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# THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

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New York Chicago San Francisco Dallas  
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# Step Two INTERVIEWING AN INFORMANT

## OBJECTIVES

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

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

## THE FRIENDLY CONVERSATION

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

BOB: "Hi Fred! How are you?" (Bob extends his hand while Fred hurriedly shifts a package to his left hand so he can respond.)  
FRED: "Fine. It's good to see you." (A firm handshake is now underway, one that goes on for several seconds as they continue to talk.)

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

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

BOB: "That's right! How does it feel to have your oldest gone? Hardly seems possible. Billy's talking about the University of North Carolina for next year."

FRED: "Did you have a good summer?"

BOB: "Well things were pretty hectic at the office. We did get away for a couple weeks to the Smokies. Then Barbara and I had a long weekend up in D.C."

FRED: "The Smokies? That sounds great. We've never been to that part of the country."

BOB: "It was beautiful. But hot in August. We camped out for part of the time. If we go again I think we'd try to make it in September, maybe even after the leaves have started to turn. How about you? Did you get away?"

FRED: "Yes, we spent three weeks in July up in Wisconsin."

BOB: "Really! Where did you stay?"

FRED: "Rented a cabin up in the northwest corner of the state. Did a lot of fishing. Best time was canoeing on the Brule River—nice rapids, but not too much for the kids. Had to rent two canoes, but we spent several days doing that river."

BOB: "What kind of fish did you get?"

FRED: "Bass, mostly, and panfish. John caught a musky and I think I had a northern pike on my line but he got away."

BOB: "Say, how are things at the company?"

FRED: "In May Al was transferred to Fort Lauderdale and that took a lot of pressure off. And since then sales have been up, too. Had a really productive week in early June—all the field men came in and I think that helped. How about you, still thinking of a transfer?"

BOB: "Well, they keep talking about it. I've told them I'd rather wait till Danny finishes high school, but I don't think I could turn down a regional if it came along."

FRED: "Look, I've got to meet Joan up the street in a few minutes; I'd better be off. It was really good to see you."

BOB: "Yeah, let's get together sometime. I know Barbara would love to see Joan."

FRED: "O.K. Sounds good. Take it easy now."

BOB: "You too. Have a good day."

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

1. *Greetings.* "Hi" and "It's good to see you," as well as the questions, serve as verbal markers to start the conversation. Physical contact expresses their friendship. When such people meet, they almost never begin talking without some form of greeting, usually both verbal and nonverbal. Some physical contact frequently emphasizes the closeness of their relationship.

2. *Lack of explicit purpose.* People engaging in friendly conversations don't have an agenda to cover, at least not an explicit one. They almost never say, "Let's talk about the vacations we each took this summer," or "I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

ETHNOGRAPHER: Hi, Pam. How are you?

PAM: Good. How are things with you?

ETHNOGRAPHER: Fine. How's school going?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### ANALYSIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Expressing cultural ignorance* prefaces the repetition of questions.

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

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

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

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

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

ETHNOGRAPHER: Really! That must make it difficult.

PAM: (Nods her head)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Expressing interest.*

*Expressing cultural ignorance.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PAM: Oh, yeah.

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

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

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

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

*Expressing interest.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PAM: Sure, that would be fine.

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

PAM: Well I enjoyed talking about it.

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

PAM: Fine. Bye.

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

*Mini-tour question.*

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

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

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

*Expressing interest.*

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

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

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

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

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

FIGURE 2.1 Elements in the Ethnographic Interview

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



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

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

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

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

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## Tasks

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