TEACHER'S CORNER: TEACHING ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWING

Ethnographic Interviewing has been taught as a regular semester-long course at Macalester College for the past 22 years. The course is designed to enable students with little or no anthropological background to "enter the field" and successfully elicit cultural data from members of an American microculture. Although the course stresses interviewing as a field technique, standard and participant observation can be part of the ethnographic process. The purpose of the course is to enhance student understanding of what culture is and how it functions for members of a group, as well as to acquaint students with a valuable qualitative field method. Classes are largely devoted to problem solving, rather than lecturing or discussions of reading.

CULTURE AND ETHNOGRAPHY

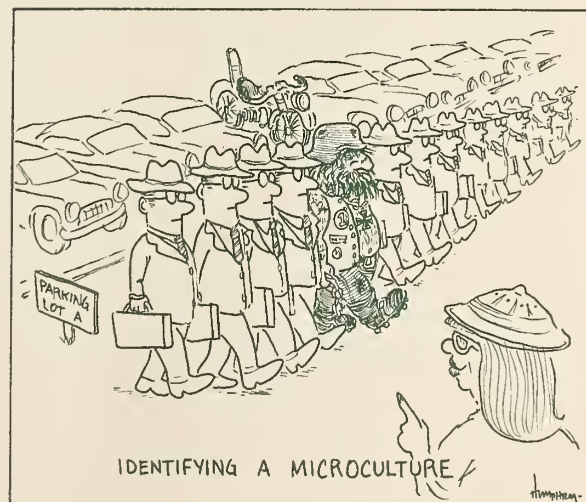
When students begin the ethnographic interviewing course, I give them a detailed syllabus describing course goals and a sequence of research tasks. The first task is for students to read about the concept of culture and its place in ethnographic research. I use a so-called "cognitive" definition of culture (one that sees culture as a form of knowledge) for this course because I think it gives a clearer idea of what students should look for when they interview. I define culture as *the learned knowledge that members of a group use to generate behavior and interpret experience.* This definition stresses that culture is **knowledge**, not behavior or material goods. It argues that culture is **learned** and not inherited genetically. It says culture is shared by members of a group; it is not knowledge unique to an individual. Although culture is knowledge, not behavior, it is intimately tied to action. The definition asserts that group members use culture to **generate behavior** because culture provides a framework of rules to guide appropriate activity. Similarly, culture permits members of groups to **interpret** their surroundings and the actions of others. It provides the categories, rules, and plans by which group members conduct their lives.

Ethnography is the task of discovering and describing a culture. Ethnographers try to learn about the behavior of a group by looking at it through the eyes of the members themselves. Instead of going to the field with predefined problems, hypotheses and questions as many social scientists do, ethnographers try to elicit an understanding of what is going on from the actors themselves. They try to avoid projecting their own cultural categories or interpretations onto the world of their informants. They play the part of students; cultural informants become teachers.

Ethnographic Interviewing uses a focused ethnographic approach called ethno-science to involve students in a series of clearly defined learning steps. These steps require students first to identify a microculture, then choose a cultural informant, conduct a series of interviews, ask three kinds of ethnographic questions, record and analyze ethnographic data, discover cultural themes, and finally write an ethnographic report. Although each student investigates a different microculture, teaching the ethnographic method one step at a time means that all students will encounter at least some of the same fieldwork problems at the same time. What follows is a discussion of these steps.

CHOOSING A MICROCULTURE

To conduct ethnography, students must find a particular culture to study; choosing a culture depends on the ability to spot culture-bearing groups. Since Macalester courses only last for three and one-half months, I ask my students to study the culture of smaller groups called **microcultures** because they are more



IDENTIFYING A MICROCULTURE

manageable for the amount of time. Cultures come in different sizes, and some are found inside others. For example, citizens of the United States share a **national culture**, the cultural knowledge that sets them off as Americans. Americans may also be part of a major ethnic subgroup, such as African Americans or Mexican Americans. We often call these **subcultures**. There are, however, many other, smaller groups found inside the larger ones that members participate in only part of the time. I call these **microcultures** and make them the focus of the ethnography course because they are common, interesting and easy to access. Occupational groups, such as a group of bank tellers, can be called microcultures. So can recreational groups, such as a local chapter of a motorcycle riding association; educational groups, such as the third graders at a nearby school; kinship groups, such as nuclear or extended families; or political action groups, such as a local chapter of the Sierra Club. Macalester students have studied the cultures of hairdressers, bouncers, midwives, real estate agents, buckskinners (people who come together to create life as it was in the 1840s frontier), emergency room doctors, homeless shelter residents, sound technicians, musicians, airline pilots, camp counselors, zoo keepers, car salesmen, custodians, and hundreds more.

I warn students to keep several things in mind as they choose microcultures because some are easier to study than others. It is easier to study enduring, clearly structured microcultures because informants recall them more clearly. It is wise to avoid microcultures associated with public relations or ideologies such as religion, because informants will give a "party line" rather than good "inside cultural" information. Since informants remember better what they are doing at the moment, it is easier to study currently operating microcultures. Since the ethnoscience interviewing method depends on discovering the inside language of informants, it is better to study social microcultures, which promote regular conversation, and ones characterized by the use of English. It is harder to study "up" than "down" when you do ethnography; bank presidents are more guarded than bank tellers. Artistic cultures are difficult to interview because so much of the culture of art and music is tacit and "felt." I also suggest that students look at microcultures they know little about because they will find it easier to spot unfamiliar cultural elements. Finally, I urge students to stay away from microcultures they are already a part of because it is often difficult for them to switch roles from group member to outside interviewer.

Most of my students choose a microculture and then look for an informant. An informant is someone who belongs to a particular culture and willingly teaches the anthropologist about that culture. Informants can make or break the research experience. It is wise to find an informant who is verbal, available, knowledgeable about his or her microculture, and interested in being interviewed.

I usually limit students to a single informant each semester because they lack the time to establish rapport with more than one. Students recruit informants from the community surrounding the college or may even find other students or family members to interview. Often they approach an informant "cold turkey." For example, last semester a student who wished to know about tattooist culture simply went into the tattoo parlor and asked the tattooist if she would be willing to engage in a series of interviews. Many students find informants by enlisting the aid of a go-between. One student found a zoo keeper through a friend who knew one. Still other students approach research by thinking of someone who would make a good informant, then asking that person what microculture they know about.

ETHICS AND BEGINNING THE STUDY

When students begin their ethnography, they have to be open about what they intend to do, and they have to recognize their own ethical responsibilities. I require students to tell informants that they are Macalester students doing a research project in an anthropology class. I also have them read the statement on ethics published by the American Anthropological Association. I stress the importance of protecting the informant at all costs. This often means covering the real identity of people and places and refraining from inquiry into damaging subjects. Finally, I will not permit students to study illegal microcultures, although many find them interesting. The risks to the students themselves are much too great.

RESEARCH STEPS

The interviewing process is divided into three steps: discovering folk categories, eliciting taxonomic structure, and finding attributional meaning [see "Doing Ethnography at Macalester College" in the Winter 1992 issue of *Anthro.Notes*]. These steps relate to the central thesis of ethnoscience that a significant part of people's culture is coded in language. If you can learn the words people use, place closely related words in taxonomies and determine their meaning, you can gather a great deal about a culture quickly and systematically. Let's look at these steps one at a time.

Discovering categories. I teach my students that human cultural knowledge is stored in thousands of mental categories. For example, *grass* is the name for a category of plant growing in front of my house. Although each little plant is slightly different, I and my neighbors can efficiently talk about the plants by categorizing them as a single kind of thing. We call the words used to name categories **folk terms.**

The first step in the interviewing process is to discover folk terms. To do this, students ask a kind of ethnographic question. **Descriptive questions** are any questions designed to get informants talking about their cultural worlds using their own folk terms. Since ethnographers try to elicit the informant's viewpoint, descriptive questions try not to lead. To elicit folk terms, the best strategy is to ask about what people do, not what they think or what their opinions are.

The most general descriptive question and one which students ask first is the **grand tour question**. This asks about an informant's average day or about the layout of a particular place. For example, when asked what he did from the time he arrived at work until he left, a stock broker described arriving at the "office," stopping by the "cage" to pick up his mail, reading his "writes" and "confirms," "posting his books," reading the *"Journal,"* and "calling clients." All these are folk terms for stock broker categories.

Once the initial grand tour is completed, student ethnographers ask **minitour questions**, which are questions about some of the folk terms they learned from the grand tour question. "Could you describe what brokers do when they call clients?" would be a minitour question. So would, "Could you describe the cage for me?" Informants then go into more detail about these things, using additional and often more precise folk terms.

Story questions and native language questions are also kinds of descriptive questions. "Has anything unusual happened to you or other brokers recently?" would be an example of a story question. Stories often yield a wealth of folk terms. Native language questions are used to check whether or not a particular word is really a folk term, one used by members of the culture. "If you were talking to another broker, would you refer to that place as the cage?" would be an example of such a question.

I have students tape record interviews and transcribe them completely, so they don't miss folk terms. After they have completed their first interview, I have them make an overhead transparency of the first page of their interview and show it to the class. They discuss with their classmates how their interview went and ask for help with problems. This gives students a feel for different interviewing and informant styles, and a sense of involvement in each other's work.

Discovering Taxonomic Order. The next step in the research process is to discover taxonomic structure for folk terms. The task derives from the fact that some folk categories classify other categories by a single relationship. We call the larger categories **domains**. For example, at the brokerage office, the domain "broker" is a cover term for "big hitters," "rookies," "brokers" (average brokers), and the "manager." Together these terms form a small taxonomy, which is a hierarchical chart based on the inclusion of some terms by others and on the notion that terms on any level contrast with each other. One student, Sharon Saydah, recently elicited the a taxonomy of kinds of customers from a car salesman. Customers or buyers could be divided into 14 categories including mom and pop (empty nestors), engineer (pipe smokers), parents with high school grad, guys wearing Raiders jackets (gang members), outstaters (weekenders), brochure collectors, and first time buyers. To create taxonomies, students must look for domain

cover terms. Plural nouns often give clues as the term *customers* indicates above and the relationship "kinds of" implies. I also have my students look for taxonomies built on other relationships in addition to "kinds of"; for example, "ways to" do things, "steps in" doing things, or "parts of" things.

To fill out taxonomies, I have students use taxonomic or structural questions. If they already have discovered a domain and a relationship, they can ask **descending structural questions**. For example, once she discovered the term "customers," Sharon Saydah asked "What kinds of customers are there?" which is a typical descending structural question. If students discover a list of things that all appear to be related in the same way, they can ask an **ascending structural question** to discover the domain that ties them together, such as "What do all these terms have in common?"

After a second and third interview, using a mixture of descriptive and structural questions, I have students construct a taxonomy to show to the class. Since it is easy to include information in a taxonomy that does not belong, discussion about taxonomic problems can take substantial time.

Discovering Attributional Meaning. So far, all that students may know about some of the terms they have collected is what they sound like and how they relate to other terms in a taxonomy. The final interview step involves discovering more about what terms mean by finding out the important attributes that relate to them and that help distinguish between the terms. For example, one student found from a touring motorcycle club member that a *1991 Interstate* is a kind of Honda Gold Wing motorcycle (its place in a taxonomy) that has an opposed six cylinder engine, is water cooled and shaft driven, is very smooth, is very heavy, has a comfortable seat, has a radio but no cruise control or CB, is very reliable, handles well, and has large luggage capacity. All of these are important attributes that give the *Interstate* meaning in the culture of touring club members.

I tell my students that it is easier to elicit detailed attributes of terms if you have informants compare and contrast a set of closely related categories, and this is where taxonomies come in. I have my students take a "contrast set" of categories from a taxonomy, then ask attribute questions about them to elicit dimensions of contrast. Questions might ask informants the difference between two terms, or to take three terms and point out which two are most alike and how they differ from the third. Another good attribute question asks informants which categories are best and why. The "why" question should yield sets of important attributes.

When they are done, students display their attributes and original contrast set in paradigms, which are charts designed for this purpose. A paradigm of the contrast set, "kinds of securities," elicited from a stock broker, would look like this.

Paradigm of Kinds of Securities

Kinds of Securities	Safety	Return	Capital Gain	Insured
bonds	high	medium	sometimes	no
stocks	lower	low	yes	no
CDs	v.high	medium	no	yes

In this paradigm, the original contrast set is the three kinds of securities (bonds, stocks, and CDs); the dimensions of contrast are "safety," "return," "capital gain," and "insurance"; the actual attributes for each kind of security (high, low, medium, etc.) are listed in the chart.

WRITING THE PAPER

Once students have completed the various research steps, I ask them to continue interviewing, using all the kinds of ethnographic questions as they apply. They continue to record interviews and build their data base. Toward the end of the semester, I have each student look for the problems or adaptive challenges that his or her particular culture seems designed to handle. For example, the railroad switchman culture studied by one student seemed largely organized to manage the problem of managing time and relations to an uncaring employer. Stock broker culture seemed to adapt brokers to the need to buy and sell stock for valued clients in an uncertain market better suited to long-term holding. Again, I ask students to make lists of "cultural problems" and share these with

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the class. I also ask students to look for cultural themes, the general propositions or core values that seem to tie different parts of an informant's cultural knowledge together.

The final product of student research is an ethnographic paper organized around some general observations about a micro-culture, but a paper that also contains ample cultural illustrations in the form of descriptions, taxonomies, paradigms, and informant quotes. If the paper is successful, the reader ought to be able to see the world, including its challenges and solutions, through the eyes of the informant and people like the informant. I feel the course is successful if after students have taken it they walk into new situations and ask themselves, "I wonder what the inside rules are around here? What am I supposed to do and say and why?"

Recently I visited a local restaurant where I found one of my ex-students waiting on tables. She came over and quietly spoke to me. "You are sitting in section six. This section has the most 'customers' during 'evening rush,' is good if you want to make 'high tips,' is too far from the kitchen for comfort, and requires you to walk around an awkward corner to reach it." Only a student who is also an ethnographer would say a thing like that!

ADDITIONAL READINGS:

Spradley, James P. and David W. McCurdy, *The Cultural Experience: Research in Complex Society*. Chicago: SRA 1972. Reissued by Waveland Press, 1988. This book contains four chapters for students describing how to do ethnographic research as well as 12 papers by Macalester undergraduates, which serve as examples.

Spradley, James P., *The Ethnographic Interview*, New York: Holt 1979. A more detailed, step-by-step set of instructions for doing ethnography based on teaching experiences at Macalester College.

Reference cited:

Sharon Saydah, "Closing the Deal: Ethnography of Car Salespeople. "Unpublished Macalester College Paper, 1991.

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