# Research Methods in Anthropology

**Fourth Edition**

## *Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*

H. Russell Bernard

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# Interviewing: Unstructured and Semistructured

## The Big Picture

The concept of "interviewing" covers a lot of ground, from totally unstructured interactions, through semistructured situations, to highly formal interactions with respondents. Interviewing is done on the phone, in person, by mail—even by computer. This chapter is about unstructured and semistructured face-to-face interviewing, including the management of focus groups.

**Unstructured interviewing** goes on all the time and just about anywhere—in homes, walking along a road, weeding a millet field, hanging out in bars, or waiting for a bus. **Semistructured**, or **in-depth interviewing** is a scheduled activity. A semistructured interview is open ended, but follows a general script and covers a list of topics.

There is a vast literature on how to conduct effective interviews: how to gain rapport, how to get people to open up, how to introduce an interview, and how to end one. You can't learn to interview by reading about it, but after you read this chapter, and practice some of the techniques described, you should be well on your way to becoming an effective interviewer. You should also have a pretty good idea of how much more there is to learn, and be on your way to exploring the literature.

## Interview Control

There is a continuum of interview situations based on the **amount of control** we try to exercise over people's responses (Dohrenwend and Richardson

1965; Gorden 1975; Spradley 1979). These *different types* of interviews produce *different types* of data that are useful for *different types* of research projects and that appeal to *different types* of researchers. For convenience, I divide the continuum of interviews into four large chunks.

## *1. Informal Interviewing*

At one end there is **informal interviewing**, characterized by a total lack of structure or control. The researcher just tries to remember conversations heard during the course of a day in the field. This requires constant jotting and daily sessions in which you sit at a computer, typing away, unburdening your memory, and developing field notes. Informal interviewing is the method of choice at the beginning of participant observation fieldwork, when you're settling in. It is also used throughout ethnographic fieldwork to build greater rapport and to uncover new topics of interest that might have been overlooked.

When it comes to interviewing, never mistake the adjective "informal" for "lightweight." This is hard, hard work. You have to remember a lot; you have to duck into private corners a lot (so you can jot things down); and you have to use a lot of deception (to keep people from knowing that you're really at work, studying them). Informal interviewing can get pretty tiring.

Still, in some kinds of research, informal interviewing is all you've got. Mark Connolly (1990) studied *gamines*, or street children, in Guatemala City, Guatemala, and Bogotá, Colombia. These children live, eat, and sleep on the street. Hanging out and talking informally with these children was an appropriate way to do this research. Informal ethnography can also be combined with more structured methods, when circumstances allow it. In fact, Rachel Baker (1996a, 1996b) was able to collect anthropometric data on street children in Kathmandu, Nepal, while doing informal ethnography.

## *2. Unstructured Interviewing*

Next comes **unstructured interviewing**, one of the two types covered in this chapter. There is nothing at all informal about unstructured interviewing, and nothing deceptive, either. You sit down with another person and hold an interview. Period. Both of you know what you're doing, and there is no shared feeling that you're just engaged in pleasant chitchat.

Unstructured interviews are based on a clear plan that you keep constantly in mind, but are also characterized by a minimum of control over the people's responses. The idea is to get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms, and at their own pace. A lot of what is called **ethnographic interviewing** is unstructured. Unstructured interviewing is used in

situations where you have lots and lots of time—like when you are doing long-term fieldwork and can interview people on many separate occasions.

### *3. Semistructured Interviewing*

In situations where you won't get more than one chance to interview someone, **semistructured interviewing** is best. It has much of the freewheeling quality of unstructured interviewing, and requires all the same skills, but semistructured interviewing is based on the use of an **interview guide**. This is a written list of questions and topics that need to be covered in a particular order.

This is the kind of interview that most people write about—the kind done in professional surveys. The interviewer maintains discretion to follow leads, but the interview guide is a set of clear instructions—instructions like this one: "Probe to see if informants (men and women alike) who have daughters have different values about dowry and about premarital sex than do people who have only sons."

Formal, written guides are an absolute must if you are sending out several interviewers to collect data. But even if you do all the interviewing on a project yourself, you should build a guide and follow it if you want reliable, comparable qualitative data.

Semistructured interviewing works very well in projects where you are dealing with high-level bureaucrats and elite members of a community—people who are accustomed to efficient use of their time. It demonstrates that you are fully in control of what you want from an interview but leaves both you and your respondent free to follow new leads. It shows that you are prepared and competent but that you are not trying to exercise excessive control.

### *4. Structured Interviewing*

Finally, in fully **structured interviews**, people are asked to respond to as nearly identical a set of stimuli as possible. One variety of structured interviews involves use of an **interview schedule**—an explicit set of instructions to interviewers who administer questionnaires orally. Instructions might read: "If the informant says that she or he has at least one daughter over 10 years of age, then ask questions 26b and 26c. Otherwise, go on to question 27."

Questionnaires are one kind of structured interview. Other structured interviewing techniques include pile sorting, frame elicitation, triad sorting, and tasks that require informants to rate or rank order a list of things. I'll deal with structured interviews in chapter 10.

## Unstructured Interviewing

Unstructured interviewing is truly versatile. It is used equally by scholars who identify with the hermeneutic tradition and by those who identify with the positivist tradition. It is used in studies that require only textual data and in studies that require both textual and numerical data. Ethnographers may use it to develop formal guides for semistructured interviews, or to learn what questions to include, in the native language, on a highly structured questionnaire (see Werner and Schoepfle [1987] for a good discussion of this). I say that ethnographers *may* use unstructured interviewing in developing structured interview schedules because unstructured interviewing also stands on its own.

When you want to know about the **lived experience** of fellow human beings—what it's like to survive hand-to-hand combat, how you get through each day when you have a child dying of leukemia, how it feels to make it across the border into Texas from Mexico only to be deported 24 hours later—you just can't beat unstructured interviewing.

Unstructured interviewing is excellent for building initial rapport with people, before moving to more formal interviews, and it's perfect for talking to informants who would not tolerate a more formal interview. The personal rapport you build with close informants in long-term fieldwork can make highly structured interviewing—and even semistructured interviewing—feel somehow unnatural. In fact, really structured interviewing can get in the way of your ability to communicate freely with key informants.

But not always. Some people want very much to talk about their lives, but they really don't like the unstructured interview format. I once asked a fisherman in Greece if I could have a few minutes of his time to discuss the economics of small-scale fishing. I was about 5 minutes into the interview, treading lightly—you know, trying not to get too quickly into his finances, even though that's exactly what I wanted to know about—when he interrupted me: "Why don't you just get to the point?" he asked. "You want to know how I decide where to fish, and whether I use a share system or a wage system to split the profits, and how I find buyers for my catch, and things like that, right?" He had heard from other fishermen that these were some of the topics I was interviewing people about. No unstructured interviews for him; he was a busy man and wanted to get right to it.

### *A Case Study of Unstructured Interviewing*

Once you learn the art of probing (which I'll discuss in a bit), unstructured interviewing can be used for studying sensitive issues, like sexuality, racial or ethnic prejudice, or hot political topics. I find it particularly useful in studying

conflict. In 1972–1973, I went to sea on two different oceanographic research vessels (Bernard and Killworth 1973, 1974). In both cases, there was an almost palpable tension between the scientific personnel and the crew of the ship. Through both informal and unstructured interviewing on land between cruises, I was able to establish that the conflict was predictable and regular. Let me give you an idea of how complex the situation was.

In 1972–1973, it cost $5,000 a day to run a major research vessel, not including the cost of the science. (That would be about $25,000 today.) The way oceanography works, at least in the United States, the chief scientist on a research cruise has to pay for both ship time and for the cost of any experiments he or she wants to run. To do this, oceanographers compete for grants from institutions like the U.S. Office of Naval Research, NASA, and the National Science Foundation.

The spending of so much money is validated by publishing significant results in prominent journals. It's a tough, competitive game and one that leads scientists to use every minute of their ship time. As one set of scientists comes ashore after a month at sea, the next set is on the dock waiting to set up their experiments and haul anchor.

The crew, consequently, might only get 24 or 48 hours shore leave between voyages. That can cause some pretty serious resentment by ships' crews against scientists. And that can lead to disaster. I found many documented instances of sabotage of expensive research by crew members who were, as one of them said, "sick and tired of being treated like goddamn bus drivers." In one incident, involving a British research vessel, a freezer filled with Antarctic shrimp, representing 2 years of data collection, went overboard during the night. In another, the crew and scientists from a U.S. Navy oceanographic research ship got into a brawl while in port (*Science* 1972:1346).

The structural problem I uncovered began at the top. Scientists whom I interviewed felt they had the right to take the vessels wherever they wanted to go, within prudence and reason, in search of answers to questions they had set up in their proposals. The captains of the ships believed (correctly) that *they* had the last word on maneuvering their ships at sea. Scientists, said the captains, sometimes went beyond prudence and reason in what they demanded of the vessels.

For example, a scientist might ask the captain to take a ship out of port in dangerous weather because ship time is so precious. This conflict between crew and scientists has been known—and pretty much ignored—since Charles Darwin sailed with HMS *Beagle* and it will certainly play a role in the productivity of long-term space station operations.

Unraveling this conflict at sea required participant observation and unstructured (as well as informal) interviewing with many people. No other strategy

for data collection would have worked. At sea, people live for weeks, or even months, in close quarters, and there is a common need to maintain good relations for the organization to function well.

It would have been inappropriate for me to have used highly structured interviews about the source of tension between the crew and the scientists. Better to steer the interviews around to the issue of interest and to let informants teach me what I needed to know. In the end, no analysis was better than that offered by one engine room mechanic who told me, "These scientist types are so damn hungry for data, they'd run the ship aground looking for interesting rocks if we let them."

## *Getting Started*

There are some important steps to take when you start interviewing someone for the first time. First of all, assure people of anonymity and confidentiality. Explain that you simply want to know what *they* think, and what *their* observations are. If you are interviewing someone whom you have come to know over a period of time, explain why you think their opinions and observations on a particular topic are important. If you are interviewing someone chosen from a random sample, and whom you are unlikely to see again, explain how they were chosen and why it is important that you have their cooperation to maintain representativeness.

If people say that they really don't know enough to be part of your study, assure them that their participation is crucial and that you are truly interested in what they have to say (and you'd better mean it, or you'll never pull it off). Tell everyone you interview that you are trying to learn from *them*. Encourage them to interrupt you during the interview with anything they think is important. And always ask for permission to *record* personal interviews *and to take notes*. This is vital. If you can't take notes, then, in most cases, the value of an interview plummets. (See below, on using a tape recorder and taking notes.)

Keep in mind that people who are being interviewed know that you are shopping for information. There is no point in trying to hide this. If you are open and honest about your intentions, and if you are genuinely interested in what people have to say, many people will help you.

This is not always true, though. When Colin Turnbull went out to study the Ik in Uganda, he found a group of people who had apparently lost interest in life and in exchanging human kindnesses. The Ik had been brutalized, decimated, and left by the government to fend for themselves on a barren reservation. They weren't impressed with the fact that Turnbull wanted to study their culture. In fact, they weren't much interested in anything Turnbull was up to and were anything but friendly (Turnbull 1972).

### *Letting the Informant or Respondent Lead*

If you can carry on "unthreatening, self-controlled, supportive, polite, and cordial interaction in everyday life," then interviewing will come easy to you, and informants will feel comfortable responding to your questions (Lofland 1976:90). But no matter how supportive you are as a person, an interview is never really like a casual, unthreatening conversation in everyday life. In casual conversations, people take more or less balanced turns (Spradley 1979), and there is no feeling that somehow the discussion has to stay on track or follow some theme (see also Merton et al. 1956; Hyman and Cobb 1975). In unstructured interviewing, you keep the conversation focused on a topic, while giving the respondent room to define the content of the discussion.

The rule is: Get people on to a topic of interest and get out of the way. Let the informant provide information that he or she thinks is important.

During my research on the Kalymnian sponge fishermen in Greece, I spent a lot of time at Procopis Kambouris's *taverna*. (A Greek *taverna* is a particular kind of restaurant.) Procopis's was a favorite of the sponge fishermen. Procopis was a superb cook, he made his own wine every year from grapes that he selected himself, and he was as good a teller of sea stories as he was a listener to those of his clientele. At Procopis's *taverna*, I was able to collect the work histories of sponge fishermen—when they'd begun their careers, the training they'd gotten, the jobs they'd held, and so on. The atmosphere was relaxed (plenty of retsina wine and good things to eat), and conversation was easy.

As a participant observer, I developed a sense of camaraderie with the regulars, and we exchanged sea stories with a lot of flourish. Still, no one at Procopis's ever made the mistake of thinking that I was there just for the camaraderie. They knew that I was writing about their lives and that I had lots of questions to ask. They also knew immediately when I switched from the role of participant observer to that of ethnographic interviewer.

One night, I slipped into just such an interview/conversation with Savas Ergas. He was 64 years old at the time and was planning to make one last 6-month voyage as a sponge diver during the coming season in 1965. I began to interview Savas on his work history at about 7:30 in the evening, and we closed Procopis's place at about 3 in the morning. During the course of the evening, several other men joined and left the group at various times, as they would on any night of conversation at Procopis's. Savas had lots of stories to tell (he was a living legend and he played well to a crowd), and we had to continue the interview a few days later, over several more liters of retsina.

At one point on that second night, Savas told me (almost offhandedly) that he had spent more than a year of his life walking the bottom of the Mediterra-

nean. I asked him how he knew this, and he challenged me to document it. Savas had decided that there was something important that I needed to know and he maneuvered the interview around to make sure I learned it.

This led to about 3 hours of painstaking work. We counted the number of seasons he'd been to sea over a 46-year career (he remembered that he hadn't worked at all during 1943 because of "something to do with the war"). We figured conservatively the number of days he'd spent at sea, the average number of dives per trip, and the average depth and time per dive. We joked about the tendency of divers to exaggerate their exploits and about how fragile human memory is when it comes to this kind of detail.

It was difficult to stay on the subject, because Savas was such a good raconteur and a perceptive analyst of Kalymnian life. The interview meandered off on interesting tangents, but after a while, either Savas or I would steer it back to the issue at hand. In the end, discounting heavily for both exaggeration and faulty recall, we reckoned that he'd spent at least 10,000 hours—about a year and a fourth, counting each day as a full 24 hours—under water and had walked the distance between Alexandria and Tunis at least three times.

The exact numbers really didn't matter. What did matter was that Savas Ergas had a really good sense of what *he* thought I needed to know about the life of a sponge diver. It was I, the interviewer, who defined the focus of the interview; but it was Savas, the respondent, who determined the content. And was I ever glad he did.

## Probing

The key to successful interviewing is learning how to probe effectively—that is, to stimulate a respondent to produce more information, without injecting yourself so much into the interaction that you only get a reflection of yourself in the data. Suppose you ask, "Have you ever been away from the village to work?" and the informant says, "Yes." The next question (the probe) is: "Like where?" Suppose the answer is, "Oh, several different places." The correct response is not, "Pachuca? Querétaro? Mexico City?" but, "Like where? Could you name some of the places where you've gone to get work?"

There are many kinds of probes that you can use in an interview. (In what follows, I draw on the important work by Kluckhohn [1945], Merton et al. [1956], Kahn and Cannell [1957], Whyte [1960, 1984], Dohrenwend and Richardson [1965], Gorden [1975], Hyman and Cobb [1975], Warwick and Lininger [1975], Reed and Stimson [1985], and on my own experience and that of my students.)

### *The Silent Probe*

The most difficult technique to learn is the **silent probe**, which consists of just remaining quiet and waiting for an informant to continue. The silence may be accompanied by a nod or by a mumbled "uh-huh" as you focus on your note pad. The silent probe sometimes produces more information than does direct questioning. At least at the beginning of an interview, informants look to you for guidance as to whether or not they're on the right track. They want to know whether they're "giving you what you want." Most of the time, especially in unstructured interviews, you want the informant to define the relevant information.

Some informants are more glib than others and require very little prodding to keep up the flow of information. Others are more reflective and take their time. Inexperienced interviewers tend to jump in with verbal probes as soon as an informant goes silent. Meanwhile, the informant may be just reflecting, gathering thoughts, and preparing to say something important. You can kill those moments (and there are a lot of them) with your interruptions.

Glibness can be a matter of *cultural*, not just personal style. Gordon Streib reports that he had to adjust his own interviewing style radically when he left New York City to study the Navajo in the 1950s (Streib 1952). Streib, a New Yorker himself, had done studies based on semistructured interviews with subway workers in New York. Those workers maintained a fast, hard-driving pace during the interviews—a pace with which Streib, as a member of the culture, was comfortable.

But that style was entirely inappropriate with the Navajo, who were uniformly more reflective than the subway workers (Streib, personal communication). In other words, the silent probe is sometimes not a "probe" at all; being quiet and waiting for an informant to continue may simply be appropriate cultural behavior.

On the other hand, the silent probe is a high-risk technique, which is why beginners avoid it. If an informant is genuinely at the end of a thought and you don't provide further guidance, your silence can become awkward. You may even lose your credibility as an interviewer. The silent probe takes practice to use effectively. But it's worth the effort.

### *The Echo Probe*

Another kind of probe consists of simply repeating the last thing someone has said, and asking them to continue. This **echo probe** is particularly useful when an informant is describing a process, or an event. "I see. The goat's throat is cut and the blood is drained into a pan for cooking with the meat.

Then what happens?" This probe is neutral and doesn't redirect the interview. It shows that you understand what's been said so far and encourages the informant to continue with the narrative. If you use the echo probe too often, though, you'll hear an exasperated informant asking, "Why do you keep repeating what I just said?"

### *The Uh-huh Probe*

You can encourage an informant to continue with a narrative by just making affirmative comments, like "Uh-huh," or "Yes, I see," or "Right, uh-huh," and so on. Matarazzo (1964) showed how powerful this **neutral probe** can be. He did a series of identical, semistructured, 45-minute interviews with a group of informants. He broke each interview into three 15-minute chunks. During the second chunk, the interviewer was told to make affirmative noises, like "uh-huh," whenever the informant was speaking. Informant responses during those chunks were about a third longer than during the first and third periods.

### *The Tell-Me-More Probe*

This may be the most common form of probe among experienced interviewers. Respondents give you an answer, and you probe for more by saying: "Could you tell me more about that?" Other variations include "Why exactly do you say that?" and "Why exactly do you feel that way?" You have to be careful about using stock probes like these. As Converse and Schuman point out (1974:50), if you get into a rut and repeat these probes like a robot, don't be surprised to hear someone finishing up a nice long discourse by saying, "Yeah, yeah, and why *exactly* do I feel like that?" (From personal experience, I can guarantee that the mortification factor only allows this sort of thing to happen once. The memory of the experience lasts a lifetime.)

### *The Long Question Probe*

Another way to induce longer and more continuous responses is by making your questions longer. Instead of asking, "How do you plant a home garden?" ask, "What are all the things you have to do to actually get a home garden going?" When I interviewed sponge divers on Kalymnos, instead of asking them, "What is it like to make a dive into very deep water?" I said, "Tell me about diving into really deep water. What do you do to get ready and how do you descend and ascend? What's it like down there?"

Later in the interview or on another occasion, I would home in on special

topics. But to break the ice and get the interview flowing, there is nothing quite as useful as what Spradley (1979) called the **grand tour question**.

This does not mean that asking longer questions or using neutral probes necessarily produces *better* responses. They do, however, produce *more* responses, and, in general, more is better. Furthermore, the more you can keep an informant talking, the more you can express interest in what they are saying and the more you build rapport. This is especially important in the first interview you do with someone whose trust you want to build (see ibid.:80). There is still a lot to be learned about how various kinds of probes affect what informants tell us.

Threatening questions—those asking for sensitive information—should be short but preceded by a long, rambling run-up: "We're interested in the various things that people do these days in order to keep from getting diseases when they have sex. Some people do different kinds of things, and some people do nothing special. Do you ever use condoms?" If the respondents says, "Yes," or "No," or "Sometimes," *then* you can launch that series of questions about why, why not, when, with whom, and so on. The wording of sensitive questions should be supportive and nonjudgmental. (See below for more on threatening questions.)

### *Probing by Leading*

After all this, you may be cautious about being really directive in an interview. Don't be. Many researchers caution against "leading" an informant. Lofland (1976), for example, warns against questions like, "Don't you think that? . . ." and suggests asking, "What do you think about? . . ." He is, of course, correct. On the other hand, any question an interviewer asks leads an informant. You might as well learn to do it well.

Consider this leading question that I asked a Ñähñu Indian: "Right. I understand. The compadre is *supposed* to pay for the music for the baptism fiesta. But what happens if the compadre doesn't have the money? Who pays then?" This kind of question can stop the flow of an informant's narrative stone dead. It can also produce more information than the informant would otherwise have provided. At the time, I thought the informant was being overly "normative." That is, I thought he was stating an ideal behavioral custom (having a compadre pay for the music at a fiesta) as if it were never violated.

It turned out that all he was doing was relying on his own cultural competence—"abbreviating," as Spradley (1979:79) called it. The informant took for granted that the anthropologist knew the "obvious" answer: If the compadre didn't have enough money, well, then there might not be any music.

My interruption reminded the informant that I just wasn't up to his level of

cultural competence; I needed him to be more explicit. He went on to explain other things that he considered obvious but that I would not have even known to ask about. Someone who has committed himself to pay for the music at a fiesta might borrow money from *another* compadre to fulfill the obligation. In that case, he wouldn't tell the person who was throwing the fiesta. That might make the host feel bad, like he was forcing his compadre to go into debt.

In this interview, in fact, the informant eventually became irritated with me because I asked so many things that he considered obvious. He wanted to abbreviate a lot and to provide a more general summary; I wanted details. I backed off and asked a different informant for the details. I have since learned to start some probes with "This may seem obvious, but. . . ."

Directive probes (leading questions) may be based on what an informant has just finished saying, or may be based on something an informant told you an hour ago, or a week ago. As you progress in long-term research, you come to have a much greater appreciation for what you really want from an interview. It is perfectly legitimate to use the information you've already collected to focus your subsequent interviews.

This leads researchers from informal to unstructured to semistructured interviews and even to completely structured interviews like questionnaires. When you feel as though you have learned something important about a group and its culture, the next step to test that knowledge—to see if it is idiosyncratic to a particular informant or subgroup in the culture or if it can be reproduced in many informants.

### *Baiting: The Phased-Assertion Probe*

A particularly effective probing technique is called **phased assertion** (Kirk and Miller 1986), or **baiting** (Agar 1996:142). This is when you act like you already know something in order to get people to open up.

I used this technique in a study of how Ñähñu Indian parents felt about their children learning to read and write Ñähñu. Bilingual (Spanish-Indian) education in Mexico is a politically sensitive issue (Heath 1972), and when I started asking about it, a lot of people were reluctant to talk freely.

In the course of informal interviewing, I learned from a schoolteacher in one village that some fathers had come to complain about the teacher trying to get the children to read and write Ñähñu. The fathers, it seems, were afraid that studying Ñähñu would get in the way of their children becoming fluent in Spanish. Once I heard this story, I began to drop hints that I knew the reason parents were against children learning to read and write Ñähñu. As I did this, the parents opened up and confirmed what I'd found out.

Every journalist (and gossip monger) knows this technique well. As you

learn a piece of a puzzle from one informant, you use it with the next informant to get more information, and so on. The more you seem to know, the more comfortable people feel about talking to you and the less people feel they are actually divulging anything. *They* are not the ones who are giving away the "secrets" of the group.

Phased assertion also prompts some informants to jump in and correct you if they think you know a little, but that you've "got it all wrong." In some cases, I've purposely made wrong assertions to provoke a correcting response.

### *Verbal Respondents*

Some people try to tell you *too much*. They are the kind of people who just love to have an audience. You ask them one little question and off they go on one tangent after another, until you become exasperated. Converse and Schuman (1974:46) recommend "gentle inattention"—putting down your pen, looking away, leafing through your papers. Nigel King (1994:23) recommends saying something like: "That's very interesting. Could we go back to what you were saying earlier about. . . ."

You may, however, have to be a bit more obvious. New interviewers, in particular, may be reluctant to cut off informants, afraid that doing so is poor interviewing technique. In fact, as William Foote Whyte notes, informants who want to talk your ear off are probably used to being interrupted. It's the only way their friends get a word in edgewise. But you need to learn how to cut people off without rancor. "Don't interrupt *accidentally* . . . ," Whyte said, "learn to interrupt *gracefully*" (1960:353, emphasis his). Each situation is somewhat different; you learn as you go in this business.

### *Nonverbal Respondents*

One of the really tough things you run into is someone telling you "I don't know" in answer to lots of questions. In qualitative research projects, where you choose respondents precisely because you think they know something of interest, the "don't know" refrain can be especially frustrating. Converse and Schuman (1974:49) distinguish four kinds of don't-know response: (1) I don't know (and frankly I don't care); (2) I don't know (and it's none of your business); (3) I don't know (actually, I do know, but you wouldn't be interested in what I have to say about that); and (4) I don't know (and I wish you'd change the subject because this line of questioning makes me really uncomfortable). There is also the "(I wish I could help you but) I really don't know."

Sometimes you can get beyond this, sometimes you can't. You have to face the fact that not everyone who volunteers to be interviewed is a good respon-

dent. If you probe those people for information when they say, "I don't know," you tempt them to make something up just to satisfy you, as Sanchez and Morchio (1992) found. Sometimes, you just have to take the "don't know" for an answer and cut your losses by going on to someone else.

### *The Ethics of Probing*

Are these tricks of the trade ethical? I think they are, but using them creates some responsibilities to your respondents.

First, there is no ethical imperative in social research more important than seeing to it that you do not harm innocent people who have provided you with information in good faith. The problem, of course, is that not all respondents are innocents. Some people commit wartime atrocities. Some practice infanticide. Some are HIV-positive and, out of bitterness, are purposely infecting others. Do you protect them all?

Are any of these examples more troublesome to you than others? These are not extreme cases, thrown in here to prepare you for the worst, "just in case." They are the sorts of ethical dilemmas that field researchers confront all the time.

Second, the better you get at making people "open up," the more responsible you become that they don't later suffer some emotional distress for having done so. Informants who divulge *too* quickly what they believe to be secret information can later come to have real regrets and even loss of self-esteem. They may suffer anxiety over how much they can trust you to protect them in the community.

It is sometimes better to stop an informant from divulging privileged information in the first or second interview and to wait until both of you have built a mutually trusting relationship. If you sense that an informant is uncomfortable with having spoken too quickly about a sensitive topic, end the interview with light conversation and reassurances about your discretion. Soon after, look up the informant and engage in light conversation again, with no probing or other interviewing techniques involved. This will also provide reassurance of trust.

Remember: The first ethical decision you make in research is whether to collect certain kinds of information at all. Once that decision is made, *you* are responsible for what is done with that information, and *you* must protect people from becoming emotionally burdened for having talked to you.

## Learning to Interview

It's impossible to eliminate reactivity and subjectivity in interviewing, but like any other craft, you get better and better at interviewing the more you

practice. It helps a lot to practice in front of others and to have an experienced interviewer monitor and criticize your performance. Even without such help, however, you can improve your interviewing technique just by paying careful attention to what you're doing. Harry Wolcott (1995) offers excellent advice on this score: Pay as much attention to your own words as you do to the words of your respondents (p. 102).

Wolcott also advises: Keep interviews focused on a few big issues (ibid.:112). More good advice from one of the most accomplished ethnographers around. Here's a guaranteed way to wreck rapport and ruin an interview: An informant asks you, "Why do you ask? What does that have to do with what we're talking about?" You tell her: "Well, it just seemed like an interesting question—you know, something I thought might be useful somehow down the road in the analysis."

Here you are, asking people to give you their time and tell you about their lives and you're treating that time with little respect. If you can't imagine giving a satisfactory answer to the question: "Why did you ask *that*?" then leave *that* out.

Do *not* use your friends as practice informants. You cannot learn to interview with friends because there are role expectations that get in the way. Just when you're really rolling, and getting into probing deeply on some topic that you both know about, they are likely to laugh at you or tell you to knock it off.

Practice interviews should *not* be just for practice. They should be done on topics you're really interested in and with people who are likely to know a lot about those topics. Every interview you do should be conducted as professionally as possible and should produce useful data (with plenty of notes that you can code, file, and cross-file).

### *The Importance of Language*

Most anthropologists (and an increasing number of sociologists and social psychologists) do research outside their own country. If you are planning to go abroad for research, find people from the culture you are going to study and interview them on some topic of interest. If you are going to Turkey to study women's roles, then find Turkish students at your university and interview them on some related topic.

It is often possible to hire the spouses of foreign students for these kinds of "practice" interviews. I put "practice" in quotes to emphasize again that these interviews should produce real data of real interest to you. If you are studying

a language that you'll need for research, these practice interviews will help you sharpen your skills at interviewing in that language.

Even if you are going off to the interior of the Amazon, this doesn't let you off the hook. It is unlikely that you'll find native speakers of Yanomami on your campus, but you cannot use this as an excuse to wait until you're out in the field to learn general interviewing skills. Interviewing skills are honed by practice. Among the most constructive things you can do in preparing for field research is to practice conducting unstructured and semistructured interviewing. Learn to interview in Portuguese or Spanish (depending on whether the Yanomami you are going to visit live in the Brazilian or Venezuelan Amazon) before heading for the field and you'll be way ahead.

### *Pacing the Study*

Two of the biggest problems faced by researchers who rely heavily on semistructured interviews are boredom and fatigue. Even small projects may require 30–40 interviews to generate sufficient data to be worthwhile. Most field researchers collect their own interview data, and asking the same questions over and over again can get pretty old. Gorden (1975) studied 30 interviewers who worked for 12 days doing about two tape-recorded interviews per day. Each interview was from 1 to 2 hours long.

The first interview on each day, over all interviewers, averaged about 30 pages of transcription. The second averaged only 25 pages. Furthermore, the first interviews, on average, got shorter and shorter during the 12-day period of the study. In other words, on any given day, boredom made the second interview shorter, and over the 12 days, boredom (and possibly fatigue) took its toll on the first interviews of each day.

Even anthropologists who spend a year in the field may have focused bouts of interviewing on a particular topic. Plan each project, or subproject, in advance and calculate the number of interviews you are going to get. Pace yourself. Spread the project out if possible, and don't try to bring in all your interview data in the shortest possible time—unless you're studying reactions to a hot issue, in which case, spreading things out can create a serious history confound (see chapter 4).

Here's the tradeoff: The longer a project takes, the less likely that the first interviews and the last interviews will be valid indicators of the same things. In long-term, participant observation fieldwork (6 months to a year), I recommend going back to your early informants and interviewing them a second time. See whether their observations and attitudes have changed, and if so, why.

## Presentation of Self

How should you present yourself in an interview? As a friend? As a professional? As someone who is sympathetic or as someone who is nonjudgmental? It depends on the nature of the project. When the object is to collect comparable data across respondents, then it makes no difference whether you're collecting words or numbers—cordial-but-nonjudgmental is the way to go.

That's sometimes tough to do. You're interviewing someone on a project about what people can do to help the environment, and your respondent says: "All those eco-Nazis want is to make room for more owls. They don't give a damn about real people's jobs." (Yes, that happened on one of my projects.) That's when you find out whether you can probe without injecting your feelings into the interview. Professional interviewers (the folks who collect the data for the General Social Survey, for example) learn to maintain their equilibrium and move on (see Converse and Schuman 1974).

Some situations are so painful, however, that it's impossible to maintain a neutral facade. Gene Shelley interviewed 72 people in Atlanta, Georgia, who were HIV-positive (Shelley et al. 1995). Here's a typical comment by one of Shelly's informants: "I have a lot of trouble watching all my friends die. Sometimes my whole body shuts down inside. I don't want to know people who are going to die. Some of my friends, there are three or four people a week in the obits. We all watch the obits."

How would *you* respond? Do you say: "Uh-huh. Tell me more about that"? Do you let silence take over and force the respondent to go on? Do you say something sympathetic? Shelley reports that she treated each interview as a unique situation and responded as her intuition told her to respond—sometimes more clinically, sometimes less, depending on her judgment of what the respondent needed her to say. Good advice.

### *On Just Being Yourself*

In 1964, when we were working on the island of Kalymnos, my wife Carole would take our 2-month-old baby for daily walks in a carriage. Older women would peek into the baby carriage and make disapproving noises when they saw our daughter sleeping on her stomach. Then they would reach into the carriage and turn the baby over, explaining forcefully that the baby would get the evil eye if we continued to let her sleep on her stomach.

Carole had read the latest edition of *The Commonsense Book of Baby and Child Care* (the classic baby book by Dr. Benjamin Spock). We carried two copies of the book with us—in case one fell out of a boat or something—and Carole was convinced by Dr. Spock's writings that babies who sleep on their

backs risk choking on their own mucous or vomit. Since then, of course, medical opinion—and all the baby books that young parents read nowadays—have flip-flopped about this issue several times. At the time, though, not wanting to offend anyone, Carole listened politely and tried to act nonjudgmental.

One day, enough was enough. Carole told off a woman who intervened and that was that. From then on, women were more eager to discuss child-rearing practices in general, and the more we challenged them, the more they challenged us. There was no rancor involved, and we learned a lot more than if Carole had just kept on listening politely and had said nothing. This was informal interviewing in the context of long-term participant observation. So, if we had offended anyone, there would have been time and opportunity to make amends—or at least come to an understanding about cultural differences.

### *Little Things Mean a Lot*

Little things are important in interviewing, so pay attention to them. How you dress and where you hold an interview, for example, tell your respondent a lot about you and what you expect. The "interviewing dress code" is: Use common sense. Proper dress depends on the venue. Showing up with a backpack or an attaché case, wearing jeans or a business suit—these are choices that should be pretty easy to make, once you've made the commitment to accommodate your dress to different circumstances.

Same goes for venue. I've held interviews in bars, in business offices, in government offices, on ferry boats, on beaches, in homes. . . . I can't give you a rule for selecting the single *right* place for an interview, since there may be several right places. But some places are just plain wrong for certain interviews. Here again, common sense goes a long way.

## Using a Voice Recorder

Don't rely on your memory in interviewing; use a voice recorder in all structured and semistructured interviews, except where people specifically ask you not to. Recorded interviews are a permanent archive of primary information that can be passed on to other researchers. (Remember, I'm talking here about formal interviews, not the hanging-out, informal interviews that are part of ethnographic research. More on *that* in chapter 17.)

If you sense some reluctance about the recorder, leave it on the table and don't turn it on right away. Start the interview with chitchat and when things get warmed up, say something like "This is really interesting. I don't want to trust my memory on something as important as this; do you mind if I record

it?" Charles Kadushin (personal communication) hands people a microphone with a shut-off switch. Rarely, he says, do respondents actually use the switch, but giving people control over the interview shows that you take them very seriously.

Sometimes you'll be recording an interview and things will be going along just fine and you'll sense that a respondent is backing off from some sensitive topic. Just reach over to the recorder and ask the respondent if she or he would like you to turn it off. Harry Wolcott (1995:114) recommends leaving the recorder on, if possible, when the formal part of an interview ends. Even though you've finished, Wolcott points out, your respondent may have more to say.

### *Recording Equipment: Machines, Media, and Batteries*

The array of recording devices available today is impressive but, as you make your choices of equipment to take to the field, remember: These are tools and only tools. Don't get caught up by the "gee whiz" factor. If it does what you want it to do, no technology is obsolete.

There are three choices: cassette tape, minidisk (also known as MiniDisc, or MD format), and digital. They all have their pluses and minuses, though I suspect that this is the last edition of this book in which I'll be talking about tape.

Digital has a lot going for it. Good digital recorders start at around $75 (street price) and hold 10–15 hours of voice recording with 32mb of flash memory. When the memory is full, you upload the contents to a computer (through a USB port, for example) and then burn a CD to store your interviews offline. If you have an Apple iPod®, and if you don't need all the disk space for music, you can turn the machine into a digital audio recorder with a plug-in microphone (see appendix F). A gigabyte of disk space holds about 400 hours of voice recordings, so a 20-gigabyte iPod has plenty of room for both music and interviews.

But caution: (1) Use the right technology, or it will take as long to upload digital audio to your computer, so you can transcribe it, as it takes to record it in the first place. (2) Okay, you have the money to hire a transcriptionist. Be sure that he or she can work from digital files. Transcribing from voice to text is traditionally done with a transcribing machine (more on them in a minute), and those machines are mostly for cassettes and microcassettes. You can make a cassette from digital audio, but it's very time consuming. (3) If you are in an isolated field site and don't have reliable power, digital audio can be risky. Imagine filling your digital recorder and needing to upload before you can start another interview and then . . . the power goes out, or your portable gen-

erator goes down. You'll wish then you'd stuck with a good quality, battery-operated cassette or minidisk recorder.

If you have reasonably reliable power in the field, and if you don't need a hard, paper transcription of your field notes or your interviews, then digital recording has another huge advantage: Many software packages for managing text let you code, on the fly, as you listen to digitally recorded text. In other words, they let you tag a digital recording of *voice* with digital codes, just as if you were doing it on a document on your computer. Digital audio has several minor advantages as well. Unlike tape, you can make copies of it, byte for byte, without losing any fidelity; you can post copies to the Internet to share with others; and you can insert actual sound snippets into lectures or papers presented at conferences.

The big advantage of cassettes and minidisks is that they are separate, hard media. Minidisks and microcassettes, however, are not available everywhere the way standard cassette tapes are, so if you opt for these media and you're going to the Andes, bring plenty of them with you. Many professionals still prefer top-of-the-line cassette recorders for field research, though these machines are quite expensive, compared to the alternatives available. Highly rated field machines (like the Sony Professional Walkman Minidisk) were selling for $250–$400 in 2005. This is professional equipment—the sort you'd want for linguistic fieldwork (when you're straining to hear every phoneme) or for high-quality recording of music. If you are not investing in professional-level equipment, there are many very good field tape recorders that cost less than $200.

In fact, for simple recording of interviews, especially in a language you understand well, you can get away with a good, basic cassette machine for under $50, or a microcassette machine for under $100. But buy two of them. When you skimp on equipment costs, and don't have a spare, this almost guarantees that you'll need one at the most inconvenient moment.

Use a good, separate microphone ($20–$50). Some people like wearing a lavalier microphone—the kind you clip to a person's lapel or shirt collar—but many people find them intrusive. I've always preferred omnidirectional microphones (good ones cost a bit more), because they pick up voices from anywhere in a room. Sometimes, people get rolling on a topic and they want to get up and pace the room as they talk. Want to kill a really great interview? Tell somebody who's on a roll to please sit down and speak directly into the mike. Good microphones come with stands that keep the head from resting on any surface, like a table. Surfaces pick up and introduce background noise into any recording. If you don't have a really good stand for the mike, you can make one easily with some rubbery foam (the kind they use in making mattresses).

No matter what you spend on a tape or minidisk recorder, never, ever skimp on the quality of tapes or minidisks. Use only cassettes that are put together with screws so you can open them up and fix the tape when (inevitably) they jam or tangle. And don't use 120-minute tapes. Transcribing involves listening, stopping, and rewinding—often hundreds of times per tape. Thin tape (the kind that runs for 2 hours or more) just won't stand up to that kind of use.

Bruce Jackson (1987:145), a very experienced fieldworker in folklore, recommends taking brand new tapes to a studio and getting them bulk erased before recording on them for the first time. This cuts down the magnetic field noise on the new tape. Jackson also recommends running each tape through your machine three or four times on fast forward and fast reverse. All tapes stretch a bit, even the best of them, and this will get the stretch out of the way.

Test your tape recorder before every interview. And do the testing at home. There's only one thing worse than a recorder that doesn't run at all. It's one that runs but doesn't record. Then your informant is sure to say at the end of the interview: "Let's run that back and see how it came out!" (Yes, that happened to me. But only once. And it needn't happen to anyone who reads this.)

Good tape recorders have battery indicators. Want another foolproof way to kill an exciting interview? Ask the informant to "please hold that thought" while you change batteries. When batteries get slightly low, throw them out. Edward Ives (1995) recommends doing all recording on batteries. That guarantees that, no matter what kind of flaky or spiky current you run into, *your* recordings will always be made at exactly the same speed.

Particularly if you are working in places that have unstable current, you'll want to rely on batteries to ensure recording fidelity. Just make sure that you start out with fresh batteries for each interview. (You can save a lot of battery life by using house current for all playback, fast forward, and rewind operations—reserving the batteries *only* for recording.) If you prefer household current for recording, then carry along a couple of long extension cords so you have a choice of where to set up for the interview.

Good tape recorders come with voice activation (VA). When you're in VA mode, the recorder only turns on if there is noise to record. During long pauses (while an informant is thinking, for example), the recorder shuts off, saving tape. Holly Williams, however (personal communication), recommends not using the VA mode. It doesn't save much tape and she finds that the long breaks without any sound make transcribing tapes much easier. You don't have to shut the machine off and turn it on as many times while you're typing.

### *Transcribers*

It takes 6–8 hours to transcribe 1 hour of tape, depending on how closely you transcribe (getting all the "uhs" and "ers" and throat clearings, or just

capturing the main elements of speech), how clear the tape is, and how proficient you are in the language and in typing. Invest in a transcription machine. Don't even try to transcribe taped interviews without one of those machines unless you are conducting an experiment to see how long it takes to get frustrated with transcribing. These machines cost around $250 to $300. You use a foot pedal to start and stop the machine, to back up and to fast forward, and even to slow down the tape so you can listen carefully to a phrase or a word. A transcription machine and a good set of earphones will save you many hours of work because you can keep both hands on your keyboard all the time.

It isn't always necessary to fully transcribe interviews. If you are using life histories to describe how families in some community deal with prolonged absence of fathers, then you *must* have full transcriptions to work with. And you can't study cultural *themes*, either, without full transcriptions. But if you want to know how many informants said they had actually used oral rehydration therapy to treat their children's diarrhea, you may be able to get away with only partial transcription. You may even be as well off using an interview guide and taking notes. (More about transcribing machines in appendix F.)

Whether you do full transcriptions or just take notes during interviews, always try to record your interviews. You may need to go back and fill in details in your notes.

### *Voice Recognition Software*

Voice recognition software (VRS) has come of age. You listen to an interview through a set of headphones and repeat the words—both your questions and your informant's responses—out loud, in your own voice. The software listens to your voice and types out the words across the screen. You go over each sentence to correct mistakes (tell it that the word "bloat" should be "float" for instance) and to format the text (tell it where to put punctuation and paragraph breaks). The process is slow at first, but the software learns over time to recognize inflections in your voice, and it makes fewer and fewer mistakes as weeks go by. It also learns all the special vocabulary you throw at it. The built-in vocabularies of current VRS systems are enormous—something like 300,000 words—but, though they may be ready to recognize polygamy, for example, you'll have to teach it polygyny or fraternal polyandry. And, of course, you'll have to train it to recognize words from the language of your field site. If you say, "Juanita sold eight *huipiles* at the market this week," you'll have to spell out "Juanita" and "*huipiles*" so the software can add these words to its vocabulary.

As the software gets trained, the process moves up to 95%–98% accuracy at about 100 to 120 word per minute. With a 2%–5% error rate, you still have

to go over every line of your work to correct it, but the total time for transcribing interviews can be reduced by half or more. The two most widely used products are ViaVoice™, from IBM, and ScanSoft's Dragon Naturally Speaking™ (see appendix F).

### *Recording Is Not a Substitute for Taking Notes*

Finally, never substitute recording for note taking. A lot of very bad things can happen to tape or disks or flash memory, and if you haven't got backup notes, you're out of luck. Don't wait until you get home to take notes, either. Take notes during the interview *about* the interview. Did the informant seem nervous or evasive? Were there a lot of interruptions? What were the physical surroundings like? How much probing did you have to do? Take notes on the contents of the interview, even though you get every word on tape.

A few informants, of course, will let you use a recorder but will balk at your taking notes. Don't assume, however, that informants will be offended if you take notes. Ask them. Most of the time, all you do by avoiding note taking is lose a lot of data. Informants are under no illusions about what you're doing. You're interviewing them. You might as well take notes and get people used to it, if you can.

## Focus Groups and Group Interviews

Focus groups are recruited to discuss a particular topic—anything from people's feelings about brands of beer to their experience in toilet training their children. Not all group interviews, however, are *focus group* interviews. Sometimes, you just find yourself in an interview situation with a lot of people. You're interviewing someone and other people just come up and insert themselves into the conversation. This happens spontaneously all the time in long-term fieldwork in small communities, where people all know one another. If you insist on privacy, you might find yourself with no interview at all. Better to take advantage of the situation and just let the information flow. Be sure to take notes, of course, on who's there, who's dominant, who's just listening, and so on, in any group interview.

Rachel Baker (1996a, 1996b) studied homeless boys in Kathmandu. When she interviewed boys in temples or junkyards, others might come by and be welcomed into the conversation-interview situation.

Focus groups are quite different. The method derives from work by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in 1941 at Columbia University's Office of

Radio Research. A group of people listened to a recorded radio program that was supposed to raise public morale prior to America's entry into World War II. The listeners were told to push a red button whenever they heard something that made them react negatively and to push a green button when they heard something that made them react positively. The reactions were recorded automatically by a primitive polygraph-like apparatus. When the program was over, an interviewer talked to the group of listeners to find out why they had felt positively or negatively about each message they'd reacted to (Merton 1987).

The commercial potential of Lazarsfeld and Merton's pioneering work was immediately clear. The method of real-time recording of people's reactions, combined with focused interviewing of a group, is today a mainstay in advertising research. MCI, the long-distance phone company, used focus groups to develop their initial advertising when they were just starting out. They found that customers didn't blame AT&T for the high cost of their long-distance phone bills; they blamed themselves for talking too long on long-distance calls. MCI came out with the advertising slogan: "You're not talking too much, just spending too much." The rest, as they say, is history (Krueger 1994:33).

Whole companies now specialize in focus group research, and there are manuals on how to recruit participants and how to conduct a focus group session (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990; Krueger 1994; Vaughn et al. 1996; Morgan 1997; Morgan and Krueger 1998).

### *Why Are Focus Groups So Popular?*

The focus group method was a commercial success from the 1950s on, but it lay dormant in academic circles for more than 20 years. This is probably because the method is virtually devoid of statistics. Since the late 1970s, however, interest among social researchers of all kinds has boomed as researchers have come to understand the benefits of combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

Focus groups do not replace surveys, but rather complement them. You can convene a focus group to discuss questions for a survey. Do the questions seem arrogant to respondents? Appropriate? Naive? A focus group can discuss the wording of a particular question or offer advice on how the whole questionnaire comes off to respondents. And you can convene a focus group to help interpret the results of a survey. But focus groups are not just adjuncts to surveys. They are widely used to find out *why* people feel as they do about something or the steps that people go through in making decisions.

### *Three Cases of Focus Groups*

Knodel et al. (1984), for example, used focus groups to study the fertility transition in Thailand. They held separate group sessions for married men under 35 and married women under 30 who wanted three or fewer children. They also held separate sessions for men and women over 50 who had at least five children. This gave them four separate groups. In all cases, the participants had no more than an elementary school education.

Knodel et al. repeated this four-group design in six parts of Thailand to cover the religious and ethnic diversity of the country. The focus of each group discussion was on the number of children people wanted and why.

Thailand has recently undergone fertility transition, and the focus group study illuminated the reasons for the transition. "Time and again," these researchers report, "when participants were asked why the younger generation wants smaller families than the older generation had, they responded that nowadays everything is expensive" (ibid.:302).

People also said that all children, girls as well as boys, needed education to get the jobs that would pay for the more expensive, monetized lifestyle to which people were becoming accustomed. It is, certainly, easier to pay for the education of fewer children. These consistent responses are what you'd expect in a society undergoing fertility transition.

Ruth Wilson et al. (1993) used focus groups in their study of acute respiratory illness (ARI) in Swaziland. They interviewed 33 individual mothers, 13 traditional healers, and 17 health care providers. They also ran 33 focus groups, 16 male groups and 17 female groups. The groups had from 4 to 15 participants, with an average of 7.

Each individual respondent and each group was presented with two hypothetical cases. Wilson et al. asked their respondents to diagnose each case and to suggest treatments. Here are the cases:

> Case 1. A mother has a 1-year-old baby girl with the following signs: coughing, fever, sore throat, running or blocked nose, and red or teary eyes. When you ask the mother, she tells you that the child can breast-feed well but is not actively playing.
>
> Case 2. A 10-month-old baby was brought to a health center with the following signs: rapid/difficult breathing, chest indrawing, fever for one day, sunken eyes, coughing for three days. The mother tells you that the child does not have diarrhea but has a poor appetite.

Many useful comparisons were possible with the data from this study. For example, mothers attributed the illness in Case 2 mostly to the weather, hered-

ity, or the child's home environment. The male focus groups diagnosed the child in Case 2 as having asthma, fever, indigestion, malnutrition, or worms.

Wilson et al. (1993) acknowledge that a large number of individual interviews make it easier to estimate the degree of error in a set of interviews. However, they conclude that the focus groups provided valid data on the terminology and practices related to ARI in Swaziland. Wilson and her coworkers did, after all, have 240 respondents in their focus groups; they had data from in-depth interviews of all categories of persons involved in treating children's ARI; and they had plenty of participant observation in Swaziland to back them up.

Paul Nkwi (1996), an anthropologist at the University of Yaounde, Cameroon, studied people's perceptions of family planning in his country. He and his team worked in four communities, using participant observation, in-depth interviews, a questionnaire, and focus groups. In each community, the team conducted nine focus groups on community development concerns, causes of resistance to family planning, cultural and economic factors that can be used to promote family planning, community problems with health and family planning services, how services could be improved to meet the needs of communities, and how much (if at all) people would pay for improved health care services.

The focus groups, conducted in the local language of each community, lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours and were conducted in the homes of influential men of the communities. This helped ensure that the discussions would produce useful information. The groups were stratified by age and sex. One group was exclusively young men 12–19 years of age; another group was exclusively young women of that age. Then there were male and female groups 20–35, 36–49, and 50 and over. Finally, Nkwi and his team did a single focus group with mixed ages and sexes in each community.

The focus groups were taped and transcribed for analysis. It turned out that the information from the focus groups duplicated much of the information gathered by the other methods used in the study. Nkwi's study shows clearly the value of using several data-gathering methods in one study. When several methods produce the same results, you can be a lot more secure in the validity of the findings. Nkwi's study also shows the potential for focus group interviewing in assessing public policy issues (Paul Nkwi, personal communication).

Note two very important things about all three of these cases: (1) They weren't based on *a focus group* but on *a series of groups*. Each of the groups was chosen to represent a subgroup in a factorial design, just as we saw with experiments in chapter 4 and with survey sampling in chapter 6. (2) Each of

the groups was homogeneous with respect to certain independent variables—again, just as we saw with respect to experimental and sampling design.

The principle of **factorial design** is an essential part of focus group methodology. The study by Knodel et al. (1984) on page 234 is an example of factorial design: two age groups and two genders, for a total of four groups (men under 35 and women under 30, who wanted three or fewer children, and men over 50 and women over 50, who had at least five children), repeated in six venues across Thailand, for a total of 24 groups.

### *Are Focus Groups Valid?*

Ward et al. (1991) compared focus group and survey data from three studies of voluntary sterilization (tubal ligation or vasectomy) in Guatemala, Honduras, and Zaire. Ward et al. report that, "Overall, for 28% of the variables the results were similar" in the focus group and survey data. "For 42% the results were similar but focus groups provided additional detail; for 17% the results were similar, but the survey provided more detail. And in only 12% of the variables were the results dissimilar" (p. 273).

In the Guatemala study, 97% of the women surveyed reported no regrets with their decision to have a tubal ligation. The "vast majority" of women in the focus groups also reported no regrets. This was counted as a "similar result." Ten percent of the women surveyed reported having had a tubal ligation for health reasons. In the focus groups, too, just a few women reported health factors in their decision to have the operation, but they provided more detail and context, citing such things as complications from previous pregnancies.

This is an example of where the focus group and survey provide similar results, but where the focus group offers more detail. Data from the focus groups and the survey confirm that women heard about the operation from similar sources, but the survey shows that 40% of the women heard about it from a sterilized woman, 26% heard about it from a health professional, and so on. Here, the survey provides more detail, though both methods produce similar conclusions.

In general, though, focus groups—like participant observation, in-depth interviews, and other systematic qualitative methods—should be used for the collection of data about content and process and should not be relied on for collecting data about personal attributes or for estimating population parameters of personal attributes. The belief that a woman has or does not have a right to an abortion is a personal attribute, like gender, age, annual income, or religion. If you want to estimate the proportion of people in a population who

believe that a woman has a right to an abortion, then focus groups are not the method of choice.

A proportion is a number, and if you want a good number—a valid one, a useful one—then you need a method that produces exactly that. A survey, based on a representative sample, is the method of choice here. But if you want information about content—about *why* people think a woman should or should not have the right to an abortion—then that's just the sort of thing a focus group can illuminate.

### *Focus Group Size, Composition, Number*

Focus groups typically have 6–12 members, plus a moderator. Seven or eight people is a popular size. If a group is too small, it can be dominated by one or two loudmouths; if it gets beyond 10 or 12, it gets tough to manage. However, smaller groups are better when you're trying to get really in-depth discussions going about sensitive issues (Morgan 1997). Of course, this assumes that the group is run by a skilled moderator who knows how to get people to open up and how keep them opened up.

The participants in a focus group should be more or less homogeneous and, in general, should not know one another. Richard Krueger, a very experienced focus group moderator, says that "familiarity tends to inhibit disclosure" (1994:18). It's easy to open up more when you get into a discussion with people whom you are unlikely ever to see again (sort of like what happens on long air flights).

Obviously, what "homogeneous" means depends on what you're trying to learn. If you want to know why a smaller percentage of middle-class African American women over 40 get mammograms than do their white counterparts, then you need a group of middle-class African American women who are over 40.

### *Running a Focus Group*

The group moderator gets people talking about whatever issue is under discussion. Leading a focus group requires the combined skills of an ethnographer, a survey researcher, and a therapist. You have to watch out for people who want to show off and close them down without coming on too strongly. You have to watch out for shy people and draw them out, without being intimidating.

Tips on how to do all this, and a lot more, are in *The Focus Group Kit*, a series of six how-to books (Morgan and Krueger 1998). Don't even think about getting into focus group management without going through this kit.

In a focus group about sensitive issues like abortion or drug use, the leader works at getting the group to gel and getting members to feel that they are part of an understanding cohort of people. If the group is run by an accomplished leader, one or more members will eventually feel comfortable about divulging sensitive information about themselves. Once the ice is broken, others will feel less threatened and will join in. Moderators should not be known to the members of a focus group, and in particular, focus group members should not be employees of a moderator. Hierarchy is not conducive to openness.

In running a focus group, remember that people will disclose more in groups that are supportive and nonjudgmental. Tell people that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions you will ask and emphasize that you've invited people who are similar in their backgrounds and social characteristics. This, too, helps people open up (Krueger 1994:113).

Above all, don't lead too much and don't put words in people's mouths. In studying nutritional habits, don't ask a focus group why they eat or don't eat certain foods; do ask them to talk about what kinds of foods they like and dislike and why. In studying risky sexual behavior, don't ask, "Do you use condoms whenever you visit a prostitute?"; do ask people to talk about their experience with prostitutes and exactly what kind of sexual practices they prefer. Your job is to keep the discussion on the topic. Eventually, people will hit on the nutritional habits or the sexual acts that interest you, and you can pick up the thread from there.

### *Analyzing Data from Focus Groups*

You can analyze focus group data with the same techniques you would use on any corpus of text: field notes, life histories, open-ended interviews, and so on. As with all large chunks of text, you have two choices for very different kinds of analysis. You can do formal content analysis, or you can do qualitative analysis. See chapter 17 (on text analysis) for more about this.

As with in-depth interviews, it's best to record (or videotape) focus groups. This is a bit tricky, though, because any audio of a focus group, whether digital or tape, is hard to understand and transcribe if two or more people talk at once. A good moderator keeps people talking one at a time. Don't hide the recorder or the microphones. Someone is sure to ask if they're being recorded, and when you tell them, "Yes"—which you must do—they're sure to wonder why they had to ask.

If you are just trying to confirm some ideas or to get a general notion of the how people feel about a topic, you can simply take notes from the tapes and work with your notes. Most focus groups, however, are transcribed. The real

power of focus groups is that they produce ethnographically rich data. Only transcription captures a significant part of that richness. But be prepared to work with a lot of information. Any single hour-and-a-half focus group can easily produce 50 pages or more of text.

Many focus groups have two staff members: a moderator and a person who does nothing but jot down the name each person who speaks and the first few words they say. This makes it easier for a transcriber to identify the voices on a tape. If you can't afford this, or if you feel that people would be uncomfortable with someone taking down their names, you can call on people by name, or mention their name when you respond to them. Things can get rolling in a focus group (that's what you want), and you'll have a tough time transcribing the tapes if you don't know who's talking.

## Response Effects

**Response effects** are measurable differences in interview data that are predictable from characteristics of informants, interviewers, and environments. As early as 1929, Stuart Rice showed that the political orientation of interviewers can have a substantial effect on what they report their respondents told them. Rice was doing a study of derelicts in flop houses and he noticed that the men contacted by one interviewer consistently said that their down-and-out status was the result of alcohol; the men contacted by the other interviewer blamed social and economic conditions and lack of jobs. It turned out that the first interviewer was a prohibitionist and the second was a socialist (cited in Cannell and Kahn 1968:549).

Since Rice's pioneering work, hundreds of studies have been conducted on the impact of things like race, sex, age, and accent of both the interviewer and the informant; the source of funding for a project; the level of experience respondents have with interview situations; whether there is a cultural norm that encourages or discourages talking to strangers; whether the question being investigated is controversial or neutral (Cannell et al. 1979; Schuman and Presser 1981; Bradburn 1983; Schwarz 1999; Schaeffer and Presser 2003).

Katz (1942) found that middle-class interviewers got more politically conservative answers in general from lower-class respondents than did lower-class interviewers, and Robinson and Rhode (1946) found that interviewers who looked non-Jewish and had non-Jewish-sounding names were almost *four times more likely* to get anti-Semitic answers to questions about Jews than were interviewers who were Jewish looking and who had Jewish-sounding names.

Hyman and Cobb (1975) found that female interviewers who took their cars in for repairs themselves (as opposed to having their husbands do it) were more likely to have female respondents who report getting their own cars repaired. And Zehner (1970) found that when women in the United States were asked by women interviewers about premarital sex, they were more inhibited than if they were asked by men. Male respondents' answers were not affected by the gender of the interviewer.

By contrast, William Axinn (1991) found that women in Nepal were better than men as interviewers. In the Tamang Family Research Project, the female interviewers had significantly fewer "don't know" responses than did the male interviewers. Axinn supposes this might be because the survey dealt with marital and fertility histories.

Robert Aunger (1992, 2004:145–162) studied three groups of people in the Ituri forest of Zaire. The Lese and Budu are horticultural, while the Efe are foragers. Aunger wanted to know if they shared the same food avoidances. He and three assistants, two Lese men and one Budu man, interviewed a total of 65 people. Each of the respondents was interviewed twice and was asked the same 140 questions about a list of foods.

Aunger identified two types of errors in his data: forgetting and mistakes. If informants said in the first interview that they did not avoid a particular food but said in the second interview that they did avoid the food, Aunger counted the error as forgetfulness. If informants reported in interview two a different type of avoidance for a food than they'd reported in interview one, then Aunger counted this as a mistake.

Even with some missing data, Aunger had over 8,000 pairs of responses in his data (65 *pairs* of interviews, each with up to 140 responses), so he was able to look for the causes of discrepancies between interview one and interview two. About 67% of the forgetfulness errors and about 79% of the mistake errors were correlated with characteristics of informants (gender, ethnic group, age, and so on).

However, about a quarter of the variability in what informants answered to the same question at two different times was due to characteristics of the interviewers (ethnic group, gender, native language, etc.).

And consider this: About 12% of variability in forgetting was explained by interviewer experience. As the interviewers interviewed more and more informants, the informants were less likely to report "no avoidance" on interview one and some avoidance on interview two for a specific food. In other words, interviewers got better and better with practice at drawing out informants on their food avoidances.

Of the four interviewers, though, the two Lese and the Budu got much better, while the anthropologist made very little progress. Was this because of

Aunger's interviewing style, or because informants generally told the anthropologist different things than they told local interviewers, or because there is something special about informants in the Ituri forest? We'll know when we add variables to Aunger's study and repeat it in many cultures, including our own.

### *The Deference Effect*

When people tell you what they think you want to know, in order not to offend you, that's called the **deference effect** or the **acquiescence effect**. Aunger may have experienced this in Zaire. In fact, it happens all the time, and researchers have been aware of the problem for a long, long time. In 1958, Lenski and Leggett embedded two contradictory questions in a face-to-face interview, half an hour apart. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following two statements: (1) It's hardly fair to bring children into the world, the way things look for the future; (2) Children born today have a wonderful future to look forward to. Just 5% of Whites agreed with *both* statements compared to 20% of African Americans. Lenski and Leggett concluded that this was the deference effect in action: Blacks were four times more likely than Whites to agree to anything, even contradictory statements, because the interviewers were almost all white and of higher perceived status than the respondents (Lenski and Leggett 1960).

When the questions are about race, the deference effect also works for African Americans interviewing Whites. In 1989, Douglas Wilder, an African American, ran against Marshall Coleman, who is white, for the governorship of Virginia. Preelection polls showed that Wilder was far ahead, but in the end, he won by only a slim margin. When white voters were asked on the telephone whom they would vote for, they were more likely to claim Wilder as their choice if the interviewer was African American than if the interviewer was white. This effect accounted for as much as 11% of Wilder's support (Finkel et al. 1991). This finding has serious consequences for the future of election polls in the United States, as more and more elections involve competition between white and African American candidates.

Reese et al. (1986:563) tested the deference effect in a telephone survey of Anglo and Mexican American respondents. When asked specifically about their cultural preference, 58% of Hispanic respondents said they preferred Mexican American culture over other cultures, irrespective of whether the interviewer was Anglo or Hispanic. Just 9% of Anglo respondents said they preferred Mexican American culture when asked by Anglo interviewers, but 23% said they preferred Mexican American culture when asked by Hispanic interviewers.

Questions about gender and gender roles produce deference effects, too. When you ask people in the United States how most couples actually divide child care, men are more likely than women to say that men and women share this responsibility—if the interviewer is a man (Kane and McCaulay 1993:11). Do women have too much influence, just the right amount of influence, or too little influence in today's society? When asked *this* question by a male interviewer, men are more likely to say that women have *too much* influence; when asked the same question by a female interviewer, men are more likely to say that women have *too little* influence.

And similarly for women: When asked by a female interviewer, women are more likely to say that men have *too much* influence than when asked by a male interviewer (Kane and Macaulay 1993:14–15). Lueptow et al. (1990) found that women gave more liberal responses to female interviewers than to male interviewers on questions about gender roles. Men's attitudes about gender roles were, for the most part, unaffected by the gender of the interviewer—except that highly educated men gave the *most* liberal responses about gender roles to female interviewers.

"It appears," said Lueptow et al., "that educated respondents of both sexes are shifting their answers toward the socially desirable positions they think are held by female interviewers" (p. 38). Attitudes about gender roles sure are adaptable.

Questions that aren't race related are not affected much by the race or the ethnicity of either the interviewer or the respondent. The Center for Applied Linguistics conducted a study of 1,472 bilingual children in the United States. The children were interviewed by Whites, Cuban Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, or Chinese Americans. Weeks and Moore (1981) compared the scores obtained by white interviewers with those obtained by various ethnic interviewers and it turned out that the ethnicity of the interviewer didn't have a significant effect.

Whenever you have multiple interviewers, keep track of the race, ethnicity, and gender of the interviewer and test for response effects. Identifying sources of bias is better than not identifying them, even if you can't eliminate them. (For more on the deference effect and the social desirability effect, see Krysan and Couper 2003.)

### *The Third-Party-Present Effect*

We sort of take it for granted that interviews are private conversations, conducted one on one, but in fact, many face-to-face interviews have at least one third party in the room, often the spouse or partner of the person being interviewed. Does this affect how people respond to questions? Sometimes it does,

and sometimes it doesn't, and there's a lot of research on when it might be a problem. Zipp and Toth (2002), for example, analyzed data from a household survey in Britain and found that when the spouses are interviewed together, they are much more likely to agree about many things—like who does what around the house—than when they are interviewed separately. Apparently, people listen to each other's answers and modify their own answers accordingly, which puts on a nice, unified face about their relationship.

As you'd expect, there is a social desirablity effect when a third party is present. Casterline and Chidambaram (1984) examined data from 24 developing countries in the World Fertility Study and found that women in those countries are less likely to admit using contraception when a third party is present at the interview. Anthropologists face this situation a lot: trying to get people to talk about sensitive topics and assuring them of privacy, but unable to find the privacy for an interview.

On the other hand, Aquilino (1993) found that when their spouse is in the room, people report more marital conflict than when they are interviewed alone. They are also more likely to report that they and their spouse lived together before marriage if their spouse is in the room. Perhaps, as Mitchell (1965) suggested 40 years ago, people own up more to sensitive things like this when they know it will be obvious to their spouse that they are lying. Seems like a good thing to test. (For more on the third-party-present effect, see Blair [1979], Bradburn [1983], Hartmann [1994], Aquilino [1997], Pollner and Adams [1997], T. W. Smith [1997], Aquilino et al. [2000], and Boeije [2004]).

### *Threatening Questions*

In general, if you are asking someone a nonthreatening question, slight changes in wording of the question won't make much difference in the answers you get. Peterson (1984) asked 1,324 people one of the following questions: (1) How old are you? (2) What is your age? (3) In what year were you born? or (4) Are you 18–24 years of age, 25–34, 35–49, 50–64, 65 or older? Then Peterson got the true ages for all the respondents from reliable records.

There was no significant difference in the accuracy of the answers obtained with the four questions. (However, almost 10% of respondents refused to answer question 1, while only 1% refused to answer question 4, and this difference *is* significant.)

On the other hand, if you ask people about their alcohol consumption, or whether they ever shoplifted when they were children, or whether they have family members who have had mental illness, or how many sexual partners they've had, then even small changes in the wording can have significant

effects on informants' responses. And asking about *other people's* sexual behavior, by the way, can produce dramatically different results. Katz and Naré (2002) asked 1,973 single Muslim women between the ages of 15 and 24 in Dakar, Senegal, if they had ever been pregnant. Three percent of the women said they had. But 25% of the same women said that at least one of their *three closest friends* had been pregnant—more than eight times what they reported about themselves. (See Wiederman et al. [1994], Catania et al. [1996], Gribble et al. [1999], and Hewitt [2002] for work on how to increase response to questions about sexual behavior. For more on threatening questions in general and the use of the three-closest-friends technique, see Bradburn [1983:147–151]; on improving response to threatening questions, see Bradburn et al. 1978 and Bradburn, Sudman et al. 1979. See Johnston and Walton [1995] on the use of computer-assisted self-interviewing for asking sensitive questions. And see below for more on computer-assisted interviewing.)

### *The Expectancy Effect*

In 1966, Robert Rosenthal conducted an experiment. At the beginning of the school year, he told some teachers at a school that the children they were about to get had tested out as "spurters." That is, according to tests, he said, those particular children were expected to make significant gains in their academic scores during the coming year. Sure enough, those children did improve dramatically—which was really interesting, because Rosenthal had matched the "spurter" children and teachers at random.

The results, published in a widely read book called *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968) established once and for all what experimental researchers across the behavioral sciences had long suspected. There is an **expectancy effect**. The expectancy effect is "the tendency for experimenters to obtain results they expect, not simply because they have correctly anticipated nature's response but rather because they have helped to shape that response through their expectations" (Rosenthal and Rubin 1978:377).

In 1978, Rosenthal and Rubin reported on the "first 345 studies" that were generated by the discovery of the expectancy effect, and research continues on this problem (see Rosenthal 2002). The effect is largest in animal studies (perhaps because there is no danger that animals will go into print rejecting findings from experiments on them), but it is likely in all experiments on people. As Rosenthal's first study proved, the effect extends to teachers, managers, therapists—anyone who makes a living creating changes in the behavior of others.

Expectancy is different from distortion. The distortion effect comes from seeing what you want to see, even when it's not there. The expectancy effect

involves creating the objective results we want to see. We don't distort results to conform to our expectations as much as we make the expectations come true.

Strictly speaking, then, the expectancy effect is not a response effect at all. But for fieldworkers, it is an important effect to keep in mind. If you are studying a small community, or a neighborhood in a city, or a hospital or clinic for a year or more, interacting daily with a few key informants, your own behavior can affect theirs in subtle (and not so subtle) ways, and vice versa. Don't be surprised if you find your own behavior changing over time in relation to key informants.

## Accuracy

Even when people tell you what they think is the absolute truth, there is still the question of whether the information they give you is accurate.

A lot of research—ethnographic and survey research alike—is about mapping opinions and attitudes. When people tell you that they *approve of* how the chief is handling negotiations for their village's resettlement, or when they tell you that they *prefer* a particular brand of beer to some other brand, they're talking about internal states. You pretty much have to take their word for such things.

But when we ask people to tell us about their actual behavior (How many times did you take your baby to the clinic last month? How many times last year did you visit your mother's village?), or about their environmental circumstances (How many hectares of land do you have in maize? How many meters is it from your house to the well?), we can't just assume informant accuracy.

We see reports of behavior in our local newspapers all the time: College students today are binge drinking more than they did 5 years ago. Americans are going to church more often than they did a decade ago. In back of *findings* like these are *questions* like these:

> Circle one answer:
> How many times last month did you consume five or more beers or other alcoholic drinks in a single day?
> Never
> Once
> Twice
> Three times
> More than three times

How often do you go to church?
Never
Very occasionally
About once a month
About once a week
More than once a week

## *La Pierre Discovers the Problem*

We've known for a long time that we should be suspicious of this kind of data. From 1930 to 1932, Richard La Pierre, accompanied by a Chinese couple, crisscrossed the United States, twice, by car. The threesome covered about 10,000 miles, stopping at 184 restaurants and 66 hotels. And they kept records. There was a lot of prejudice against Chinese in those days, but they were not refused service in a single restaurant and just one hotel turned them away (La Pierre 1934).

Six months after the experiment ended, La Pierre sent a questionnaire to each of the 250 establishments where the group had stopped. One of the things he asked was: "Will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests?" Ninety-two percent—230 out of 250—replied "No."

By today's standards, La Pierre's experiment was crude. He could have surveyed a control group—a second set of 250 establishments that they hadn't patronized but that were in the same towns where they'd stopped. With self-administered questionnaires, he couldn't be sure that the people who answered the survey (and who claimed that they wouldn't serve Chinese) were the same ones who had actually served the threesome. And La Pierre didn't mention in his survey that the Chinese couple would be accompanied by a white man.

Still, La Pierre's experiment was terrific for its time. It made clear that what people say they do (or would do) is not a proxy for what they actually do or will do (see Deutscher 1973). This basic finding shows up in the most unlikely (we would have thought) places: In the 1961 census of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 23% of the women underreported the *number of their children*! Apparently, people there didn't count babies who die before reaching the age of two (Pausewang 1973:65).

## *Why People Are Inaccurate Reporters of Their Own Behavior*

People are inaccurate reporters of their own behavior for many reasons. Here are four:

1. Once people agree to be interviewed, they have a personal stake in the process and usually try to answer all your questions—whether they understand what you're after or not.

2. Human memory is fragile, although it's clearly easier to remember some things than others.

Cannell et al. (1961) found that the ability to remember a stay in the hospital is related to the length of the stay, the severity of the illness that lands you there, and whether or not surgery is involved. It's also strongly related to the length of time since discharge. Cannell and Fowler (1965) found that people report accurately 90% of all overnight hospital stays that happened 6 months or less before being interviewed.

It's easy for people to remember a rare event, like surgery, that occurred recently. But, as Sudman and Schwarz (1989) point out, if you ask people to think about some common behavior going back months at a time, they probably use estimation rules. When Sudman and Schwartz asked people "How many [sticks] [cans] of deodorant did you buy in the last six months?" they started thinking: "Well, I usually buy deodorant about twice a month in the summer, and about once a month the rest of the year. It's now October, so I suppose I must have bought 10 deodorants over the last six months." And then they say, "10," and that's what you write down.

3. Interviews are social encounters. People manipulate those encounters to whatever they think is their advantage.

Adolescent boys tend to exaggerate, and adolescent girls tend to minimize, reports of their own sexual experience (see Catania et al. 1996). Expect people to overreport socially desirable behavior and to underreport socially undesirable behavior. (See deMaio [1984] for a review of the social desirability effect.)

4. People can't count a lot of behaviors, so they use rules of inference.

In some situations, they invoke D'Andrade's "what goes with what" rule (1974) and report what they *suppose* must have happened, rather than what they actually saw. Freeman et al. (1987) asked people in their department to report on who attended a particular colloquium. People who were *usually* at the department colloquium were mentioned as having attended the particular colloquium—even by those who hadn't attended (and see Shweder and D'Andrade 1980).

### *Reducing Errors: Jogging Informants' Memories*

Sudman and Bradburn (1974) distinguish two types of memory errors: simply forgetting and reporting that something happened a month ago when it

really happened two months ago. The latter error is called **forward telescoping** (backward telescoping is rare).

Here are four things you can do to increase the accuracy of self-reported behavior.

1. **Cued recall**. In cued recall, people either consult records to jog their memories or you ask them questions that cue them about specific behaviors. For example, if you're collecting life histories, college transcripts will help people remember events and people from their time at school. Credit card statements and long-distance phone bills help people retrace their steps and remember events, places, and people they met along the way. Still . . . Horn (1960) asked people to report their bank balance. Of those who did not consult their bankbooks, just 31% reported correctly. But those who consulted their records didn't do that much better. Only 47% reported correctly (reported in Bradburn 1983:309).

   **Event calendars** are particularly useful in societies where there are no written records. Leslie et al. (1999:375–378), for example, developed an event calendar for the Ngisonyoka section of the South Turkana pastoralists in northwestern Kenya. The Turkana name their seasons rather than their years. Based on many interviews between 1983 and 1984, Leslie et al. were able to build up a list of 143 major events associated with seasons between 1905 and 1992. Events include things like "no hump" in 1961 (it was so dry that the camels' humps shrank), "bulls" in 1942 (when their bulls were taken to pay a poll tax), and "rescue" in 1978 (when rains came). This painstaking work has made it possible for many researchers to gather demographic and other life history data from the Ngisonyoka Turkana. (For more on event calendars in life histories, see Freedman et al. 1988, Kessler and Wethington 1991, Caspi et al. 1996, and Belli 1998.)

   Brewer and Garrett (2001) found that five kinds of questions can dramatically increase the recall of sex partners and drug injection partners. They gave people alphabetic cues, location cues, network cues, role cues, and timeline cues. After asking people to list their sex partners and/or drug injection partners, they asked them the following questions:

   1. Alphabetic cues. "I am going to go through the letters of the alphabet one at a time. As I say each letter, think of all the people you know whose name begins with that letter. The names could be first names, nicknames, or last names. Let me know if any of these are people you had sex/injected drugs with in the last year but might not have mentioned earlier."
   2. Location cues. "I have here a list of different kinds of locations or places where people have sex/inject drugs with other people or meet people who they later have sex/inject drugs with. As I say each location, think of all of the times you have had sex/injected drugs there, or met people there in the last year. Focus on all the people you interacted with at these locations. Let me know if any of these are people you had sex/injected drugs with but might not have mentioned earlier."
   3. Network cues. "I am going to read back again the list of people you mentioned

earlier. This time, as I say each person, think of all the other people who know, hang out, or interact with that person. Let me know if any of these are people you had sex/injected drugs with in the last year but might not have mentioned earlier."

4. Role cues. "I have here a list of different kinds of relationships people have with the persons they have sex/inject drugs with. As I say each type of role relationship, think of all of the people you know that you have that kind of relationship with. Let me know if any of these are people you had sex/injected drugs with in the last year but might not have mentioned earlier."
5. Timeline cues. "We're going to map out where you've been and what you've been doing the last year. Then we will go through this timeline and see if there are other people you have had sex/injected drugs with during this period. As we are making this timeline, if any additional people you have had sex/injected drugs with during this period come to mind, please tell me."

Asking these five questions together increased the number of sex partners recalled by 40% and the number of drug injection partners by 123% (Brewer and Garrett 2001:672; the questions are from http://faculty.washington.edu/ddbrewer/trevinstr.htm).

2. **Aided recall**. In this technique, you hand people a list of possible answers to a question and ask them to choose among them. Aided recall increases the number of events recalled, but also appears to increase the telescoping effect (Bradburn 1983:309). Aided recall is particularly effective in interviewing the elderly (Jobe et al. 1996).

   In studies where you interview people more than once, another form of aided recall is to remind people what they said last time in answer to a question and then ask them about their behavior since their last report. This corrects for telescoping but does not increase the number of events recalled.
3. **Landmarks**. Here, you try to establish a personal milestone—like killing your first peccary, going through clitoridectomy, burying your mother, becoming a grandparent—and asking people to report on what has happened since then.

   Loftus and Marburger (1983) found that landmarks help reduce forward telescoping. The title of their articles says it all: "Since the Eruption of Mt. St. Helens, Has Anyone Beaten You Up? Improving the Accuracy of Retrospective Reports with Landmark Events." Means et al. (1989) asked people to recall landmark events in their lives going back 18 months from the time of the interview. Once the list of personal landmark events was established, people were better able to recall hospitalizations and other health-related events.
4. **Restricted time**. Sudman and Schwarz (1989) advocate keeping the recall period short in order to increase recall accuracy. They asked people: "How many times have you been out to a restaurant in the last three months?" and "How many times have you been out to a restaurant in the last month?" The per-month average for the 1-month question was 55% greater than the per-month average for

the 3-month question. The assumption here is that increasing the amount of the behavior reported also increases its accuracy.

### *The Social Desirability Effect*

Hadaway et al. (1998) went to a large Protestant church and found 115 people in attendance at the Sunday school. On Monday morning, when Hadaway et al. polled the whole church membership, 181 people claimed to have been in Sunday school the previous day. Head-count experiments like this one typically produce estimates of church attendance that are 55%–59% of what people report (T. W. Smith 1998).

This **social desirability** effect is influenced by the way you ask the question. Major surveys, like the Gallup Poll, ask something like: "How often do you attend religious services?" Then they give the people choices like "once a week, once a month, seldom, never." Presser and Stinson (1998) asked people on Monday to list everything they had done from "midnight Saturday to midnight last night." When they asked the question this way, 29% of respondents said that they had gone to church. Asking "How often do you go to church?" produced estimates of 37%–45%. (This is a 28%–55% *difference* in reported behavior and is statistically very significant.)

Informant accuracy remains a major problem. Gary Wells and his colleagues (2003) showed a video of a staged crime to 253 students. Then they showed the students a photo lineup of six people and asked the students to pick out the culprit. Every single student picked one of the six photos, but there was a small problem: the culprit wasn't in the six photos. We need a lot more research about the rules of inference that people use when they respond to questions about where they've been, who they were with, and what they were doing.