Text starts on next page

this can prevent us from learning from them. The army nurse, as familiar as she may appear, turns into a great informant about international politics. The only way to learn with her is to be a listener. To learn from others, we must converse collaboratively. Fieldworkers and informants construct meaning together.

This chapter will help you strengthen the everyday skills of listening, questioning, and researching people who interest you. You'll experience interactive ways to conduct interviews and **oral histories**. You'll look for and discover meaning in your informants' everyday cultural artifacts. You'll gather, analyze, write, and reflect on family stories. And you'll read some examples of how other fieldworkers have researched and written about people's lives.

THE INTERVIEW: LEARNING HOW TO ASK

Fieldworkers listen and record stories from the point of view of the informant—not their own. Letting people speak for themselves by telling about their lives seems an easy enough principle to follow. But in fact, there are some important strategies for both asking questions and listening to responses. Those strategies are part of interviewing—learning to ask and learning to listen.

Interviewing involves an ironic contradiction: you must be both structured and flexible at the same time. While it's critical to prepare for an interview with a list of planned questions to guide your talk, it is equally important to follow your informant's lead. Sometimes the best interviews come from a comment, a story, an artifact, or a phrase you couldn't have anticipated. The energy that drives a good interview—for both you and your informant—comes from expecting the unexpected.

It's happened to both of us as interviewers. As part of a two-year project, Elizabeth conducted in-depth interviews with Anna, a college student who was a dancer. Anna identified with the modern dancers at the university and also was interested in animal rights, organic foods, and ecological causes. She wore a necklace that Elizabeth thought served as a spiritual talisman or represented a political affiliation. When she asked Anna about it, she learned that the necklace actually held the key to Anna's apartment—a much less dramatic answer than Elizabeth anticipated. Anna claimed that she didn't trust herself to keep her key anywhere but around her neck, and that information provided a clue to her temperament that Elizabeth wouldn't have known if she hadn't asked and had persisted in her own speculations.

In a shorter project, Bonnie interviewed Ken, a school superintendent, over a period of eight months. As Ken discussed his beliefs about education, Bonnie connected his ideas with the writings of progressivist philosopher John Dewey. At the time, she was reading educational philosophy herself and was greatly influenced by Dewey's ideas. To her, Ken seemed to be a contemporary incarnation of Dewey. Eventually, toward the end of their interviews, Bonnie asked Ken which of Dewey's works had been the most important to him. "Dewey?" he asked, "John Dewey? Never exactly got around to reading him."

No matter how hard we try to lay aside our assumptions when we interview others, we always carry them with us. Rather than ignore our hunches, we need to form questions around them, follow them through, and see where they will lead us. Asking Anna about her necklace, a personal artifact, led Elizabeth to new understandings about Anna's self-concept and habits that later became important in her analysis of Anna's literacy. Bonnie's admiration for Dewey had little to do directly with Ken's educational philosophy, but her follow-up questions centered on the scholars who did shape Ken's theories. It is our job to reveal our informant's perspectives and experiences rather than our own. And so our questions must allow us to learn something new, something that our informant knows and we don't. We must learn how to ask.

Asking

Asking involves collaborative listening. When we interview, we are not extracting information like a dentist pulls a tooth, but we make meaning together like two dancers, one leading and one following. Interview questions range between closed and open.

Closed Questions *Closed questions* are like those we answer on application forms or in magazines: How many years of schooling have you had? Do you rent your apartment? Do you own a car? Do you have any distinguishing birthmarks? Do you use bar or liquid soap? Do you drink sweetened or unsweetened tea, caffeinated or decaffeinated coffee? Some closed questions are essential for gathering background data: Where did you grow up? How many siblings did you have? What was your favorite subject in school? But these questions often yield single phrases as answers and can shut down further talk. Closed questions can start an awkward volley of single questions and abbreviated answers.

To avoid asking too many closed questions, you'll need to prepare ahead of time by doing informal research about your informants and the topics they represent. For example, if you are interviewing a woman in the air force, you may want to read something about the history of women in aviation. Reading a book about the WAFs (Women in the Air Force) will prepare you for your interview. You might also consult an expert in the field or telephone government offices to request informational materials so that you avoid asking questions that you could answer for yourself, like "How many years have women been allowed to fly planes in the U.S. Air Force?" When you are able to do background research, your knowledge of the topic and the informant's background will demonstrate your level of interest, put the informant at ease, and create a more comfortable interview situation.

Open Questions *Open questions,* by contrast, help elicit your informant's perspective and allow for more conversational exchange. Because there is no single answer to open-ended questions, you will need to listen, respond, and follow the informant's lead. Because there is no single answer, you can allow yourself to

engage in a lively, authentic response. In other words, simply being an interested "other" makes a good field interviewer. Here are some very general open questions—sometimes called *experiential* and *descriptive*—that encourage the informant to share experiences or to describe them from his or her own point of view:

- Tell me more about the time when…
- Describe the people who were most important to…
- Describe the first time you…
- Tell me about the person who taught you about…
- What stands out for you when you remember…
- Tell me the story behind that interesting item you have.
- Describe a typical day in your life.
- How would you describe yourself to yourself?
- How would you describe yourself to others?

When thinking of questions to ask an informant, make your informant your teacher. You want to learn about his or her expertise, knowledge, beliefs, and worldview. An interview can begin with a focus on almost any topic, as long as it involves the informant's point of view.

BOX 19 Using a Cultural Artifact in an Interview

Purpose

This exercise mirrors the process of conducting interviews over time with an informant. It emphasizes working with the informant's perspective, making extensive and accurate observations, speculating and theorizing, confirming and disconfirming ideas, writing up notes, listening well, sharing ideas collaboratively, and reflecting on your data.

To introduce interviewing in our courses, we use an artifact exchange. This exercise allows people to investigate the meaning of an object from another person's point of view. It follows the model we used when we interviewed our friend Danling in Chapter 6 about silk and silkworms. (see p. 326). This interview focuses on a concrete object, an artifact rather than language connotations.

Action

Choose a partner from among your colleagues. You will act as both interviewer and informant. Select an interesting artifact that your partner is either wearing or carrying: a key chain, a piece of jewelry, an item of clothing. Both partners should be sure the artifact is one the owner feels comfortable talking about. If,

for example, the interviewer says, "Tell me about that pin you are wearing," but the informant knows that her watch has more meaning or her bookbag holds a story, the interviewer should follow her lead. Once you've each chosen an artifact, try the following process. Begin by writing observational and personal notes as a form of background research before interviewing:

1. *Take observational notes.* Take quiet time to inspect, describe, and take notes on your informant's artifact. Pay attention to its form and speculate about its function. Where do you think it comes from? What is it used for?
2. *Take personal notes.* What does it remind you of? What do you already know about things similar to it? How does it connect to your own experience? What are your hunches about the artifact? In other words, what assumptions do you have about it? (For example, you may be taking notes on someone's ring and find yourself speculating about how much it costs and whether the owner of the artifact is wealthy). It is important here to identify your assumptions and not mask them.
3. *Interview the informant.* Ask questions and take notes on the story behind the artifact. What people are involved in it? Why is it important to them? How does the owner use it? Value it? What's the cultural background behind it? After recording your informant's responses, read your observational notes to each other to verify or clarify the information.
4. *Theorize.* Think of a metaphor that describes the object. How does the artifact reflect something you know about the informant? Could you find background material about the artifact? Where would you look? How does the artifact relate to history or culture? If, for example, your informant wears earrings made of spoons, you might research spoon making, spoon collecting, or the introduction of the spoon in polite society. Maybe this person had a famous cook in the family, played the spoons as a folk instrument, or used these as baby spoons in childhood.
5. *Write.* In several paragraphs about the observations, the interview, and your theories, create a written account of the artifact and its relationship to your informant. Give a draft to your informant for a response.
6. *Exchange.* The informant writes a response to your written account, detailing what was interesting and surprising. At this point, the informant can point out what you didn't notice, say, or ask that might be important to a further understanding of the artifact. You will want to exchange your responses again, explaining what you learned from the first exchange.
7. *Reflect.* Write about what you learned about yourself as an interviewer. What are your strengths? Your weaknesses? What assumptions or preconceptions did you find that you had that interfered with your interviewing skills? How might you change this?
8. *Change roles and repeat this process.*

Response

Here is an excerpt from the artifact exercise, written by EunJoo Kang about Ming-Chi Own's watch. In the final draft of her essay, EunJoo, the interviewer, interweaves many of her original notes with information added by Ming-Chi from both the oral interview and the written exchange:

> When I tried to locate an artifact on my classmate, Ming-Chi, I was first caught by her necklace. It was golden and very thin. I asked if it had any story behind it, but she said that it did not, she just wore it. So I changed my eyes to a different object. I saw that she was wearing a watch.
>
> Ming-Chi's watch is small and gold-plated and square. It has seven colors: gold, steel, silver, dark gray, light gray, brown, and black on the band. It has a snake leather band with an omega symbol on it. The band does not look new and does not seem cheap either because I could read the omega symbol, which is [used by] one of the most famous Swiss watch companies. The band has seven holes and two loops. The watch itself was made in Japan by Seiko. I recognized Seiko as another good and famous watch company.
>
> How I saw this watch depended on what I was likely to look at, what I was oriented to seeing. I should confess that once I dreamed to be a fine artist. And I find I have a tendency to look at objects by their colors, shapes, design, and usage all at the same time. This was borne out by my noting the seven colors in the watch. Ming-Chi seemed surprised at my finding so many colors in her watch. That told me something. Not everyone sees the same things. To Ming-Chi, the color had little meaning. Instead, her watch focused on keeping schedules and being on time.
>
> Ming-Chi shared that the watch was purchased by her father in Singapore. She got the watch as a graduation gift. She attended college in Australia, far from her family in Singapore. It was not common for families to send their daughters to foreign countries to study, but Ming-Chi's father trusted her to be able to live by herself in Australia. Her father was happy with his grown daughter and bought her a watch that she could wear for a long time. And she did, as shown by the many scratches on it.
>
> The most obvious thing to associate Ming-Chi's watch with is a concept of time. Even though she is from another culture, she had obviously adjusted to Western ideas of time. She has adjusted to our culture in which time is counted as "length," but time can be considered either monochronic, which comes from Western Europe, or polychronic. In monochronic time, for example, a host expects his guest would visit and leave by set times. In contrast, polychronic time is mea-

sured by quality and not length. Polychronic time should be measured by substance and satisfaction and not just by beginnings and endings. This is clearly a more Eastern way of observing time. I wonder whether or not Ming-Chi has experienced this way of being in time.

I am surprised at myself for finding this depth with an ordinary watch my classmate is wearing. This chance to look at a small artifact and describe it makes me understand what the ethnographic field-worker does.

In interviews, researchers sometimes use cultural artifacts to enter into the informant's perspective. We might start by talking about something in our informant's environment: a framed snapshot, a piece of artwork on the wall, a CD or DVD collection, an interesting or unusual object in the room—anything that will encourage comfortable conversation. When we invite informants to tell stories about their artifacts, we learn about the artifacts themselves (Ming-Chi's watch) and, indirectly, about other aspects of their world that they might not think to talk about. Artifacts, like stories, can mediate between individuals and their cultures.

In their short, informal conversation that began with a wristwatch, EunJoo uncovered the story of Ming-Chi's multicultural life: from Singapore to Australia to the United States. The watch gave them both, as Eastern students living in the West, an opportunity to theorize about different cultural attitudes toward time. Using Ming-Chi's watch as a focal point gave both the interviewer and the informant intense interaction and talk. Stories surfaced from Ming-Chi about herself as a student, a daughter, a foreigner in two cultures, and an amateur philosopher. Without the watch as mediator, it would have taken much longer to achieve such collaboration. That's why EunJoo was so surprised to find herself learning so much from looking at, speculating on, and thinking about her classmate's "ordinary watch."

Cultural artifacts provide data for a fieldworking project, much as stories do. Fieldworkers try to describe a wide range of artifacts from their individual informants and the culture at large to document their findings. If EunJoo were to write a full oral history of Ming-Chi, she might choose to include descriptions of some of the following cultural artifacts: letters from Ming-Chi's father, a catalog and her school records from Australia, and her passport, family photos, or articles and books describing the complex mix of English and Chinese cultures in Singapore.