

talking among themselves at the beginning of an evening, what questions would I hear them ask each other?" To which they might answer, "Who's the other bartender tonight?" or "Which section would you like to work?"

A third strategy for discovering questions simply asks informants to talk about a particular cultural scene. This approach uses general *descriptive questions* that are less likely to reflect the ethnographer's culture. Answers can be used to discover other culturally relevant questions. This approach is like offering informants a frame and canvas and asking them to paint a word-picture of their experience. "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" and "Could you describe a typical evening at Brady's Bar?" are examples of such *descriptive questions*. A variation on this approach developed by Agar (1969) in his study of heroin addicts in prison, is to ask two or more informants to role-play typical interactions from the cultural scene under consideration. As informants talk to each other, the ethnographer can record questions and answers. In the rest of this chapter I want to discuss in detail several kinds of descriptive questions.

DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS

Descriptive questions take "advantage of the power of language to construe settings" (Frake 1964a:143). The ethnographer does need to know at least one setting in which the informant carries out routine activities. For example, I needed to know my informants spent much of their time in jail to be able to ask, "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" I needed to know that cocktail waitresses worked evenings in Brady's Bar to be able to ask, "Could you describe a typical evening at Brady's Bar?" Because ethnographers almost always know *who* an informant is, they almost always know at least one appropriate setting to be used in a descriptive question. If one is studying air-traffic controllers, it is easy to ask, "What do you do as an air-traffic controller?" If one is studying the culture of housewives, it is easy to ask an informant, "Could you describe a typical day? What do you do as a housewife?"

There are five major types of descriptive questions and several subtypes (Figure 4.1). Their precise form will depend on the cultural scene selected for investigation. Descriptive questions aim to elicit a large sample of utterances in the informant's native language. They are intended to encourage an informant to talk about a particular cultural scene. Sometimes a single descriptive question can keep an informant talking for more than an hour.

One key principle in asking descriptive questions is that *expanding the length of the question tends to expand the length of the response*. Although a question like, "Could you tell me what the jail is like?" qualifies as a descriptive question, it needs expansion. Instead of this brief form, I might say, "I've never been inside the jail before, so I don't have much of an idea

FIGURE 4.1 Kinds of Descriptive Questions

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1. Grand Tour Questions
 - 1.1. Typical Grand Tour Questions
 - 1.2. Specific Grand Tour Questions
 - 1.3. Guided Grand Tour Questions
 - 1.4. Task-Related Grand Tour Questions
 2. Mini-Tour Questions
 - 2.1. Typical Mini-Tour Questions
 - 2.2. Specific Mini-Tour Questions
 - 2.3. Guided Mini-Tour Questions
 - 2.4. Task-Related Mini-Tour Questions
 3. Example Questions
 4. Experience Questions
 5. Native-Language Questions
 - 5.1. Direct Language Questions
 - 5.2. Hypothetical-Interaction Questions
 - 5.3. Typical-Sentence Questions
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what it's like. Could you kind of take me through the jail and tell me what it's like, what I would see if I went into the jail and walked all around? Could you tell me what it's like?" Expanding descriptive questions not only gives informants time to think, but it says, "Tell me as much as you can, in great detail."

1. Grand Tour Questions

A grand tour question simulates an experience many ethnographers have when they first begin to study a cultural scene. I arrived at the alcoholism treatment center and the director asked, "Would you like a grand tour of the place?" As we walked from building to building, he named the places and objects we saw, introduced me to people, and explained the activities in progress. I could not ask tramps to give me a grand tour of the Seattle City Jail, so I simply asked a grand tour question: "Could you describe the inside of the jail for me?" In both situations, I easily collected a large sample of native terms about these cultural scenes.

A grand tour usually takes place in a particular locale: a jail, a college campus, a home, a factory, a city, a fishing boat, etc. Grand tour questions about a locale almost always make sense to informants. We can now expand the idea of "grand tour" to include many other aspects of experience. In addition to *space*, informants can give us a grand tour through some *time* period: "Could you describe the main things that happen during the school year, beginning in September and going through May or June?" They can take an ethnographer through a sequence of *events*: "Can you tell me all the things that happen when you get arrested for being drunk, from the first moment you encounter the police, through going to court and being sentenced, until you finally get out of jail?" An informant can give the ethnog-

rather a grand tour through some group of *people*: "Can you tell me the names of all your relatives and what each one is like?" Some large events such as a ceremony are made up of *activities* that can become the basis for a grand tour question: "What are all the things that you do during the initiation ceremony for new members who join the fraternity?" Even a group of *objects* offers an opportunity for a grand tour: "Could you describe all the different tools and other equipment you use in farming?" Whether the ethnographer uses *space, time, events, people, activities, or objects*, the end result is the same: a verbal description of significant features of the cultural scene. Grand tour questions encourage informants to ramble on and on. There are four different types which vary the way such questions are asked.

1.1. Typical Grand Tour Questions. In this form, the ethnographer asks for a description of how things usually are. "Could you describe a *typical* night at Brady's Bar?" One might ask a secretary informant: "Could you describe a *typical* day at the office?" In studying Kwakiutl salmon fishing, I asked, "Could you tell me how you *usually* make a set?" Typical grand tour questions ask the informant to generalize, to talk about a pattern of events.

1.2. Specific Grand Tour Questions. A specific question takes the most recent day, the most recent series of events, or the locale best known to the informant. "Could you describe what happened at Brady's Bar last night, from the moment you arrived until you left?" An ethnographer might ask a secretary, "Tell me what you did yesterday, from the time you got to work until you left?" "Tell me about the last time you made a set, fishing for salmon." Some informants find it difficult to generalize to the *typical* but can easily describe a recent situation.

1.3. Guided Grand Tour Questions. This form asks the informant to give an actual grand tour. A secretary might be asked: "Could you show me around the office?" The ethnographer might ask a Kwakiutl fisherman, "The next time you make a set, can I come along and could you explain to me what you are doing?" Some subjects, such as a typical year or month, do not lend themselves to a guided tour.

1.4. Task-Related Grand Tour Questions. These questions ask the informant to perform some simple task that aids in the description. For example, I frequently asked tramps, "Could you draw a map of the inside of the Seattle City Jail and explain to me what it's like?" While performing this task, they added a great deal of verbal description. The map helped informants to remember and gave me a better understanding of the jail as they saw it. In studying the cultural scene of backgammon players, I asked, "Could you play a game of backgammon and explain what you are doing?" When informants perform tasks in the context of grand tour questions, the

ethnographer can ask numerous questions along the way, such as, "What is this?" and "What are you doing now?"

2. Mini-Tour Questions

Responses to grand tour questions offer almost unlimited opportunities for investigating smaller aspects of experience. Because grand tour questions lead to such rich descriptions, it is easy to overlook these new opportunities. One ethnographer, investigating the culture of directory assistance operators working for Bell Telephone Co., began with a grand tour question: "Could you describe a typical day in your work as a directory assistance operator?" After a lengthy description, she discovered that one recurrent activity was "taking calls." Each call lasted an average of 37 seconds. This led to a mini-tour question: "Could you describe what goes on in taking a call?" The informant was able to break down that brief period of time into more than a dozen activities, ones that were far more complex than the ethnographer realized when she asked the question.¹

Mini-tour questions are identical to grand tour questions except they deal with a much smaller unit of experience. "Could you describe what you do when you take a break at Brady's Bar?" "Could you draw me a map of the trusty tank in the Seattle City Jail?" "Could you describe to me how you take phone calls in your work as a secretary?" The four kinds of mini-tour questions (typical, specific, guided, task-related) use the same approaches as their counterparts do with grand tour questions.

3. Example Questions

Example questions are still more specific, in most cases. They take some single act or event identified by the informant and ask for an example. A tramp, in responding to a grand tour question, says, "I was arrested while pooling," and so I would ask, "Can you give me an example of pooling?" A waitress states, "There was a table of guys who really gave me a hard time last night." An example question: "Could you give me an example of someone giving you a hard time?" This type of question can be woven throughout almost any ethnographic interview. It often leads to the most interesting stories of actual happenings which an ethnographer will discover.

4. Experience Questions

This type merely asks informants for any experiences they have had in some particular setting. "You've probably had some interesting experiences in jail; can you recall any of them?" "Could you tell me about some experiences you have had working as a directory assistance operator?" These questions are so open ended that informants sometimes have

difficulty answering them. They also tend to elicit atypical events rather than recurrent, routine ones. They are best used after asking numerous grand tour and mini-tour questions.

5. Native-Language Questions

Native-language questions are designed to minimize the influence of informants' translation competence. Because descriptive questions are a first step to discovering more culturally relevant questions, they sometimes contain words and phrases seldom used by informants. This encourages informants to translate. Native-language questions ask informants to use the terms and phrases most commonly used in the cultural scene.

When I first began studying tramps, I only knew they were often incarcerated in the Seattle City Jail. "Could you describe the jail?" was a useful grand tour question, but I still was not sure that "jail" was a commonly used term. And so I asked a native-language question: "How would you refer to the jail?" When informants uniformly said, "Oh, most guys would call it *the bucket*," I was able to use this term in future questions. "How would you talk about getting arrested?" led to the term "made the bucket." Only then could I ask more meaningful descriptive questions like "Could you describe in detail what happens from beginning to end when you make the bucket?"

Native-language questions serve to remind informants that the ethnographer wants to learn their language. They can be used whenever one suspects an informant is translating for the ethnographer's benefit. They should be employed frequently in early interviews until an informant begins to state voluntarily, "The way we would say it is _____," or "Our term for that is _____." Every ethnographer can develop ways to insert native-language queries into each interview. I want to identify three useful strategies.

5.1. Direct-Language Questions. This type of native-language question simply asks "How would you refer to it?" when an informant uses a term. Sometimes it may take the form "Is that the way most people would say it?" For example, tramps often spoke of trying to find a place to sleep at night, so I would ask: "Would you say, 'I was trying to find a place to sleep?'" "No," they responded. "Probably I would say I was trying to *make a flop*." An ethnographer studying the culture of secretaries might ask the following native-language question:

SECRETARY: When I type letters I have to watch out for mistakes.

ETHNOGRAPHER: How would you refer to *mistakes*?

SECRETARY: Oh, I would call them *typos*.

The more familiar the informant and ethnographer are with each other's

cultures, the more important native-language questions become. I asked many direct-language questions of cocktail waitresses for this reason. An informant would say, "These two customers were really hassling me," and I would ask, "How would you refer to them, as *customers*?" To which she would reply: "I'd probably say those two *obnoxos*."

5.2. Hypothetical-Interaction Questions. Speaking takes place between people with particular identities. When an informant is talking to an ethnographer, it may be difficult to recall ways to talk to other people. The ethnographer can help in this recall by creating a hypothetical interaction. For example, an ethnographer could ask, "If you were talking to another directory assistance operator, would you say it that way?" Tramps not only interact among themselves but with policemen, or *bulls*. I often phrased hypothetical-interaction questions to discover how tramps talked to bulls as well as to other tramps.

Hypothetical-interaction questions can be used to generate many native-language utterances. I have interviewed children about school who could easily recall native usages when placed in situations such as the following: "If I were to sit in the back of your classroom, what kinds of things would I hear kids saying to each other?" "If a friend called on the phone to ask if you were going to bring your lunch, what would that person say?" It is even possible to construct the situation in more detail, as in the following question to a waitress: "Imagine yourself at a table of four male customers. You haven't said anything yet, and you don't know any of them. What kinds of things would they likely say to you when you first walked up to their table?" By being placed in a typical situation and having the identities of speaker and listener specified, most informants overcome any tendency to translate and recall many phrases used in ordinary talk.

5.3. Typical-Sentence Questions. A closely related kind of native-language question, this one asks for typical sentences that contain a word or phrase. "What are some sentences I would hear that include the phrase *making the bucket*," or "What are some sentences that use the term *flop*?" are two examples. The typical-sentence question provides an informant with one or more native terms and then asks that informant to use them in typical ways.

Descriptive questions form the basis of all ethnographic interviewing. They lead directly to a large sample of utterances that are expressed in the language used by informants in the cultural scene under investigation.

All ethnographic questions can be phrased in both personal and cultural terms. When phrasing questions *personally*, the ethnographer asks, "Can you describe a typical evening you would have at Brady's Bar?" or "How would you refer to the jail?" This tells the informant to present his own point

of view or her own particular language usage. When phrasing questions *culturally*, the ethnographer asks, "Can you describe a typical evening for most cocktail waitresses at Brady's Bar?" or "How would most tramps refer to the jail?" An informant is someone who can tell about patterns of behavior in a particular scene, not merely his or her own actions. I recall one novice ethnographer who asked a letter carrier about lunch. "I don't eat lunch" was the reply. The ethnographer later rephrased the question in cultural terms: "What do letter carriers do at lunch time?" This query brought a long response which included those who didn't eat lunch, those who brought lunches and ate together, those who ate at restaurants, and several other variations. The various things letter carriers did at lunch turned out to be important cultural information. But eliciting this information depended on phrasing the question in cultural terms.

In this chapter we have examined the rapport process and some of the principles that will facilitate the development of rapport. In addition, we have examined the nature of ethnographic questions and descriptive questions in particular. Descriptive questions form the backbone of all ethnographic interviews. They will make up most of the questions asked in the first interview and their use will continue throughout all subsequent interviews. With practice, a beginning ethnographer can easily gain skill in asking this type of ethnographic question.

Tasks

- 4.1. Review the examples given of the various kinds of descriptive questions and prepare several of each type for informants in the cultural scene you are studying.
 - 4.2. Conduct and record an ethnographic interview with an informant, using descriptive questions.
 - 4.3. Transcribe the recorded interview (or expand the condensed notes taken during the interview).
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James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*,
New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979.