and brought to trial. Protecting cultural informants is an essential part of an ethnographer's ethical responsibility.

When you choose a microculture, we think it is a good idea to evaluate it against this list. (We have our students write and present such an evaluation in class.) That way you can prepare yourself for disadvantages you might face and think about ways to deal with them.

As we noted at the beginning of this section, no microculture meets all these requirements. Furthermore, many students have managed to overcome microcultural liabilities by choosing the right informants or in some other way inventing ways around them. Ethnographic research is a personal business, and although we stress rules for doing this kind of research here, we recognize the need to break them will often occur. But we urge you to try to follow the steps we have outlined here as you choose a microculture. Once you do so, the next step is to find one or a few people from the scene to become your cultural informants.

Cultural Informants

Choosing a microculture is only the first step in setting up an ethnographic study. The second step, and one that is often more difficult and anxiety producing, is to find one or a small number of cultural informants who are willing to teach you their microculture. Working with informants is the hallmark of ethnographic fieldwork and involves an ongoing personal relationship. This is often not true for social scientists who use other forms of research. They may never lay eyes on questionnaire respondents, never meet people they observe, or at best, interview respondents only once face-to-face or over the phone. Anthropologists, on the other hand, usually spend long hours with their cultural informants, often becoming their friends and in some cases, part of their communities. Indeed, many of us were attracted to the discipline because of the "humanness" that characterizes ethnographic research and writing.

Most anthropologists, including almost all of our students when they begin an ethnographic research project, find locating willing cultural informants to be a challenging and anxiety producing process. The best way to think about this is to imagine what it would be like if a stranger came up to you at work and asked you "out of the blue" if you would be willing to be interviewed for a study about what you do there. Immediately, you would wonder who this person is. What kind of study is it? What does he or she want to know? What will the information you relate be used for? Is there a hidden agenda to all of this? Your suspicions would be natural under any circumstance but probably intensified in North America because almost everyone here has been bombarded by phone calls from telemarketers and

ceaseless and often disingenuous advertising on television, radio, and the Internet. Furthermore, like most North Americans, you are probably busy and likely to protect your time and privacy.

The challenge associated with this initial contact is what you will face as you seek to locate informants and begin your ethnographic study. Happily, most anthropologists and anthropology students manage this trial well, but they also discover that once an ethnographer/cultural informant relationship is established, some degree of tension will always remain as researchers strive to develop and maintain rapport with their informants.

In this chapter we will look at ways to locate cultural informants, attributes of a good informant, strategies to allay informant distrust, ways to introduce yourself and explain the ethnographic project, and the initial steps necessary to meet your ethical obligations.

Locating Cultural Informants

Finding potential informants can be as easy as approaching someone you already know who is part of the microculture you wish to study, or as difficult as searching the yellow pages and the Internet or making "cold calls" to strangers in hopes of finding links to a microculture that might yield names of people you could interview. Let's start with the easiest approach.

Find an Informant You Already Know

The simplest way to locate an informant is to use a strategy for choosing a microculture described in the last chapter: talk to someone you know who is a member of an interesting microculture. In essence, by contacting an acquaintance about a microculture, you automatically identify a cultural informant. One student ethnographer, for example, asked each of her friends about the groups they participated in. One noted that she had been working part-time for three years as a nursing assistant at a local retirement home. This sounded interesting to the student and she immediately recruited her friend to be her cultural informant. This approach solves not only the challenges of finding a microculture and an informant, it eases the problem of generating initial rapport and trust with the informant. There are drawbacks to this approach, however. You will be limited to studying only the microcultures your acquaintances participate in and you will forgo a typical ethnographic experience, entering a cultural setting as a total stranger. Also, when your informants are your friends, it is sometimes difficult to change your roles as friends to the roles of ethnographer and cultural informant. As we will see later, ethnographic interviewing is not like day-to-day friendly conversation, and this may be difficult for a friend to accept or play along with.

Find an Informant "Cold Turkey"

You may elect to choose a microculture first, then make a direct approach to a stranger who could act as an informant. For example, Jennifer Boehlke, whose paper appears in this book, recruited an informant by visiting a tattoo shop and asking if anyone would be willing to be interviewed by her. After some hesitation, a tattooist agreed to serve in that role. Alex Rubenstein, whose paper also appears later in this book, followed much the same procedure. He walked into a local firehouse and simply asked if someone there would be willing to serve as an informant. Another student made contact with a skateboarder by hanging out at a plaza where young aficionados of the microculture practiced their sport. Even then, it took him three visits before he could successfully interact with the skateboarders and recruit a willing informant.

The direct approach may have to take place over the phone, either because the microculture has a formal location, such as a business office or school building, or because it is impractical or off limits to visit. One student, for example, wished to interview a production line worker at a local car assembly plant. He could not visit the production line at the plant in person because of company policy, so he called the workers' union and received some names of likely informants. After his fourth or fifth call, a man agreed to meet him and later became his informant.

The direct approach gives you the chance to experience what it is like to enter the field as a stranger, but it also is the most difficult to do; it can lead to many rejections, take the most time (time may be crucial when your study must fit into a quarter or semester), and cause you the most anxiety since it is stressful to approach total strangers. When using the cold-call approach, it is especially prudent to keep your options open and have a backup microculture in mind if your first try proves unfeasible.

Find an Informant through a Go-Between

A third way to locate an informant is through the intercession of a go-between, a person you know but who also is acquainted with a suitable informant. Take the experience of one of our students, for example. She wished to learn about the culture of the fourth graders who attended a nearby grammar school, but she did not know any members of the class. She also hesitated to visit the school and ask permission to enter the classroom to find an informant that way because she had heard that many schools are unwilling to give approval to research enterprises that are beyond their control. So she began to ask student friends if they knew of

any fourth graders living nearby. None did, so she began to query faculty members. Luckily, a professor had a child in fourth grade and once the student described the project to the parents, they gave her permission to do the ethnography, although they asked that interviews take place at their house, not at the school. You can also widen your search by asking go-betweens to suggest other people who could act as go-betweens and who might know someone from a particular microculture.

The help of go-betweens has one advantage: Because go-betweens are often known to both the researchers and their prospective informants, there is an initial degree of trust that increases an informant's feelings of security. This often enhances their willingness to become informants.

Sometimes friends you initially asked to serve as informants may decline but be willing to act as go-betweens. This is what happened to Melissa Cowell (her paper also appears later in this volume) when she discovered that a high school friend had been working as an exotic dancer. The friend at first agreed to be Melissa's informant, but after preliminary interviews felt embarrassed and recruited a coworker to take her place. The change turned out to be an advantage in another way; the second informant, perhaps because she didn't know Melissa personally, felt freer to talk more openly about her sensitive occupation.

Go-betweens can pose problems, however. For example, a go-between may outrank an informant in the microculture they share. Teachers outrank their students. Factory shift managers outrank their assembly line workers. Such go-betweens may censor what informants say or inhibit their responses in other ways.

For example, one of our students asked the principal of a parochial grammar school to act as a go-between, and the principal named a suitable third-grade informant and set up a meeting between the student and the little girl. When the ethnographer arrived to do her first interview, she was ushered into an empty room. Soon a small girl wearing her school uniform stepped through the door, accompanied by a nun who introduced herself as Sister Mary, and both sat down across from the researcher. After explaining the project and asking her first question, the ethnographer soon discovered that Sister Mary's presence inhibited the third grader from being completely open. Soon, Sister Mary was asking questions of the little girl herself, many of them aimed at producing responses that would place the school in a positive light. In addition, the student ethnographer began to suspect that the third grader had been chosen for her "reliability," and the presence of the nun prevented any possibility of learning an inside view of third-grade culture. In short, it is best to avoid this situation by using go-betweens who are not part of a microculture or whose status is the same or lower than your informant's.

Attributes of a Good Informant

Finding a suitable go-between is important, but choosing good informants is even more vital, remembering that this is your first ethnographic research experience and you will learn more about the method if things go smoothly. Several attributes of good cultural informants emerge from the experience of our students. Let us look at the most important ones.

- A cultural informant should know the culture well, not be just learning it. It is better to choose seniors as informants about student culture at your college or university than newly arrived first-year students. The latter will have difficulty thinking of cultural categories and rules because they have not learned them yet.
- An informant should be currently involved in the culture, not previously involved. Culture becomes so routine and unconscious that informants who are no longer involved have difficulty remembering the special knowledge they previously used to generate behavior and interpret experience within a group. Current involvement makes it possible for the informant to recall information more easily and observe what goes on in the scenes associated with their microculture. Their information will be fresher and they will find it easier to remember details if they are actually "doing" the scene. We should point out that in some cases, it is quite possible to help informants recall information about the past in some detail. For example, some students have found informants whose microcultures were not currently in operation, such as summer camp counselors or being a senior at a boarding school and were able to ask questions that facilitated detailed answers.
- Someone who is verbal and social makes a better informant than someone who is a loner or who dislikes talking. Since you will want detail in your study, someone who fills in facts automatically without constant probing and who tells stories easily will be more valuable, to say nothing about more fun, to interview. The case of a student ethnographer who interviewed a worker at a local library comes to mind. The informant hated his job and seemed to dislike social interaction. When asked a basic ethnographic question, such as "Could you describe your average day at the library?" he responded, "There is not much to tell. I come to work, do stuff in the stacks, and go home." As interviewing continued over the semester-long study, the student ethnographer described the experience as "like pulling teeth" and "prying words loose." It was not only difficult for the researcher to learn much about the informant's microculture, it was hard for her to maintain her own enthusiasm about the study.

On the other hand, it is possible to choose an informant who is too verbal. The first interview or two may go fine, but later interviews may be difficult to control, and some degree of control is necessary to successful ethnographic interviewing.

- An informant should be located nearby and have time for the research rather than live far away or be too busy to get together for interviews. An informant located 20 miles away may require a lot of travel time. Doctors and many businesspeople often lack time for interviews and either fail to agree to do a study at all or balk at continuing the interviews once they figure out how much time they will actually take. In addition, as the paper on midwife culture by Natasha Winegar illustrates, you may have to gauge how much flexibility you have to accommodate an informant who doesn't have control over his or her schedule and availability.

One Informant or Many?

We recommend that you limit semester-long (or shorter) ethnographic studies to a single informant or, at most, two or three informants. You will find it necessary to build trust and a comfortable relationship with your cultural informant, and this requires time. And given the kinds of questions we suggest you ask as you interview, each new informant requires the same kind of "development" time, and time is something you won't have much of.

Many of our students question this advice. Doesn't interviewing just one informant bias the ethnography? How can you be sure that what an informant tells you is shared by other members of the microculture? Doesn't this violate scientific reliability?

These are valid questions and indeed, most anthropologists who conduct longer ethnographic studies interview many cultural informants. But ethnographic research is different from survey research, with its carefully drawn respondent samples, sets of questions asked to all, and use of statistics to interpret results. Although informants constantly give us opinions whether we ask for them or not, ethnography is not opinion research. Instead, it is the discovery of categories that members of a group share and that name and give meaning to the natural and social contexts in which they live. The kind of information anthropologists collect is often basic—how do you brush your teeth? What do you say to be polite? What ways are there to dress? What strategies are there to avoid a speeding ticket? None of us learns our culture (and microcultures) by constructing a questionnaire. Instead, we learn it by observing and asking questions just as anthropologists do.

Determining how much and how widely cultural information is shared is a problem, however. As we will note later, we suggest you ask questions that refer to the group—"Could you describe the average day for police officers here at the station?" instead of, "Could you describe *your* average day here at the station?" Although you will meet critics of the ethnographic method, the approach is validated by the large number of anthropologists who work as ethnographers in government and private corporations.

Identifying Yourself and Explaining the Project

Once you have found a likely informant, you still must identify yourself, describe your research agenda, and ask that person to participate in the study. We impose a hard and fast rule on our students about identifying themselves. They must reveal that they are anthropology students in a particular class and that they are trying to learn how to discover a group's microculture. Under no circumstances do we permit them to misrepresent themselves.

The identity, *anthropologist*, has initial pitfalls that you may have to overcome. Most people have no idea what cultural anthropology is. Most identify the discipline with paleontology and archaeology. Second, they don't know what ethnography is. They expect that you will ask them a battery of questions from a survey protocol. They suspect that you have in mind a social problem or point of view that guides your research. The idea that you are just trying to discover what one needs to know to act and understand things in their microcultural terms seems foreign, and sometimes trivial, to them. And when you tell them that you would like to do several hour-long interviews, they may look even more critically at your motivations.

A couple of things will help, though. The fact that you are a student, and many people are used to students asking for help on field projects, will make people feel at ease. To help people understand the type of research you are conducting, use examples to explain what ethnography is. Describe traditional anthropological fieldwork in foreign societies, where an anthropologist often does not know enough about a people to ask directed questions. Instead, you say, anthropologists need to discover the knowledge it takes to *be* the people in that society. Some years ago one of the authors of this book interviewed stockbrokers at a local firm. When at times they seemed confused about what he was doing, he used to say, "This is a foreign culture around here. It's just like Highland New Guinea," and point out that it would be hard for a stranger, unfamiliar with the stockbroker business, to understand what went on in the office.

Controlling Anxiety

Ethnography can be a scary enterprise. You may have to approach total strangers and, almost like a beggar, ask them for help. Since you are just learning how to interview, there is also the uncertainty about what to say next. Especially at first, field research can cause anxiety. Take consolation in the fact that most people and certainly most anthropologists feel anxiety when they enter a strange social setting; it is simply to be expected.

One way to lesson anxiety is to choose an informant you already know. Or, you can interview someone who is younger than you. Children are less threatening for most people so you can choose a microculture where children act as informants. Read and reread applicable sections of this book. The more you know about what you are doing, the more confident you will be. Try doing a practice session where you play the role of an anthropologist approaching an informant for the first time. (You can also do this with a first interview.) Finally, as you progress in your study you can work to establish rapport, the harmonious relationship between two people.

Recording Ethnographic Field Data

As you will learn in the next chapter, the ethnosemantic interview method requires that you record the actual words, called ***folk terms***, which members of a microculture use when they talk with each other. You may also observe settings that characterize the microculture. Since it is nearly impossible to remember everything people say or everything you observe, it is important to take notes. We require that our students use tape recorders to record and transcribe their cultural informants' words verbatim. This may seem (and is) a long and tedious process, but it is essential to analysis and to the formulation of future questions. It also provides a detailed and exhaustive record of parts of the informant's culture and minimizes the impact of ethnocentric bias.

We also suggest that students write down some brief notes during interviews, recording *key terms* that might help them ask questions later in the interview or in subsequent interviews. If it seems impossible to record or note down your informant's words during the interview, try to find time as soon after an interview ends as possible to reconstruct what was said and noticed.

Box 3.1 Tape Recorder Tips

Tape recorders can and do malfunction, so it is a good idea to check that your tape recorder is working before you start interviewing. Also, as soon as possible after an interview is finished, make sure you actually recorded the proceedings and that you can hear what was said. If recording failed, as soon as possible write down everything you can remember about the interview. Also, keep a second tape handy along with a full set of extra batteries in case you need them. And don't use the voice recognition feature on your tape recorder if it has one. Keep the recorder on all the time during the interview.

Ethical Responsibilities

Earlier we stated our belief that it is unethical for ethnographers to misrepresent themselves and their research to informants. Here, we want to emphasize another primary ethical principle that should be followed by all anthropologists, the primary duty *not to harm an informant in any way.*

This precept is not as easy to follow as it sounds. We ask our informants to teach us their culture, but in doing so they may tell us things that would somehow harm or embarrass them or members of their microculture if made public. To protect informants, you may have to exclude interesting, even crucial, information from your final ethnographic report. You may also tell informants at the beginning of the study to reveal only cultural information they are comfortable disclosing. Finally, you can ask them to read a draft of your ethnography, checking for sensitive information, and you can change the names of places and people when you write. It is also a good idea to read the Code of Ethics produced by the American Anthropological Association. It can be found on their Web site at http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm.

Human Subjects Research Requirements

Since the early 1990s, more and more colleges and universities have required researchers who work with human study populations, both students and faculty members, to have their research proposals approved by a Human Subjects Research Committee and to have subjects sign informed consent forms. Both procedures can pose problems for anthropological fieldwork because they were not designed with ethnography in mind. Instead, they emerged as a result of excesses in medical research and other procedures that involved human intervention. A number of notorious cases came to light where experimental subjects were not told

Others Involved in the Study:

[Who else is being asked to participate in this study.]

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

[Sample description of risks and benefits: The worst problem from participating in this study is that you may feel that some questions are private. You are free to not answer any question. You do not have to talk about things unless you want to. You may stop the interview at any time. There may be no direct benefit for you for taking part in this study.]

Confidentiality:

[Sample description of use of data: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of published report, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify anyone. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. The tape recording of the interview will be transcribed and your name will be changed so that no one can identify you. The transcripts of the interview will be used to help researchers better understand the experiences of people (define goals of study here). The tapes will be erased after we have a paper copy of the transcript of the interview. The paper copy will not have your name on it. It will be kept for future research on this topic.]

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect [describe any connections to informant and possible access to services.] You are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher directing this study is: [Insert name and full contact information.]

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

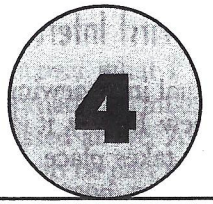
I have read the above information. If I had questions, I asked them and received answers to them. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

Signature of parent or guardian:_____ Date:_____
(If minors are involved)

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date:_____

Figure 3.2 Informed consent form *(continued)*



Discovering Folk Terms

Once you have chosen a microculture and found a willing cultural informant, you are ready to begin ethnographic research. You arrange to meet your informant in a place where you can talk easily and arrive to conduct your first interview. Now what do you do? If you were administering a survey, you would already have a list of prepared questions designed to measure something of scientific interest. You would explain this to your respondent and begin to ask her questions and record her answers.

But as an ethnographer, you are not conducting a survey; you are there to discover your informant's microculture. How do you explain this to your informant and what kinds of questions do you ask to elicit your informant's cultural knowledge? In this and the next two chapters, we will discuss the interviewing process, dividing the procedure into three basic steps: (1) discovering folk terms, (2) eliciting taxonomic structure, and (3) determining meaning. Each step is a task that involves different kinds of ethnographic questions, and as you become skilled at these tasks you can use all three kinds in a single interview depending on which ones seem most useful at the moment. To learn to ask ethnographic questions, however, we suggest that you begin with what we call *descriptive questions* and add new types of questions in subsequent interviews.

The First Interview

Before we discuss the actual interviewing process, we need to look at the setting for the first interview. Ideally, it is best to interview away from where the informant's culture takes place. This avoids interruptions and the influence of curious bystanders, bosses, and onlookers. Quiet helps as well since you will want to use a tape recorder. Unfortunately, ideal conditions may be impossible to find so you may need to improvise or put up with distractions. In any event, try to anticipate what effect the surroundings will have on you and your informant's comfort level and performance.

Explaining the Research

There is also the problem of how to explain the nature of ethnographic interviewing to your informant. Even if you described the project when you asked your informant to do the interviews, it is a good idea to again state what the interviews will be like. Most people don't know what a cultural anthropologist is or does, and, as we have noted before, based on their prior experience they will expect you to ask them about some topic or problem that *you* are interested in. They will expect direct questions, such as how old they are, where they were born, what their income is, and how they rate their job satisfaction.

But you won't be asking questions like these. Instead, because you seek to help them teach you their cultural knowledge, your questions will be more like those asked by someone who arrives at a new job. Like the first day on the job as a new employee, you will want to know where things are, what they are called, which people work there, what behavior is expected of you, what special problems you might face, and a host of other things that will help you learn to be a member of the group.

One way to start is to point out that interviews won't have questions like those on questionnaires or surveys. Then give a little history about ethnography. Say something like:

> In the past (and even today), anthropologists entered foreign societies to do fieldwork. They couldn't ask survey questions because they often didn't have any background knowledge about the people they came to live with. Instead, they had to learn the people's language and discover the knowledge the "locals" used when they engaged in daily life. They called this knowledge *culture.* Recently anthropologists have discovered that there are subgroups like yours [the informant's] that also have their own culture and ways to act and do things. It is important to know about them because this knowledge can prevent members of different subgroups from misunderstanding one another. In fact, anthropologists are often hired by companies and the government to discover the cultural differences and sort out the misunderstandings.

With this "I want to discover what I would need to know to be a member of your group" approach, it might be useful to use the "new employee" analogy we discussed above. Ask your informant to imagine that she has to teach you how to be part of her culture. Liken the task to what she would do to help a new employee (or member of whatever group you are studying) become oriented to the surroundings, other group members, and tasks performed by the group members.

Finally, stress that she should answer your questions using words that she would normally employ with other members of her culture. (You do this because, as we will see next, you want to discover folk terms.) Also point out that she doesn't have to tell you anything that she is uncomfortable with and that there are no "right" answers. Always thank informants for doing the interview and note how helpful they have been.

There are actually many other ways ethnographers have explained their research to informants. Since ethnographic interviewing is a personal process, what you choose to say may depend on your social skills, prior experience, the nature of the microculture you have chosen, whether or not you already know the informant, or a host of other considerations. You may find it useful to talk about this or any problems you encounter during your research with classmates and instructors.

One thing we ask our students to do before they meet with an informant for the first time is to pair up with a classmate and take turns interviewing each other for twenty minutes. This not only provides some initial interviewing experience but also demonstrates what it is like to be an informant. Recently, we have had students videotape their practice interviews. Although it is sometimes painful to watch yourself perform, viewing the interview is a good way to assess your body language. Do you maintain eye contact with the informant? Do you look interested or bored?

Asking Descriptive Questions

Once you have made your introductions, discussed the research, obtained consent, and talked about recording the interview and taking notes, you must ask your first ethnographic question. To understand what that question (and other initial questions) is and the rationale for asking it, we need to look briefly at the theory behind ethnosemantic interviewing. (Useful sources on ethnosemantics include Spradley 1972; Tyler 1969; Casagrande and Hale 1967; Frake 1962; Goodenough 1956; Sturtevant 1964; Walker 1965; Werner and Schoepfle 1986.)

Cultural Categories. Ethnosemantic interviewing is based on the supposition that knowledge, including shared cultural knowledge, is

stored as a system of categories in the human brain. A ***category*** is a group of things that people classify together and treat as if they were the same. To create categories, people lump together closely related things on the basis of shared attributes while ignoring their differences. For example, we classify a certain set of actions in the game of tennis as a "serve." We do so because we recognize that among other things, serves occur at definable intervals during a game, are done with an overhead stroke, and give the server an advantage over the opponent. But if you observe a tennis match closely, you will see that no two serves are exactly alike. Some cause the ball to hit the net. The racket may be angled differently from one serve to the next. The ball may exhibit a slightly different spin each time it is hit. We overlook these differences and focus on the similarities to create the category.

Categories *simplify* the world we apprehend with our senses or imagine in our minds. If we always focused on the unique features of everything we can sense, our world would consist of many more impressions than we can store in our brains. By classifying slightly different things together on the basis of some attributes they share, we create a manageable number of categories to use as we cope with the natural and social worlds in which we live.

Folk Terms. Cultural categories are part of an informant's knowledge but their existence can't be physically sensed. They are hidden in the informant's brain and so far no way has been found to physically observe them in this complex organ. Their existence must be inferred.

One way to infer them is to *observe* an informant's behavior, looking for repetition, sequences, and associations, and to assume the patterns that emerge represent cultural categories. As we noted in chapter 1, this is the only way to get at tacit cultural categories, ones that are not coded in language. Once they believe they have discovered tacit cultural categories, researchers usually name them, and we call these kinds of names ***analytical terms.*** They are observer generated.

A second way to infer the existence of cultural categories is to discover the names informants give them. Luckily, although some categories are tacit, as we have just noted, most categories are named; they represent explicit culture because they are part of an informant's language. We conclude from this that if we can find the words that name things when informants talk with other members of their microculture, we can infer the existence of the group's cultural categories. We call these informant-generated words *folk terms.* For example, when stockbrokers say words such as *bull pen, cage, waffle, put, red herring,* and *dog and pony show* when they speak to each other, they are using folk terms, and we infer that these folk terms stand for cultural categories, although we may not know what they mean yet.

There is one other kind of term we need to mention here, ***translation terms.*** Translation terms are words that members of a group may use when they talk about their culture to outsiders. Such words are often general and are used to approximate the speaker's culture. For example, a tramp might use the word "sleep" when talking with a social worker who does not know his culture, but he would never use this translation term when he talks with other tramps. For them the folk term is *flop* and it has a much more precise meaning in tramp culture than "sleep" does.

A problem for ethnosemantic ethnographers is telling the difference between translation terms and folk terms. That is why we stress the need to regularly ask informants if the words they are giving us to describe their culture are the same ones they use with each other. The reason for eliciting folk terms is that they refer directly to folk categories. We figure that when members of a group use them, they know what they are talking about.

Spotting folk terms for English-speaking groups can be troublesome in another way. Many words used by members of a group are common to most English speakers. For example, brokers pick up their *mail,* a word we all commonly use. The term is still a folk term because members of broker culture use it to describe a category that has special meaning in their world. Unlike the mail most of us get, broker mail consists of *confirms, wires, red herrings,* and a variety of other pieces associated with brokerage business. It is easy to spot slang and technical speech associated with microcultures, but don't overlook other words that informants use when they talk with each other.

Design Features of Descriptive Questions. The discovery of folk terms is the first step in the ethnosemantic process. In the end, it is the discovery of how folk terms (and the categories they refer to) are organized and what they mean that gives us an understanding of a culture using this method. But what is the best way to find them?

There are two ways to discover folk terms. We could hang out near people belonging to a particular microculture and listen to them talk. This is not easy for many reasons, and it is a slow and unstructured approach. Instead, we believe it is most fruitful and efficient to elicit folk terms by *interviewing* informants. But the question still remains, what kinds of questions do you ask to achieve this goal?

The answer to this question involves the use of what we call descriptive questions. ***Descriptive questions*** are primarily intended to elicit folk terms. The idea behind them is to encourage informants to talk about their cultural worlds and in the process, to use folk terms. As their name suggests, they ask informants to describe things, such as events and places. Before we list them, we should mention some of the rules that go into their design.

- *Interview about what members of the microculture* do *and what things are called and look like*, not how informants *feel* about things or what things are *like*. (If you ask them what things are like, they are liable to use translation terms. If you ask how they "feel" about things you have focused the interview on them, not their culture.)
- *It is crucial to put the question in context*. The more context you can supply with a question, the easier it is for an informant to recall information. If someone were to ask you to describe life at your college or university, it would be hard for you to know where to begin. There are so many things you could talk about. What should you say? If the same person were to ask you what is the first thing you do when you get up on Tuesday morning at college, you should be able to answer easily. And the easier it is for informants to recall information, the more relaxed and confident they are likely to be, which also helps with rapport.
- *Avoid asking "what is a . . ." questions* such as, "What's a confirm?" or "What's a cage?" when you discover informants using folk terms. These ask for meaning and often lead informants on a tangent, interrupting the topic being described. You will have a chance to ask for meaning later when you use what we call attribute questions (see chapter 6). Meaning questions are especially difficult to avoid since it is natural to ask what things are in normal conversation.
- *Do not ask informants* why *they do something*, especially during the first few interviews. Questions such as, "Why do you need confirms?" and "Why do you bother to make cold calls?" ask for motivation and imply judgment on your part. You should avoid the impression that you are judging what you hear even if the judgment is positive.

Descriptive Questions

Now let's turn to the questions themselves. There are four kinds of descriptive questions: (1) grand tour questions, (2) mini tour questions, (3) story questions, and (4) native language check questions. Let us look at each giving examples and describing what they are good for.

Grand tour questions are the most general kind of descriptive question. This type of question is normally used as the first question you ask a new informant and may never be employed again. There are two kinds of grand tour questions based on what they ask informants to describe. The first asks for a description of *space*; it is literally a grand tour question. They look something like this (imagine we are interviewing a stockbroker).

- Could you take me on an imaginary tour of the office and point out everything I would see?
- Imagine I am blind. Could you describe what the office looks like for me?

The second kind of grand tour question asks for *action*. For example, you might ask:

- Could you describe what a stockbroker does during an average day here at the office from the time you arrive until you leave?

Mini tour questions are descriptive questions that ask for more detail about a folk term you have already discovered. They provide greater detail and a fuller picture of the informant's world. For example, suppose when you asked your informant to tell you about his average day at the office, he mentioned that he makes *cold calls* or works in *the bull pen*. You might ask mini tour questions like these:

- Could you describe how you make cold calls?
- Could you describe what the bull pen looks like for me?

Mini tour questions are always based on folk terms you have learned from responses to earlier questions. We suggest you listen especially carefully for terms describing actions, such as *making cold calls*, as the interview progresses, because actions generate the fullest answers. To think of mini tour questions during an interview, it helps to write down action terms as you hear them.

Box 4.1 Interviewing Hint: The Repeating Strategy

Some informants find it difficult to describe things in detail. Their answers seem short and relatively unhelpful. Is there any way to encourage more expansive descriptive responses? A number of things may help. As noted above, informants tend to relax and say more when questions become more specific. Time helps, too, as informants get to know you better.

But there is one strategy that can also make a difference: repeating words your informant says. The strategy is borrowed from counseling and seems helpful in ethnographic interviewing because it indicates interest and an effort to understand what is being said on the anthropologist's part. Neutral interest seems to encourage expansiveness.

An example of repeating might look something like this.

BROKER: Then after I check my mail I go sit down in my cubicle and look at it [the mail] to see if there is anything important. Then I read the headlines in the *Wall Street Journal* and since I am pretty new here I will make some cold calls.

INTERVIEWER: I see, cold call.

BROKER: Yes, that is when I call prospects for the first, and maybe only [laugh] time, and then I check what the analysts have to say and look for investment ideas.

INTERVIEWER: Investment ideas?

BROKER: Yes, you need investment ideas to talk to your clients about. . . .

Story questions ask informants to tell you about actual events or places associated with their microculture. One story question would look like this:

- Could you tell me about the last time you made cold calls?

Stories are often loaded with detail and additional folk terms and are very useful for illustrating points when you write. We should point out that the accuracy of a story—whether or not events happened exactly the way an informant says they did—is not at issue here. People often differ in their recollections of events. What is important is the cultural content of stories since people tell stories using appropriate cultural categories and rules for action.

Native language questions are a kind of descriptive question designed to check whether or not a particular term is really a folk term. Native language questions check to see if a term given to you by your informant is one the informant normally uses with other members of the cultural group. For example, if an informant says, "Then we come in the *main room* here where most of the brokers work," you might ask the native language question:

- Do you call this the *main room* when you talk with other brokers?

The broker's answer should be, "No, not really. We actually call this the *bull pen*."

Native language questions help to insure that the terms you have discovered are actual folk terms, not translations or approximations.

Field Notes

Interviews should result in a set of ***field notes***, which are written accounts of what transpired. If you tape recorded the interview, your field notes should consist of a typed transcription of everything that was said, including your questions. You might also want to add observations about how the interview went—was your informant nervous? What problems did you encounter? What worked? What kinds of questions did you ask? Did they work? You also should try to remember and record anything that was said when the tape recorder was off.

Typing field notes is a long and arduous process, but having a verbatim account of your informant's words is important to the cultural discovery process defined by the ethnosemantic method.

You may find it impractical to use a tape recorder all of the time or even at all. If this happens, try to jot down folk terms as you hear them, and as soon as possible after an interview is over, type—preferably on a computer for easy storage and retrieval—as detailed an account of the interview as possible. Be sure and make copies of your field notes (either

printed or saved on a disk). There is nothing worse than losing notes you have just spent hours preparing.

Preliminary Analysis

When you have completed typing your field notes, look them over to identify folk terms. Some of our students have used different colored highlighter pens to identify folk nouns, phrases, and verbs. It may be useful to list topics covered in the interview in the margins of your notes. Think about possible mini tour questions you can ask during your next interview. What terms should be checked with a native language question? Finally, are there preliminary sets of terms that might form lists? This last question leads us to the discussion of taxonomic structure in chapter 5.