

## OBJECTIVES

1. To learn how ethnographic interviews can be used in participant observation.
2. To understand how contrast questions lead to selected observations.
3. To learn to make selected observations.

In the last few steps we have moved from the broad surface of many domains in a cultural scene to an in-depth analysis of a few domains in an *ethnographic focus*. By now you should have completed a taxonomic analysis of at least one domain. You probably have several other taxonomies in various stages of development. In addition to making focused observations, you have continued to make descriptive observations which have undoubtedly led to a longer list of cultural domains. You may have shifted from a tentative ethnographic focus to a different one that is more strategic for understanding the cultural scene. Such changes in direction are common in ethnographic research and should not cause the ethnographer to regret earlier choices. One of the challenging features of doing ethnography is that one cannot tell where it will lead ahead of time. New discoveries open new doors to cultural understanding.

One of the changes that occurs after five or six periods of field observation in most scenes is that you become recognized by people in the social situation. You may have had the opportunity to explain your project; several people may have observed you taking notes and inquired about your work. It may only be that you are on a smile-and-nod recognition basis with people, but you are no longer a complete stranger. This fact offers opportunities for conducting ethnographic interviews during participant observation. Although the primary emphasis of this book is on *observation techniques*, some readers may find they cannot pass up the valuable chance to interview one or more informants. Another book, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Spradley 1979), examines the entire ethnographic research cycle from the perspective of interviewing. At this point I only want to suggest ways that will enable you to capitalize on interviewing opportunities that present themselves during participant observation.

## INTERVIEWS AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

There are many different forms of interviewing. Ethnographic interviewing is a special kind that employs questions designed to discover the cultural meanings people have learned. Such interviews make use of descriptive questions (discussed in Step Four), structural questions (discussed in Step Six), and contrast questions (discussed in Step Eight). Participant observers formulate specific ethnographic questions and then *ask themselves* these questions. They come up with answers from fieldnotes or new observations. Or, in many cases, after several periods of field investigation you may answer your own ethnographic questions out of your own memory. In a real sense, you are treating yourself as an informant for a particular cultural scene.

If you decide to conduct ethnographic interviews, you can simply make use of the same questions with one or more informants. It is useful to distinguish between two types of interviews: informal and formal.

### Informal Ethnographic Interviews

An informal ethnographic interview occurs whenever you ask someone a question during the course of participant observation. In my research on the grand jury I found many opportunities for informal interviews. For example, I wanted to know all the "kinds of cases" that were brought before the grand jury. I made observations, writing down each type as the weeks went by, but I knew there were others and so I merely asked the prosecuting attorney, "What other kinds of cases come before the grand jury?" In fact, there were many opportunities to ask questions as a member of the grand jury, and I simply asked ethnographic questions. About the third month it was announced that one of the duties of the grand jury was to inspect the jails in Marshall County. It was presented as an optional activity; a few people might want to visit nearby jails. At this point it was possible during the group meeting to raise my hand and ask, "What are all the different jails in Marshall County?" I had identified a cultural domain and conducted an informal interview. In addition, each coffee break that occurred offered chances to talk to other jurors. On more than one occasion I would engage people in conversations and then ask some ethnographic question that was appropriate to the conversation.

Consider the hypothetical case introduced earlier of studying a supermarket. As a participant observer you would have many opportunities to ask ethnographic questions informally. You could pick up a few items for purchase and then get in a long line to wait. Striking up a conversation with the next person in line, you might say, "It sure is difficult to find the line that moves the fastest." This opener could lead to questions about the domain "ways to select a line." "How do you decide to select a line?" or "What

kinds of things make a line move fast?" Customers often talk to the check-out person and you could hold informal interviews each time you go through the line. For example, you might discover that these employees treated customers differently. You formulate a tentative domain "kinds of customers" at the check-out counter, from observation identifying *check writers*, *food-stamp people*, *regulars*, and *children*. After you become recognized by one or more check-out people, you could ask casually as you pay your bill, "You sure have a lot of different people come through here. Are there different kinds of customers?" If you have informed the person of your research project, it might be relatively easy to pick a slow time, purchase a few groceries, and then stand and talk, asking several informal ethnographic questions.

### Formal Ethnographic Interviews

A formal interview usually occurs at an appointed time and results from a specific request to hold the interview. If you have developed friendly relationships with people in the social situation, you may want to ask for such interviews. "I'd like to get your ideas about what goes on in the supermarket" might be sufficient for going on to set up an interview. Don't overlook informants who are previous acquaintances. For example, if you are studying a supermarket near your campus, there are undoubtedly some students who have frequented the store. Ask your friends if they ever shop there, and when you find one, ask for an interview. Or, if you are studying the cultural rules for riding the bus, ask your friends if they ride the bus often, and when you find one, ask for an interview.

It is probably best to begin formal interviews with descriptive questions. "Can you describe to me what you do when you shop at the supermarket, from the time you enter the store until you leave?" This question could easily add new categories or clarify relationships in your domain, "stages in shopping." In the same interview you could ask other descriptive questions as well as both structural questions and contrast questions to be discussed later in this step. It is a good idea to tape record each interview as well as taking copious notes. From such an interview you may find folk terms you will want to use to replace analytic terms in one or more taxonomies.

All informants are participant observers without knowing it. When you ask them ethnographic questions you tap their knowledge about a particular cultural scene; you are making use of their informal skills as participant observers. Your own observations will often go well beyond what informants may talk about because much of their cultural knowledge is tacit. However, don't overlook the valuable insights and observations informants can give you.

### CONTRAST QUESTIONS

As discussed in Step Four, the basic unit of all ethnographic inquiry is the *question-observation*. In order to make selective observations you will need to ask *contrast* questions, which are based on the differences that exist among the terms in each domain.

By now you have worked carefully with several cultural domains, each one a large category containing many smaller categories. You have identified cover terms and included terms, and you have looked for subsets among the included terms in your taxonomic analysis. All this search for the structure of cultural meaning has focused on the *similarities* among things. "What things are the same because they are all *kinds of witnesses*?" "What things are alike because they are all *stages in shopping*?" "What people are alike because they are all *kinds of customers*?"

However, the meaning of each cultural domain comes from the *differences* as well as the *similarities* among terms. Now we shift our attention to asking, "How are all these things different?" This approach is based on the principle of contrast, which states that cultural meaning is determined, in part, by how categories inside a domain contrast with one another. Any question that asks for differences is a contrast question. There are three types you can use in your research.

### Dyadic Contrast Questions

A "dyad" refers to two items, a pair. A dyadic contrast question takes two members of a domain and asks, "In what ways are these two things different?"

Consider some examples. Earlier we identified several stages in shopping in a supermarket. A dyadic contrast question would ask: "What is the difference between *entering the store* and *checking out*?" The answer to this question can come from your own memory, from fieldnotes, or from making new *selected observations*. One difference immediately comes to mind: checking out always involves interaction between employee and customer, but entering the store almost never involves such interaction. You have identified a single difference between these two stages.

In his study of *Daytop Village*, Sugarman (1974) studied the roles people assumed during encounter groups. In studying this domain Sugarman developed nearly a dozen analytic categories, roles such as *identifier*, *preacher*, *reflector*, and *prosecutor*. This identification was based on recognition of the similarities among all these roles. In a search for differences it was necessary to ask numerous contrast questions: "What is the difference between identifier and preacher?" "What is the difference between identifier and reflector?" "What is the difference between preacher and prosecutor?" When you begin asking dyadic contrast questions you often discover there is

much more information to collect in the field. Like all contrast questions, these always involve terms from the *same domain*. If you ask for differences among terms from different domains, the contrast is so large that it is seldom fruitful for ethnographic purposes.

### Triadic Contrast Questions

This type of question uses three terms or categories at the same time. It takes the following form: "Which two are most alike in some way, but different from the third?" This kind of question involves looking for similarities and contrasts at the same time. It is especially useful for uncovering tacit contrasts that are easily overlooked.

Consider the following example. A colleague and I undertook a study of a restaurant that I shall call the Golden Nugget Night Club (Spradley and Schroedl 1972). We were interested in the interaction between employees and customers and the cultural rules for ordering food. In particular we wanted to know how people asked for different kinds of meat from the carver when they went through the food line. The carver's job was to slice pieces from a large round of roast beef. The amount of fat, the leanness of the slices, the number of slices, and their thickness were all determined by the carver in response to specific customer requests. During any evening of work the carver would engage in more than twenty-four distinct cultural activities such as *punching in, changing clothes, sharpening knives, setting up the line, trimming the round, serving the roast beef, taking a break, and watching the chips*. These were members of a domain, "kinds of activities of the carver." In our research we asked numerous contrast questions to discover the differences among all these activities. Here are two triadic contrast questions and some answers that will give you an idea of their nature.

1. Of these three, which two are most alike and which one is different: *sharpening knives, setting up the line, taking a break*?  
*Answer:* Setting up the line and taking a break are alike because most of the other employees do both of them also; sharpening knives is different because only the carver does that.
2. Of these three, which two are alike and which one is different: *sharpening knives, serving the roast beef, trimming the round*?  
*Answer:* Serving the roast beef and trimming the round are alike because they happen on the line; sharpening the knives happens in the kitchen.

### Card-Sorting Contrast Questions

One of the easiest ways to get at the differences among the things in a cultural domain is to write them all on small cards and sort them into piles.

As you begin to go through the pile of cards, ask yourself: "Are there any differences among these things?" When you come to the first thing that appears different *for any reason at all*, place it in a new pile. Now you have two piles, and you can continue to sort the cards until you find one that doesn't fit either of the piles; then start a third, and so on. This technique for discovering contrasts works especially well when you have a large domain with many terms.

Consider the following domain. In my research with tramps I discovered they often slept outside, in old buildings and in dozens of other places. They referred to such places as "flops." Although most of my information on flops came from interviews with informants, I did some participant observation in places where I could observe tramps "making a flop." Before I finished examining the domain, "kinds of flops," I had discovered more than one hundred different types. Writing them on cards I could sort them into piles or ask an informant to assist me in sorting them. In either case, I began with a contrast question, "Is the next card different from the last one in some way?" Here are several piles that emerge from this type of procedure:

1. *Requires payment*  
 flop house  
 flea bag  
 all-night theater  
 hotel
2. *Doesn't require payment*  
 graveyard  
 sand house  
 brick kiln  
 weedpatch
3. *Other requirements besides money*  
 mission flop  
 the bucket

Card-sorting contrast questions enable you to deal with numerous terms at the same time. You find out similarities as well as differences.

### Dimensions of Contrast

The differences you discover by asking contrast questions are called *dimensions of contrast*. In the last example, you saw three dimensions of contrast that can be rephrased as (1) requires money, (2) doesn't require money or anything else, (3) doesn't require money but does require something else. These dimensions of contrast are important facets of cultural meaning in the domain "kinds of flops."

In the contrast made earlier for "stages in shopping," one dimension of contrast that emerged was whether customers and employees interacted during a particular stage. The discovery of any dimension of contrast becomes the basis for making selective observations. For example, you could go back to the supermarket with a new question: "What kind of interaction

occurs between customer and employee during each stage of shopping?" As we turn to a discussion of selective observation, keep in mind that the question-observation unit, though made up of two distinct elements, must occur as a single, unitary process.

### SELECTIVE OBSERVATIONS

It is useful to think of the three kinds of observation as a funnel. The broad rim of the funnel consists of *descriptive observations* in which you want to catch everything that goes on. These are the foundation of all ethnographic research and will continue throughout your entire project. Moving down from the mouth or rim, the funnel narrows sharply. *Focused observations* require that you narrow the scope of what you are looking for. But when you start this more focused type of investigation, you know what you are looking for—the categories that belong in a particular domain. You want to find all the "parts of a building" or "kinds of persons" or "stages in an activity." At the bottom of a funnel there is an extremely narrow, restricted opening. *Selective observations* represent the smallest focus through which you will make observations. They involve going to your social situation and *looking for differences among specific cultural categories*. There are at least three ways to look for these differences.

First, in those cases where you have not discovered any contrasts, you will want to look for any differences that exist. Let's say that you undertake a study of directory assistance operators by making numerous phone calls and asking for information. Soon it becomes apparent that there are several "kinds of operators." You identify the following types: *the impatient operator, the joker, the question asker, the novice, and the supervisor*. In addition to observations you ask your friends to relate the experiences they have had with different operators. Now you ask a contrast question of yourself: "What is the difference between a question asker and a novice?" You made these categories because you observed some difference, but now you cannot think of anything that contrasts them. Both ask questions, both work at about the same speed; you probably picked up some subtle difference that led you to using these categories. Now you must make focused observations or talk to informants some more *about this specific difference*.

Second, when you have discovered one or two differences, you may still need to discover more. Focused observations are used to extend your list of differences. We knew that the carver's activities at the Golden Nugget Night Club were different. Sharpening knives, for example, took place in the kitchen while trimming the round took place on the line. But what other differences exist between these two activities? With this contrast question in mind, focused observations led to at least the following: you could joke with other employees while sharpening knives, and it was also more fun.

Third, when you have discovered a dimension of contrast that applies to

two or more terms in a domain, you may still need to find out if it applies to the other members of that domain. An important dimension of contrast for the domain "kinds of flops" had to do with whether the police would bother tramps or not. Once I discovered that some flops were defined by this fact and others were not, I needed to go through the entire list and find out whether this contrast applied or not.

Selective observations require careful planning. When you first go into the field to make observations you have only a few general questions. Now you will need to write out many specific contrast questions before you approach the social situation you are studying. It becomes increasingly necessary to make notes in the situation that answer each of your questions. And even with many specific questions in mind, you will want to make additional selective observations on the basis of a single, general inquiry: "What differences can I see for the members of this cultural domain?" Obviously it would be possible to continue searching for differences for a long time. For some domains you will want to be more exhaustive than others, but don't get trapped into the impossibility of finding out every possible difference or you will delay the completion of your project. As we turn to componential analysis in the next step we will discuss ways to organize the data collected from selective observations. In addition, this type of analysis will help you decide when you have collected enough specific information to move on to searching for themes and writing up your ethnography.

## Tasks

- 8.1 Make a list of people with whom you might conduct informal or formal ethnographic interviews. Consider the value of supplementing your participant observation with ethnographic interviews.
- 8.2 Select one or more domains and ask yourself contrast questions to discover dimensions of contrast. Review your fieldnotes to answer these questions when needed.
- 8.3 Conduct a period of field investigation in which you add selective observations to the other two types used earlier.