions of my work, were noted quickly by his response:

No, I couldn't do that. Mr Gregory will send you to those he picks out. If you try to do any interviews without his approval and knowledge, then he will close it up tight.

... Days later Gregory met with me again and announced, 'We have selected for you the "cream of the crop".' That is, four teachers had been handpicked for interviews.

(Evans 1991:170-1)

While welcoming self-selection, and perhaps even selection by others, the ethnographer must retain the leeway to choose candidates for interview. Otherwise there is a grave danger that the data collected will be misleading in important respects, and the researcher will be unable to engage in the strategic search for data that is essential to a reflexive approach. However, gaining access to informants can be quite complex, sometimes as difficult as negotiating access to a setting. Indeed, it may even be necessary to negotiate with gatekeepers before one can contact the people one wants to interview:

If the sample of navy wives was to be broad, it was essential that the cooperation of the naval authorities was secured. . . . The Royal Navy was approached to elicit its cooperation and support and to gain access to their personnel listings. . . . This was not some polite formality prior to being given a free hand, but a delicate series of negotiations. . . .

Research on service personnel inevitably encounters security problems. Therefore, it was hardly surprising that the Royal Navy was apprehensive about any organization having access to personnel files. Access to such records was limited, even within the Royal Navy, and they were certainly not for

outside eyes. There was an additional problem. The Ethics Committee of the Royal Navy had in the past developed regulations, it was claimed, to protect the civilian status of naval wives; they were not to be contacted by civilian or naval authorities without the prior permission of their husbands. Although the Navy was clearly interested in the consultative value of . . . outside research, initially these problems seemed to be major stumbling blocks. Eventually, however, a compromise was reached and a listing of all the personnel in the administrative region of Western Area was sent to the Family Services section of a local naval establishment. No names or addresses were permitted to be removed from these premises, but all replies to a questionnaire survey and later invitations to an interview were returned to the Polytechnic. This means of contacting women was cumbersome, but it protected their anonymity and fitted in with the Navy's regulations on security.

(Chandler 1990:124)

Even where gatekeepers are not involved, identifying and contacting interviewees may not be straightforward, as Shaffir found in his research on people who had left ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups. His hope was that, having identified one or two *haredim*, they would be able to supply the names of others, so producing a 'snowball sample'; but this plan was initially frustrated:

I quickly learned that there was no institutional framework within which to locate such persons. Thus I arranged a meeting with a journalist who recently had written a sensitive piece on the topic and who claimed that she located respondents through an ad in her newspaper inviting former *haredim* to contact her. The similar ad I inserted yielded only one individual who claimed to know of no others like himself. Although he did not lead me to further contacts, my conversation with him sensitized me to the pain, anguish, and desperation that characterized his departure from the ultra-Orthodox world – a theme that proved central in the account of every former *haredi* I was to meet.

The snowball technique that proved so effective for meeting Chassidic and newly observant Jews was largely unhelpful in the *haredi* project. *Ex-haredim* with whom I met suspected that

there were others like themselves, but they did not know where to find them. Although at first I was suspicious of this claim, I gradually appreciated the extent to which former *haredim* were cut off from their previous circle such that they knew little, if anything, about other individuals who had defected recently. The important exception was Chaim. . . . At the end of my conversation with him, I asked whether he knew of others like himself with whom I might meet. 'Yes, I do,' he replied, 'I have names and telephone numbers. How many people do you want to meet?'

(Shaffir 1991:76)

Sometimes the difficulty of getting access to informants determines who will and will not be interviewed. But usually there is a choice of potential interviewees, and then decisions have to be made about how many to interview and whom these should be. These are not decisions that have to be taken once and for all; usually in ethnographic work they will be made recurrently. But, of course, in making them the researcher has to take account of the time and resources available and of the opportunity costs of different decisions. In life-history work, there may be only a single informant, who is interviewed repeatedly. More usually, ethnographers interview a range of people, but some of these may need to be interviewed more than once, for example because the aim is to trace patterns of change over time, or because it is discovered that further information, or checking of previously supplied information, is required.

The criteria by which ethnographers choose people for interview can vary considerably, even over the course of the same research project. In survey research the aim, typically, is to seek a representative sample. And, sometimes, this is the goal in ethnographic research too, though what is usually involved is sampling within rather than across cases (see Chapter 2). When studying a large organization, one may not have the time and resources to interview *all* the occupants of a particular role, and may therefore try to select a sample of them that is representative.

Doing this may be approached in much the same way as in survey research, selecting a suitably sized sample at random, or a stratified sample that takes account of known heterogeneity among the members of the population. However, such system-

atic sampling requires the existence of relatively clear boundaries around the population, and the existence and availability of a full listing of its members. Such conditions may be met in organizational contexts, but they will not be in others. Equally, often the time is simply not available to interview a large sample. In such circumstances, the researcher will have to select interviewees as best he or she can in order to try to achieve representativeness – though it may be possible to check the success of this by asking informants for their judgments about what are and are not representative views, and/or by comparing the characteristics of the sample with what is known about the population as a whole.

However, a representative sample of informants is not always what is required in ethnographic research. This is especially so where the primary concern is with eliciting information rather than with documenting perspectives or discursive practices. Here the aim will often be to target those people who have the knowledge desired and who may be willing to divulge it to the ethnographer. Identifying such people requires that one draw on assumptions about the social distribution of knowledge and about the motives of those in different roles. Dean *et al.* provide an elaborate illustration of the sort of thinking that may lie behind such strategic selection of interviewees:

1 *Informants who are especially sensitive to the area of concern*

The outsider who sees things from the vantage point of another culture, social class, community, etc.

The rookie, who is surprised by what goes on and notes the taken-for-granted things that the acclimatized miss. And, as yet, he may have no stake in the system to protect.

The *nouveau* statused, who is in transition from one position to another where the tensions of new experience are vivid.

The naturally reflective and objective person in the field. He can sometimes be pointed out by others of his kind.

2 *The more-willing-to-reveal informants*

Because of their background or status, some informants are just more willing to talk than others:

The naive informant, who knows not whereof he speaks. He may be either naive as to what the fieldworker represents or naive about his own group.

The frustrated person, who may be a rebel or malcontent, especially the one who is consciously aware of his blocked drives and impulses.

The 'outs', who have lost power but are 'in-the-know'. Some of the 'ins' may be eager to reveal negative facts about their colleagues.

The habitué or 'old hand' or 'fixture', who no longer has a stake in the venture or is so secure that he is not jeopardized by exposing what others say or do.

The needy person, who fastens onto the interviewer because he craves attention and support. As long as the interviewer satisfies this need, he will talk.

The subordinate, who must adapt to superiors. He generally develops insights to cushion the impact of authority, and he may be hostile and willing to 'blow his top'.

(Dean *et al.* 1967:285)

Along the same lines, in his research on educational research policy-makers, Ball (1994) reports how he discovered early on that there was limited value in interviewing government ministers currently in office, that a much more effective strategy was to concentrate on those who had left office, since they were much more likely to feel free to provide inside information. Informants may also be selected on the basis of what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call 'theoretical sampling', choosing those whose testimony seems most likely to develop and test emerging analytic ideas.

Who is interviewed, when, and how will usually be decided as the research progresses, according to the ethnographer's assessment of the current state of his or her knowledge, and according to judgments as to how it might best be developed further. Of course, not everyone whom one might wish to interview will be willing. And, even with those who are willing in principle, it may take a considerable time, and may involve some cost, to obtain an interview. Nor will the account obtained

always be illuminating, as Thomas reports from his research on top business executives:

Unless you have some sort of leverage with which to get their attention, chances are you will get it for only half the time you think you need. Journalists I know are pleased to get an hour with an executive; but journalists have a source of leverage most sociologists do not. A staff writer for the *Wall Street Journal* or *Fortune* magazine can at least imply that he won't say nice things – or he won't say anything at all (which can be worse) – if he does not get access to the executive he wishes to interview. Even then, if you do get the 30 minutes, you may find that an emergency or someone more important bumps you off the schedule. If you get in the door, you will find that the executive does not intend to answer your questions or has a script of her own that she'd like to repeat. All of this can happen (and has happened to me) after you've spent several months and hundreds of dollars to get to the executive's office in the first place.

(Thomas 1993:82–3)

As with any other data collection technique, the quality and relevance of the data produced by interviews can vary considerably, and is not always predictable. Selection of informants must be based on the best judgments one can make in the circumstances. However, one may need to revise these judgments on the basis of experience.

INTERVIEWS AS PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Interviews in ethnographic research range from spontaneous, informal conversations in places that are being used for other purposes, to formally arranged meetings in bounded settings out of earshot of other people. In the case of the former the dividing line between participant observation and interviewing is hard to discern. In the case of formal interviews it is more obvious. Here the interview represents a distinct setting, and it follows from this that the participant understandings elicited there may not be those which underlie behaviour elsewhere (Silverman 1973). This problem has been highlighted in research on teachers' typifications of students. Hargreaves *et al.* (1975), using observation and formal interviews, presented a picture of

teachers' typifications as elaborate and individualized. Woods (1979) challenged their account, arguing, in part, that their data were a product of the interview situation and of their own analytical orientation. He claims that teachers would not be able to operate on the basis of such elaborate typifications in the secondary school classroom, given the sheer number of students they deal with each day. Whatever the merits of the arguments on each side, the fact that there is a problem about relating perspectives elicited in interviews to actions in other settings comes through clearly (Hargreaves 1977).

However, as we suggested earlier, the distinctiveness of the interview setting must not be exaggerated, and it can be viewed as a resource rather than as a problem. Just as the impact of the participant observer on the people observed is not simply a source of bias, so too with that of the interviewer. Indeed, to the extent that the aim in ethnography goes beyond the provision of a description of what occurred in a particular setting over a certain period of time, there may be positive advantages to be gained from subjecting people to verbal stimuli different to those prevalent in the settings in which they normally operate. In other words, the 'artificiality' of the interview when compared with 'normal' events in the setting may allow us to understand how participants would behave in other circumstances, for example when they move out of a setting or when the setting changes. Labov's (1969) work on 'the logic of non-standard English' illustrates this when he compares interviews in which the interviewer takes different roles. We might expect that the monosyllabic responses of some children in his formal interviews, while not an accurate indicator of their linguistic resources, may have been a genuine reflection of their behaviour in other similar circumstances, such as interviews with counselors and social workers, or lessons in school. It may be that by varying features of the interview situation in this way we can identify which aspects of the setting produce particular responses.

Thus, while it is true that the perspectives elicited in interviews do not provide direct access to some cognitive and attitudinal base from which a person's behaviour in 'natural' settings is derived, they may still be capable of illuminating that behaviour. Similarly, while we must not treat the validity of people's reports of their attitudes, feelings, behaviour, etc., as

beyond all possible doubt, as a privileged source of information, there is no reason to dismiss them as of no value at all, or even to treat them as of value only as displays of perspectives or discourse strategies.

The differences between participant observation and interviewing are not as great as is sometimes suggested, then. In both cases we must take account of context and of the effects of the researcher. There are other parallels too. Thus, both the participant observer and the interviewer need to build rapport. When interviewing people with whom one has already established a relationship through participant observation, little further work may be required. But where the research does not have a participant observation component, or where the ethnographer has had little or no previous contact with the person being interviewed, the task of building rapport is important. Much of what we wrote in the previous chapter about building relationships in participant observation applies here too. The personal characteristics of the researcher, and how these relate to those of the interviewee, can be important, though their effects are never entirely determinate. And they can be controlled to some degree by the interviewer's presentation of self. Measor (1985), for example, indicates the care she took with dressing appropriately when doing life-history interviews with teachers. This meant wearing very different clothes according, for example, to the age of the teacher concerned. She also reports drawing on shared interests and biographical experiences, and indeed developing some new interests, to facilitate the interview process. As in participant observation, so also in interviewing, it may be possible by careful self-presentation to avoid the attribution of damaging identities and to encourage ones that might facilitate rapport.

Building rapport is not the only concern, however. Equally necessary may be establishing and maintaining the interview situation itself. This is especially likely to be a problem when one is interviewing relatively powerful people:

Elites are used to being in charge, and they are used to having others defer to them. They are also used to being asked what they think and having what they think matter in other people's lives. These social facts can result in the researcher being too deferential and overly concerned about establishing

positive rapport. . . . I have found it important for the interviewer to establish some visible control of the situation at the very beginning, even if the elite subject is momentarily set off balance. This came to my attention especially on one occasion when an elite board member of one of the family and child welfare agencies I was studying suggested that I meet him for our interview at 7:30 in the morning at an elegant downtown restaurant where he had a table in his name and breakfasted daily. I agreed and wondered aloud to a friend how I would convey the message from the outset – to myself as well as to him – that I was going to structure the social situation in which we found ourselves, even though we were clearly in his space and not mine. My friend suggested that I begin by arriving early and be sitting at his table when he came in. That would give me some time to get accustomed to the space and claim some of it as my own before he arrived. It worked like a charm. He appeared briefly taken aback and began by deferring to me and my research interests. It was a very successful interview, frank and substantive.

(Ostrander 1993:19–20)

This problem of establishing the interview context may also arise outside of the study of elites, as Curren (1992) found in her attempts to interview Pathan women, who insisted on treating the event as a social occasion. And, as that example illustrates, it is a problem that is not always so easy to resolve.

The initial few minutes of an interview can be particularly significant in establishing its nature and tone. At that point there may be some implicit, and perhaps even explicit, negotiation about the form the interview will take. One element of this will usually be information offered by the researcher about the reason for the interview, along with reassurances about confidentiality and the right of the interviewee to refuse to answer any question to which they would prefer not to respond. Small-talk may also take place at this stage, perhaps while a decision is made about where to sit, where to put the audio-recorder (if one is being used), etc.

The interviewer's manner while the informant is talking can also be very important. The latter will often be looking for some indication of whether the answers being provided are appropriate, and also perhaps for any sign of judgmental reac-

tion. Generally, then, the interviewer needs to give clear indications of acceptance. Equally important, though, are signs that the ethnographer is following what is being said, and here appropriate responses on her or his part are essential. As Measor notes, God forbid that one should fail to laugh at an informant's joke! This underlines an important feature of much ethnographic interviewing: that within the boundaries of the interview context the aim is to facilitate a conversation, giving the interviewee a good deal more leeway to talk on their own terms than is the case in standardized interviews.

Frequently, the researcher him- or herself is the only other person present at an interview, and the guarantee of confidentiality implies that no one else will ever hear what the informant has said in a way that is attributable to him or her. Under these circumstances informants may be willing to divulge information and express opinions that they would not in front of others. However, this does not mean that this information is necessarily true or that the opinions they present are more genuine, more truly reflect their perspectives, than what they say on other occasions. Whether or not this is the case, and in what senses it is true, will depend in part on how their orientations towards others, including the researcher, are structured. Furthermore, informants are often aware that they are in some sense 'speaking for posterity', and this too will have an effect on what they say and how they say it. They may even doubt the ethnographer's assurances of confidentiality and seek to use him or her to 'leak' information to others.

Sometimes, of course, ethnographers conduct interviews where more than one other person is present, and here the question of audience is even more complex. On occasions, the presence of others cannot be avoided, as Lee reports:

Where possible, couples were interviewed separately, but joint interviews were necessary in a number of cases. This was particularly so with some of the more recently married couples who lived in quite small flats. I found it embarrassing to ask one partner to wait in another room – usually the bedroom – while I interviewed the other.

(Lee 1992:136)

Chandler had the same problem in her study of navy wives, and it had a significant effect:

Although appointments were made to interview only the women, on two occasions husbands were present. His presence transformed the interview; he altered the questioning, the woman's answers and sometimes he joined in. Even when he did not speak he communicated what he felt by means of what has come to be known as body language and his reactions were monitored by the women in their replies.

(Chandler 1990:127)

Such interventions need not always be counterproductive, however, as Hunter notes. During an interview he was carrying out with a councillor at his home in a wealthy suburb of Chicago, the latter's wife came in:

After listening briefly as an observer, she began to add asides and commentary on her husband's responses. Slowly, what had been heretofore a very focused and somewhat formal interview about issues and politics soon became transformed into a three-way conversation about particular persons among the elite. The wife was adding more 'social commentary' about people, who got along with whom, who was respected or not, and the interview was transformed into a very informative and revealing 'gossip situation'.

(Hunter 1993:48)

Sometimes, of course, ethnographers intentionally arrange interviews with more than one person at a time. In addition to the fact that group interviews allow a greater number of people to be interviewed, they also have the advantage that they may make the interview situation less strange for interviewees and thus encourage them to be more forthcoming. In particular, this may overcome the problem of the shy and retiring person, as in the case of Carol, quoted by Helen Simons:

INTERVIEWER: Does the lesson help the shy ones or does it make them stand out more?

ANGELA: They're so quiet and then all of sudden one of them'll speak and you think 'What's come over them?' I suppose they've got their opinion in their head and they hear everyone else talking so they think they will.

PATRICIA: Carol's quiet.

INTERVIEWER: You didn't like speaking?

CAROL: I'd only talk when I was asked a question.

ANGELA: Sort of speak when you're spoken to. I noticed that when I first met her, I thought she was quiet.

INTERVIEWER: But now you speak when you want to put your point of view.

CAROL: Yes. When I think someone's wrong, I'll say what I think.

INTERVIEWER: And how long did it take you to get to this stage?

CAROL: Well, it was more friendly, we sat in a circle and we could speak to each other. That was better and it didn't take long, only a few lessons.

ANGELA: I noticed after three or four lessons Carol started speaking more.

PATRICIA: I spoke the first lesson.

ANGELA: So did I.

CAROL: It gets me mad when people say you're very quiet though. I enjoy other people's views as well.

ANGELA (to Patricia): Probably the way you shout, you probably frighten them to death.

(Simons 1981:40)

Of course, whether or not group interviews are successful in relaxing those who would find a one-to-one interview intimidating very much depends on the composition of the group.

What is said, as well as who speaks, is also likely to be affected by whether a group or individual format is used. For example, in a group the interviewer will usually find it more difficult to maintain control over topic. On the other hand, this may be all to the good in that informants can prompt one another – 'Go on, tell him', 'What about when you...?' – using information not available to the researcher and in ways which turn out to be productive (Woods 1979). Douglas used an interesting variation on this strategy in his attempts to get an informant to 'spill the beans' about massage parlours:

we had long known that the ultimate insider in the massage parlors was a local lawyer who represented the massage parlor association and about 80 per cent of the cases. We wanted to open him up, so we tried to set him up for it. We wanted to make it manifest to the lawyer that we were on the inside and could thus be trusted. We knew it wouldn't do any good to give him verbal commitments – 'Hey, man,

we're on your side, you can trust us.' He was used to every possible deception and double cross from all angles. It would have to be made manifest, physically real. . . . We got two young masseuses to go with [us] for the interview, showing by their presence and trust in [us] what angle [we were] coming from. As [we] were ushered into the lawyer's office, two employees at the parlor where one of the girls . . . worked came out and they had a grand reunion right there. (Researchers need luck as much as anyone else.) As the interview progressed, the two girls talked of their work. One of them, as we knew well, was under indictment for her work in a parlor. They talked about that. She was impressed by the lawyer and shifted her case to him. At the end of the interview, the lawyer told [us we] could use all his files, make xerox copies of them, use his name in doing [our] research, accompany him on cases, etc. We felt sure there were some things he wasn't telling us (and one of the girls later started working with him to get at more and check it out), but that seemed okay for the first hour.

(Douglas 1976:174-5)

At the same time, of course, the effects of audience must be monitored. Woods provides an illustration of the need for this from his group interviews with secondary school students:

For added ribaldry, the facts will probably have suffered some distortion. . . . Consider this example:

TRACY: Dianne fell off a chair first and as she went to get up, she got 'old of me skirt, she was having a muck about, and there was I in me petticoat, me skirt came down round my ankles and Mr. Bridge came in (great screams of laughter from girls). He'd been standing outside the door.

KATE: 'E told her she'd get suspended.

TRACY: He 'ad me mum up the school, telling her what a horrible child I was.

KATE: 'Nobody will marry you,' said Miss Judge.

TRACY: Oh yeah, Miss Judge sits there, 'n, nobody will want to marry you, Jones,' she said. I said, 'Well you ain't married, anyway.'

(Shrieks of laughter from girls.)

(Woods 1981:20)

The possibility of distortion is always present in participant accounts, since (as in the above example) they are often worked up for purposes where truth is probably not the primary concern. On the other hand, group discussions may provide considerable insight into participant culture: in other words, what is lost in terms of information may be compensated for by the illumination that the accounts provide into the perspectives and discursive repertoires of those being interviewed.

Pollard employed a further, novel variation on the manipulation of audience in the interviewing strategy he used in his research on a middle school:

children were invited to form a dinner-time interviewing team to help me, as I put it, 'find out what all the children think about school'. This group very quickly coined the name 'The Moorside Investigation Department' (MID) for themselves and generated a sense of self-importance. Over the next year the membership of MID changed gradually, but I always attempted to balance it by having members of a range of groups. Normally about six children were involved at any one time and the total number of children involved during the year was thirteen. . . . My intention in setting up a child interviewing team was to break through the anticipated reticence of children towards me as a teacher. I spent a lot of time with the MID members discussing the type of things I was interested in and establishing the idea of immunity to teacher-prosecution and of confidentiality. We then began a procedure of inviting groups of children - in twos, threes or fours to give confidence - to be interviewed by a MID member in a building which was unused at dinner-times. Sometimes the interviewers would interview their own friends, sometimes they would interview children whom they did not know well. Initially, I did not try to control this but left it very much to the children.

(Pollard 1985:227-8)

Here again, of course, the effects of audience need to be taken into account. And the data produced will have been affected not only by the particular children involved, but also by Pollard's background role.

As important as who is present at an interview, and who carries it out, often, is where and when it takes place. Again,

though, the location of interviews is something which the ethnographer may not be able to control. Two of the couples Lee interviewed in his study of religious intermarriage in Northern Ireland only agreed to meet him

on the condition that our initial contact was made in a public place, and that they would have a description of me but I would have no description of them. In this way they were able to 'look me over' and make a judgment about the possible threat I might pose before deciding whether or not to make themselves known to me. Obviously I passed the test since both couples did make themselves known and both were interviewed. In neither case, though, was I invited to the couple's home and each interview took place on 'neutral' territory, presumably so that the couples could ensure that their address remained unknown.

(Lee 1992:131)

Even where the ethnographer is able to decide where the interview will take place, finding a suitable locale is not always easy. Burgess notes that in his study of a secondary school he conducted interviews in classrooms and departmental workrooms, both of which were far from ideal. Others researching schools have ended up in broom cupboards; and Hammersley's (1980) most successful interview with a student took place at the bottom of a stairwell!

Where there is some choice of locale, several considerations have to be borne in mind. Dexter notes the need to take account of likely distractions:

One mistake which I have made on a number of occasions is to try to carry on an interview in an environment unsuited for it. A legislator who is standing outside the legislative chamber, while half his attention is focused on buttonholing colleagues, is not a good subject for an interview; though one might learn something from observing him. I do not know whether, if confronted with such a situation again, I would have the nerve to say in effect, 'I need your full attention . . .' but I hope I would ask whether I can arrange some time when he is less preoccupied. The most common difficulty is a man who really lacks a private office; for instance, state legislators or an executive assistant whose room is used as a

passageway to his chief's. In all such cases, I shall in the future ask if there is a conference room or if we can have a cup of coffee, or, if worst comes to worst, even meet for a lunch.

(Dexter 1970:54)

Whose 'territory' (Lyman and Scott 1970) it is can make a big difference to how the interview goes, as Skipper and McCaghy's (1972) research on striptease artistes illustrates. They recount how one of the respondents asked them to come to the theatre, view her performance, and carry out the interview backstage:

On stage her act was highly sexual. It consisted primarily of fondling herself in various stages of undress while carrying on risqué banter with the audience. The act ended with the stripper squatting on the floor at the front of the stage, sans G-string, fondling her pudendum and asking a customer in the first row: 'Aren't you glad you came tonight? Do you think you can come again?'

Backstage, it was difficult for us to feign indifference over her appearance when she ushered us into her dressing room. As she sat clad only in the G-string she had worn on stage and with her legs on the dressing table, we became slightly mesmerized. We had difficulty in even remembering the questions we wanted to ask let alone getting them out of our mouths in an intelligible manner. To compound our difficulties, we felt it was obvious to the stripper what effect she was having on us. She seemed to enjoy the role. For over a half an hour she responded to our inquiries in what we perceived as a seductive voice, and her answers were often suggestive. After about forty minutes, she said very quickly, as if she had decided she had had enough, 'Doesn't it seem to be getting chilly in here? I'm freezing.' She rose, put on a kimono, and walked out of her dressing room and started talking to another stripper. When she did not return, we knew the interview had been concluded. . . .

When we returned to our office to record our impressions, we discovered we had not collected as much of the data as we had intended. We either had forgotten to ask many questions or had obtained inappropriate answers to those asked. In short, we had not conducted an effective interview. Our sheltered backgrounds and numerous courses in sociological

methodology simply had not prepared us for this kind of research environment. . . . It was very clear to us that the nudity and perceived seductiveness of the stripper, and the general permissiveness of the setting, had interfered with our role as researchers. The respondent, not we, had been in control of the interaction; we had been induced to play her game her way even to the point that she made the decision when to end the interview.

(Skipper and McCaghy 1972:239-40)

In response to this experience the researchers arranged for future interviews with the strippers to take place in a restaurant!

The physical features of a context and their arrangement can also have an effect on responses in interviews, as Burgess notes:

In the office of a head or a deputy head there are comfortable chairs as well as a desk and chair. Choosing to sit around a coffee table helps to break down the fact that the tape-recorded conversation did not occur spontaneously but was pre-set. In contrast, talking to a deputy head across a desk with a tape-recorder placed beside us may give the individual I am talking to some confidence, as he or she is surrounded by props: a filing cabinet that may be consulted, a file that can be opened. Yet it also adds to the formality and communicates something about the status of individuals and the way in which they perceived themselves.

(Burgess 1988:142)

With many people, interviewing them on their own territory, and allowing them to organize the context the way they wish, is the best strategy. It allows them to relax much more than they would in less familiar surroundings. However, as we noted earlier, sometimes one may need to establish the interview as a distinct setting in which the interviewer is in control, and choice of locale and/or manipulation of its topography by the researcher can be an effective strategy for doing this.

Equally important in thinking about the context of interviews is to look at how the interview fits into the interviewee's life. There is a great temptation for the researcher to see interviews purely in terms of his or her own schedule, regarding them as time-out from the everyday lives of participants. However, other people may not view them like this at all. This may well have

been one source of the trouble that Skipper and McCaghy ran into. Equally, though, there are people of whom one might say that talk is their business and indeed being interviewed may be a routine part of life for them. Dexter's senators and congressmen provide the obvious example. Their attitude to and behaviour in an interview will be very different to those who are unfamiliar with, or inexperienced in, this form of social interaction. Also, how people respond on any particular occasion may be affected by what else is going on in their lives, and how they currently feel. This was an important factor in Cannon's research:

one day I had what I experienced as a particularly bad interview with Katherine, with whom I felt I had built a good deal of rapport and understanding. . . . I felt that all my worst fears concerning interviewing sick people were being realized, that I was only serving further to upset her, that she was ill and tired and really only stayed in the hospital to talk to me out of politeness. She seemed remote and distant and the conversation was punctuated by long sighs and silences, yet when I asked her if she felt too tired to go on she said she wanted to continue. . . . I worried about this encounter until the next time I saw her. . . . At the next interview I was able . . . to tell her how I had felt and the matter was resolved to both our satisfaction. She said she had wanted to talk but had found herself to be too depressed and tired to be able to do so. We decided that in future if this happened we would simply have a cup of tea and make another appointment. In fact it did not happen again until she became very ill and bedridden when she would sometimes say she would prefer to talk about matters other than her illness. This we would do, although the illness often emerged as the main topic of conversation in any case.

(Cannon 1992:164)

ASKING QUESTIONS

The main difference between the way in which ethnographers and survey interviewers ask questions is not, as is sometimes assumed, that one form of interviewing is 'structured' and the other is 'unstructured'. All interviews, like any other kind of

social interaction, are structured by both researcher and informant. The important distinction to be made is between standardized and reflexive interviewing. Ethnographers do not usually decide beforehand the exact questions they want to ask, and do not ask each interviewee exactly the same questions, though they will usually enter the interviews with a list of issues to be covered. Nor do they seek to establish a fixed sequence in which relevant topics are covered; they adopt a more flexible approach, allowing the discussion to flow in a way that seems natural. Nor need ethnographers restrict themselves to a single mode of questioning. On different occasions, or at different points in the same interview, the approach may be non-directive or directive, depending on the function that the questioning is intended to serve; and this will usually be decided as the interview progresses. In these senses, as we noted earlier, ethnographic interviews are closer in character to conversations than are survey interviews (Burgess 1984a and 1988b). However, they are never simply conversations, because the ethnographer has a research agenda and must retain some control over the proceedings.

This is true even in the case of non-directive questioning. Here questions are designed as triggers that stimulate the interviewee into talking about a particular broad area:

Ordinarily, the questions should be of this nature: 'What do you hear from business?' (to the congressmen), 'What are they worrying you about?' not 'Do you hear from them about the tariff?'. Even better may be, 'What people do you hear from most?', 'Does anybody pressure you?'. Similarly, not 'How about the grants your agency is supposed to get from such-and-such a federal department?' but 'In what ways are you most affected in your work by national matters...?' and if someone starts telling you, as an official of a racing commission told me, about ex-FBI agents who are employed by some national authority, well and good, you have learned to redefine the impact of the federal government! A question which sharply defines a particular area for discussion is far more likely to result in omission of some vital data which you, the interviewer, have not even thought of.

(Dexter 1970:55)

Non-directive questions, then, are relatively open-ended, rather than requiring the interviewee to provide a specific piece

of information or, at the extreme, simply to reply 'yes' or 'no'. However, even here the interview format must be maintained, and this can be a problem where latent identities intrude, as Platt (1981) found in her research on fellow sociologists. Many of the respondents knew of Platt and her work, even if they did not know her personally. As a result, 'personal and community knowledge [was] used as a part of the information available to construct a conception of what the interview [was] meant to be about and thus affected what [was] said' (Platt 1981:77). A particular problem was the tendency of respondents to invite her to draw on her background knowledge rather than spelling out what they were saying. As a result, she sometimes gained responses lacking the explicitness and/or detail necessary to bear her interpretations.

For this reason and others, in non-directive interviewing the interviewer must be an active listener; he or she must listen to what is being said in order to assess how it relates to the research focus and how it may reflect the circumstances of the interview. Moreover, this is done with a view to how the future course of the interview might be shaped. While the aim is often to minimize the influence of the researcher on what the interviewee says, some structuring is necessary in terms of what is and is not relevant. And even where what is said is highly relevant, it may be insufficiently detailed or concrete, or some clarification may be necessary if ambiguity is to be resolved. Whyte (1953) provides an illustration of the non-directive 'steering' of an interview in the questions he puts to Columbus Gary, a union official handling grievances in a steel plant:

WHYTE: I'm trying to catch up on things that have happened since I was last here to study this case. That was back in 1950. I think probably the best thing to start would be if you could give your own impressions as to how things are going now, compared to the past. Do you think things are getting better or worse, or staying about the same? . . .

WHYTE: That's interesting. You mean that it isn't that you don't have problems, but you take them up and talk them over before you write them up, is that it? . . .

WHYTE: That's very interesting. I wonder if you could give me an example of a problem that came up recently, or not

so recently, that would illustrate how you handled it sort of informally without writing it down. . . .

WHYTE: That's a good example. I wonder if you could give me a little more detail about the beginning of it. Did Mr. Grosscup first tell you about it? How did you first find out? . . .

WHYTE: I see. He first explained it to you and you went to the people on the job to tell them about it, but then you saw that they didn't understand it?

(Whyte 1953:16-17)

As we indicated, interviewing in ethnography is by no means always non-directive. Often one may wish to test hypotheses arising from the developing analysis and here quite directive and specific questions can be required, though of course one must bear in mind that the answers may be deceptive. Such questions might also be necessary if one suspects that informants have been lying. Nadel, a social anthropologist, reports that

the expression of doubt or disbelief on the part of the interviewer, or the arrangement of interviews with several informants, some of whom, owing to their social position, were certain to produce inaccurate information, easily induced the key informant to disregard his usual reluctance and to speak openly, if only to confound his opponents and critics.

(Nadel 1939:323)

Confrontation of informants with what one already knows is another technique of this kind, as Perlman illustrates from his research in Uganda:

Christian [men] did not like to admit, for example, that they had at one time (or even still had) two or more wives. But in those cases where I had learned the truth from friends, neighbors, or relatives of the interviewee, I would confront him with the fact, although always in a joking manner, by mentioning, for instance, the first name of a former wife. At that point the interviewee – realizing that I knew too much already – usually told me everything for fear that his enemies would tell me even worse things about him. Although he might insist that he had lived with this woman for only six months and that he had hardly counted her as a real wife, he had at least confirmed my information. Later, I checked his story on

the length of time, coming back to confront him again and again if necessary. Although I visited most people only once or twice – after first learning as much as possible about them from others – I had to go back to see some of them as many as five times until I was satisfied that all the data were accurate.

(Perlman 1970:307)

Of course, not all interviewees will tolerate such repeated and directive questioning, as Troustine and Christensen (1982:70) note in the course of a study of community elites:

Respondents may be reluctant at first to offer candid views of their peers. . . . Sometimes a respondent will balk at virtually every question, finding it increasingly uncomfortable to share the inside views we are asking him or her to reveal. This won't happen often, but when it does we should be persistent but not belligerent. After all, . . . the respondent could, if he or she is well-connected, make things difficult for us with just a phone call.

(quoted in Hunter 1993:45)

Researchers are often warned to avoid the use of leading questions. While their dangers must be borne in mind, they can be extremely useful in testing hypotheses and trying to penetrate fronts. What is important is to assess the likely direction of bias that the question will introduce. Indeed, a useful tactic is to make the question 'lead' in a direction opposite to that in which one expects the answer to lie, and thus avoid the danger of misleadingly confirming one's expectations – though one must take care that this does not undermine one's identity as a competent participant in the eyes of interviewees.

Directive questioning and non-directive questioning are likely to provide different kinds of data, and thus may be useful at different stages of inquiry. But whatever kinds of questioning are employed, ethnographers must remain aware of the likely effects of their questions on what is, and is not, said by informants. (For useful discussions of different question formats, and of other matters relating to ethnographic interviewing, see Spradley 1979; and Lofland and Lofland 1984:ch.5.)

CONCLUSION

An important source of data for ethnographers is the accounts insiders provide. These may be produced spontaneously or elicited by the researcher. Interviews must be viewed as social events in which the interviewer (and for that matter the interviewee) is a participant observer. In interviews the ethnographer may be able to play a more dominant role than usual, and this can be capitalized upon, both in terms of when and where the interview takes place and who is present, as well as through the kinds of question asked. In this way different types of data can be elicited, as required by the changing demands of the research. While this feature of interviews heightens the danger of reactivity, this is only one aspect of a more general problem that cannot be avoided: the effects of audience and context on what is said and done.

The accounts produced by the people under study must neither be treated as 'valid in their own terms' and thus as beyond assessment and explanation, nor dismissed as epiphenomena or ideological distortions. They can be used both as a source of information about events, and as revealing the perspectives and discursive practices of those who produced them. Moreover, while it may sometimes be important to distinguish between solicited and unsolicited accounts, too much must not be made of this distinction. Rather, all accounts must be examined as social phenomena occurring in, and shaped by, particular contexts. Not only will this add to sociological knowledge directly, it can also throw light on the kind of threats to validity that we may need to consider in assessing the information provided by an account.

In this chapter we have rather assumed that insider accounts take an exclusively oral form. While this may be true in non-literate societies, for many settings written documents are an important source of data, as we shall see in the next chapter.