OTHER BOOKS BY BRUCE JACKSON

Rainbow Freeware (1986)
Law and Disorder: Criminal Justice in America (1984)
Doing Drugs (with Michael Jackson, 1983)
Get the Money and Shoot (1981)
Your Father's Not Coming Home Any More (editor, 1981)
Death Row (with Diane Christian, 1980)
The Programmer (1979)
Killing Time: Life in the Arkansas Penitentiary (1977)
Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me: Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition (1974)
In the Life: Versions of the Criminal Experience (1972)
Wake Up Dead Man: Afro-American Worksongs from Texas Prisons (1972)
A Thief's Primer (1969)
The Negro and His Folklore in 19th Century Periodicals (editor, 1967)
Folklore and Society (editor, 1966)

FIELDWORK

Bruce Jackson

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the Criminally Insane (where Frederick Wiseman made *Titicut Follies*) in a day room where construction was going on. A large man in inmate's clothes watched me take the cellophane off then light a cigar. He stuck out his hand for the cellophane. I handed it to him. He took it and dropped it on the floor, then said, "You through with that butt yet?"

"It's not a butt yet," I said.

"Looks like a butt to me."

I walked away, heading toward the doorway at the far end of the room. (I would have given him a cigar if I'd had two, but it was the only one I had with me and I'd been holding off smoking it all morning. I should say that the rationalization now seems silly and selfish.) Perhaps fifty patients milled about. Near the middle of the room some carpentry work had been going on. The carpenters were not around, but their tools were. The large man, who was walking alongside me and watching me smoke the cigar, saw where I was looking.

"Wouldn't it be something," he said, "if one of these nuts picked up that axe and wacked you over the head with it."

I hadn't noticed the axe until that moment. My expression must have changed because the man smiled broadly.

"It would sure be something," he said.

"None of them would do that," I said.

"Why not?" he said, still smiling.

"Because you wouldn't let them," I said.

He frowned suddenly, then smiled. "Right you are," he said. "Right you are." He waved and walked away.

7/Interviewing

The Problem of Conversation

The worst interview tape I ever heard was handed in as part of a term project in an undergraduate folklore class by the son of a New York police detective. The student couldn't get home to do his interview, so he wrote out his questions and mailed them to his brother, who had agreed to interview their father for him. The brother, then a New York policeman himself, read off the written questions in a clear, decisive voice:

"Question! Why did you join the police department?"

"I joined the police department because I wanted to be in public service and because police work looked like a good career."

"Question! Was the force different when you first joined?"

"Yes, it was."

"Question! What is the most difficult part of being a policeman?"

"The most difficult part of being a policeman is dealing with the public."

I don't know which was worse, having so many questions demanding a yes or no answer and thereby cutting off any discussion before it got started or the brother's "Question!" at the beginning of each cycle. As one might expect, the father responded like a cop on the witness stand; the answers were short and unambiguous or vague and empty. I didn't learn much about that father and son listening to the interview tapes except that the father was expert at responding to questions with a minimum of information and words. I'm certain they did not at any other time exchange those "Dragnet" lines when they were sitting around the house talking about work.

Having a conversation about a part of life and interviewing someone about a part of life are not the same kinds of event; they're not even the same kinds of discourse. "You are gathering, and the informant providing, information to be processed and stored," writes Ives, "and while you should certainly work to keep things relaxed and friendly, you are *not* simply 'having a nice chat' " (1980:50). The student who got his brother to make the tape understood there was a difference, but he went all the way to the silliness extreme in trying to avoid conversation and produce what he thought was a useful interview. He produced a parody instead, something that was neither interview nor conversation.

The best interviewers somehow make the difference between conversation and interview as unobtrusive as possible: the interviewer and Charlie discuss how and why Charlie learned those stories, but Charlie remains Charlie rather than some other person in the distant past Charlie is reconstructing for the recorder. Interview and conversation go on simultaneously, and the interviewee becomes more interested in the conversation with the interviewer than concerned about the image being projected for the abstract and distant and later listener.

Insofar as possible, it's best to act naturally in the collecting situation. I don't mean you shouldn't adapt to the situation. We all make adaptations all the time. I automatically adopt different styles and levels of discourse when talking to one of my classes, to a police officer who insists I was exceeding the speed limit, to an auditorium full of strangers, to my family at home, to my mother, to someone who owes me money, to someone I owe money. You do the same thing. None of those styles is necessarily dishonest or phony; most of them are what seem appropriate for the situations in which they emerge. We slip into those vocabularies and postures naturally: we don't think, "I'm going to adopt my family vocabulary and linguistic style now," we just do it, the same way we move the right foot from accelerator to brake when the taillights of the car ahead go on. Linguists call that kind of behavior "code-switching." Interviewers engage in code-switching and so do people being interviewed. Both adopt whatever mode they think appropriate for whatever they think the thing called "interview" is.

The reason I suggest acting as naturally as possible when doing fieldwork is this: if you present contrived poses and postures and personalities to people who don't know you very well, they'll decide you're a phony and the flow of information will dry up; and if you act that way in front of people who *do* know you very well, they'll decide you're coming unglued and they'll be distracted. Note that I didn't say that you should *be* natural. Doing what comes naturally when you're doing fieldwork can wreck the enterprise.

Until very recently, I did all my own tape transcriptions. At first I didn't have the money to hire someone else to do the work, then when I did have the money I found northern typists made too many mistakes transcribing southern conversations. I cursed and muttered and spent a lot of time at the typewriter. Afterward, I was happy for the labor because I learned a great deal listening to those tapes line by line, again and again. The most important thing I learned was that I talked too much. An informant would say something that would make me think of something and I would talk about it and then the informant would say something and I would say something—we were having conversations. Each time, each of us would redirect the conversation in reaction to what the other had just said. That's fine if you're hanging out, but if you're trying to get a lot of information in a limited field time, it's extremely inefficient. After a while, I found the amount of time on the tapes filled with my voice grew less and less. My recent interview tapes have a question now and then, but that's about it. Many times when someone gets to what he or she thinks is the end of something and I don't, there'll be a long silence when I don't ask any question at all; almost always the interviewee will fill the silence by a longer explanation, with more details, with aspects I hadn't thought to ask about. In earlier years I would have filled all those silences and not let the interviewee provide the absent information. I would have asked questions, announcing what I thought we should talk about now.

In a field collecting situation you're not a conversational participant. Whatever your reasons for being there, whatever your reasons for getting that information, the simple experience of participating in a conversation is *not* one of them. You're there to get information you don't already have. You want to know what the other person or persons think about certain things; you want to hear things from their repertoires. A contract has been made, sometimes tacitly. The informant has decided to help *you*. Not a university, not a collection project, not an archive, not any other abstraction. You, the person sitting there and setting up the recorder or opening the notebook or aiming the camera. The informant has his or her reasons for talking and you're justifying those reasons.

Everything you do while in the collection situation signals the informants: the expressions on your face, the questions you ask, the attention you pay to your recording machine. You're constantly cueing them about what matters to you and what doesn't.

You, alas, usually don't *know* what really matters; if you did you probably could have stayed home. So your problem is to keep the information flowing as freely as possible, to remain deeply enough involved in the discussion to let your informants inform you, but distant enough so they'll deliver more than what you came there thinking you'd find. The point is for you to learn what they know and you don't, so you should as much as possible let them lead the conversation. Every time you take it away from them, you cut the threads. (My favorite instance of interviewers not knowing something existed and not knowing to ask questions about it until the informant happened to mention it in passing is Alexander Butterfield's aside to the House Watergate investigators about the White House taping system. That aside led to Nixon's resignation.)

Look and act interested. After all, you're the one who asked for this meeting. If you're bored and can't hide it, do something else for a little while. Don't fiddle with the machinery unless there's a good reason for fiddling. Don't doodle meaningless, complex figures. Don't stare at your shoes or the ceiling. Don't clean your nails or look at your appointment calendar. And don't overaccentuate things, at least not without a reason. Every time you say, "Hold on a second, I want to be sure I get *this*," you're telling the speaker exactly what you think is valuable and, by exclusion, what you think isn't valuable. It's fine for you to focus the conversation, reasonable to direct the sequence of subjects, appropriate to get more detail about what matters to you most. You may want to let people know that what they're saying is truly useful to your project—both because people like to know when they're doing well and because people who feel they're on the right track may decide to be even more expansive. But be aware that every time you put out a roadsign or traffic light you may be pursuing your concerns rather than discovering the informant's structures.

Journalistic interviewers such as Oriana Falacci or Mike Wallace can be so fractious they get people to blurt out revealing things they would never otherwise say. I don't know any folkloristic or ethnographic or anthropological interviewer for whom that confrontational style is productive. Our goal isn't to get people to reveal themselves so we can nail them to the wall; rather, it's to let them reveal themselves so we can better see what the world looks like through their eyes. The people who do our kind of interviewing best become nearly transparent in their art.

Fear of Machines

A friend in Kentucky called to tell me how the rural poor were being exploited by the politicans who had taken control of the Poverty Program resources in Pike County. Organizers had been arrested on a trumped-up charge of sedition, windows had been shot out, a house had been dynamited. Unemployed coal miners were doing heavy sabotage, and across the county line a photographer had been murdered. Willie Morris at *Harper's* assigned the article and promised me a minimum, which meant I had enough money for the trip.

One cold and misty afternoon a few weeks later, I was at the Pikeville Holiday Inn for an interview with Tom Ratliff, the Pike County prosecutor. Ratliff had an official office someplace else; the Holiday Inn office was where he conducted his private business. I'd been told that he was a slick fellow who expected to run for governor soon, and I'd been warned that he'd be especially suspicious of me because I was from the North and had a beard. At that time in Pikeville there was a lot of talk about outsiders with beards who were communists. I left my tape recorder and camera in the car because I didn't want to spook Ratliff any more than was necessary. His secretary announced me and ushered me in. He stood up and we introduced ourselves, then he waved his hand at a chair across the desk from his own. I took out my notebook and pen, but before I could sit down Ratliff said, "How come you don't have a tape recorder?"

"I have one in the car."

"Well go get it. I don't trust somebody who writes things down. You never get it all when you're writing it down. Get the tape recorder. That way, if you don't get what I say right it's your decision and you can't say it was a mistake."

"Yes, sir," I said. The interview was splendid. Ratliff said just what he wanted to say and it was better than anything I might have made up for him if I were the kind of reporter who did things like that, which I wasn't.

What Ratliff reminded me was this: Someone who is willing to talk to you *wants* you to get it right. There's no reason to worry about the machine.

I don't think I've ever had a problem with anyone being really nervous about the recorder. People may sometimes be nervous about the interview itself; assuaging that is a different problem, one that usually takes care of itself. (It's similar to the fear some people have about public speaking: absolute terror before it starts and for the first few minutes, then it disappears entirely as the audience begins to respond and the speaker gets more involved in the performance than in anticipating it.) But as long as the fieldworker doesn't mystify the instruments, the informants won't be spooked by them. Informants may sometimes say, "Turn that off for a minute, this is just between

me and you." That's no different from someone saying in regular conversation, "Now this is just between the two of us, don't tell anyone else about it." Tape recorders are so common now and people are so used to seeing them and owning them that they no longer need discussion or explanation or justification. Twenty years ago, tape recorders were less an everyday thing, and that's the only reason older discussions of fieldwork treat the need for dealing with informant fear of the machine (cf. Whyte, 1960:366).

Some informants may be willing to perform certain materials for friends and relatives and even for a collector, but they may not be willing to perform them, or perform them in the same way, before a tape recorder. Dennis Tedlock recounts a time when a narrator told singularly different versions of a story at sessions with and without a tape recorder:

> Here we were, with a Zuni audience that included the narrator's daughter-in-law and children of both sexes, and the narrator was telling all. The audience at the recording session had been a strictly adult male one, so there was no doubt that the crucial factor in Andrew's earlier censorship had been neither his own nor his immediate audience's prudishness. Rather, Andrew had been mindful of the larger audience that might lie somewhere on the other side of that tape-recorder, an audience that might include the kinds of Anglo-Americans he had met up with in the government boarding schools, back in the days when Indian students were treated to mandatory Sunday-school attendance, corporal punishment, and even confinement in on-campus jail cells. Here, then, was a reminder that however much the mythographer may try to normalize a performance by gathering a native audience and by building rapport at the level of personal interaction, the presence of a tape-recorder and the eventual goal of publication raise larger questions of what might be called interethnic rapport. (1983:292)

The problem wasn't that the narrator feared the machine; rather, he was censoring himself because he was sensitive to the different audiences that would be found by his voice in that room and Tedlock's tape in the world. That's a different situation entirely—one that most informants don't worry about as much as they should. Diane Christian, when she was doing the interviews that formed the major portion of our book on death row in Texas (Jackson and Christian, 1981), several times cautioned informants about being too specific about crimes they hadn't been convicted of or, in some cases, not even accused of.

There used to be a professor at SUNY Buffalo who, whenever he introduced a motion in faculty meetings, would always list *all* the arguments that might be brought against it, then he would give his

one or two reasons for the motion and sit down. The problem was, he was smarter and better informed than most of the people in the room, so he was far better at thinking up reasons against his own motions than anyone who might have opposed them. He went to battle against himself, and the odds were never even because he thought he had to justify the motion from one position only, yet he would list all the opposing points he thought might exist. If he had just introduced his motions, said why they were important, and shut up, most of them would have passed. As it was, the con arguments he provided often convinced even those of us who supported him in the beginning that we'd better vote no on this one. The message: Be ready for trouble but don't look for it, and above all don't stoke it up yourself.

I've had a few friends and students who've had terrible times with nervous informants. I used to think they were just unlucky, then I noticed that some people *always* have a terrible time with nervous informants and other people never do. It doesn't seem likely that the laws of probability attack some fieldworkers with vicious consistency and then with benign consistency leave others alone.

A couple visited us one time with their two-year-old daughter. The wife was an attorney, a good one I was told; the husband was a photographer who specialized in inanimate objects. He held the child while his wife told us about her new job. After a while, he put the baby on the floor and she crawled about the rug. Our dog wandered into the room, looked around, noticed the baby, and padded over to investigate. The husband looked suddenly at his wife; the wife stiffened and went very pale. "It's okay," I said, "he likes ki--." Before I got to finish the word "kids" the attorney let out a shriek that brought Diane running in from the next room, sent the dog tearing down the corridor with his ears pinned back and his tail between his legs, and got me looking around to see what horrible thing had come into her field of vision. She leapt from her chair, scooped the baby from the floor, and held her high above her head. "Baby is *afraid* of dogs!" she shrieked. About then, "Baby" began crying hysterically. The lawyer handed her to the photographer, who rocked her to tranquility, which took a good ten minutes. "Baby is afraid of dogs," the lawyer said again, her voice calmer but still strained. "She really is. I don't know why."

Well, *we* knew why.

It's the same thing with your microphone and tape recorder. You go around letting people know *you* think there's something to be afraid of or nervous about and they'll be afraid or nervous. They'll think you know something they don't know—maybe something they *ought* to know. If there are reasons why your informant should be skittish about

going on tape and you know them and the informant doesn't, then you're honor-bound to bring those up. It's fine to say, "Your ex-wife works in our archive and she may listen to this tape even though we mark it 'restricted, no public use for ten years.' " But it's not fine to say, "A lot of people are terrified about being recorded, but I think there's nothing for you to worry about, really, it's all right, don't worry, there's no reason not to put this on tape, at least no reason I can think of now."

Just go ahead and *do* it.

Except for the times you feel you shouldn't. Sometimes something tells you not to record. I think it's a good idea to follow those instincts. I remember times with friends when interesting things were being said, so I hauled out a machine to immortalize the moment and found that I'd suddenly stepped outside the circle and become an observer rather than a participant and that everything had changed in an unpleasant way. I once wrecked a friend's dinner party when I started recording a fascinating monologue by a man who had a short time before been released from Cuba's Isle of Pines Prison. He had spent a year there after his capture at the Bay of Pigs, and my friend Umberto, rather weirdly now that I think about it, thought we should have a lot to talk about.

About thirty minutes into the man's monologue I decided the stories were so good and my memory so bad that the only way I'd remember any of this would be if it were on tape. I brooded a while about whether or not the machine would interfere with anything and in that time a few more terrific stories disappeared in the holes of failed memory. So I went to my apartment next door and got a recorder. About twenty minutes later the man noticed the recorder and mike, both of which were directly in front of him, and went quite crazy. He pointed a finger at me and screamed, "Spy! You're a goddamned spy!" "A spy for who?" Umberto asked him. "Who cares?" the man said. "You can't just be a spy without spying for someone," Umberto said. "What difference does it make?" the man said. "He's a spy." "Why should anyone spy on you?" Umberto's wife said. "You were working for the CIA when you went to the Bay of Pigs and Castro had you for the last year. What's to find out?" The man didn't like that one bit. He pounded the table and yelled in colloquial Spanish, which I couldn't understand at all but it must have been something interesting because Umberto looked quite startled and whispered to me, "He doesn't really mean that." Umberto then valiantly tried to serve dessert, a flan he'd learned how to make in his native Colombia, but only one person at the far end of the table was up to it.

After that I became less likely to wreck nice times. I tend to be more interested in my relationships than in my tapes. Real life is full of stories and sometimes stepping out of real life to document other people doing it isn't the smart, decent, useful, or even satisfying thing to do.

Having a recorder going all the time doesn't solve the problem either, because you have to change reels or tapes, or you're aware of the potential need for changing reels or tapes, and that means you never fully participate in the action of the room because you're watching the clock. People sense that; if you're at all sensitive, you'll sense it too. What do you do in those circumstances? Lean back and forget it. Have a good time. Tell yourself to remember as much as you can and be sure to make notes later. Sometimes it's okay just to be a person.

Everything I've said about tape recorders applies equally well to photography. If you know that your pictures won't be used for anything that will hurt people, if you believe you aren't exploiting them or taking pictures that will embarrass them or compromise them, then there's no reason at all not to take whatever pictures are appropriate to the work you're doing. Cameras are far more commonplace than they used to be, but I find that cameras interfere with an immediate relationship even more than tape recorders do, because to use a camera you must break off normal eye contact and place this box with a cyclops-eye between you and the person you're talking to. Even so, if you act as if it's something reasonable and natural to do (if you *believe* it's something reasonable and natural to do), you'll rarely have any problems. "People are far more used to being photographed than being recorded," writes Ives. "I've found video sometimes less intrusive than tape." The great American photographer Walker Evans once said,

> I'm often asked by students how a photographer gets over the fear and uneasiness in many people about facing a camera, and I just say that any sensitive man is bothered by a thing like that unless the motive is so strong and the belief in what he's doing is so strong it doesn't matter. The important thing is to do the picture. And I advise people who are bothered by this to cure it by saying to themselves, what I'm doing is harmless to these people really, and there's no malevolence in it and there's no deception in it, and it is done in a great tradition, examples of which are Daumier and Goya. Daumier's *Third Class Carriage* is a kind of snapshot of some actual people sitting in a railway carriage in France in eighteen something. (1982:125)

Leave the recorder or camera at home or in the car or in the box or bag if you think the machine will alter the situation in ways you

don't want or if you think it will cause harm. But don't suppress the machine because you assume people will automatically take fright when they see it. The fright is most often transmitted by you, not the inanimate box.

The Silent Participant

I said people aren't likely to be nervous because of the recorder if you don't make them nervous; I didn't say the recorder left the situation the same, because it doesn't. In William Foote Whyte's term, it makes the event "formal" and may lead informants "to talk more 'for the record' . . ." (1960:366). I've noticed many informants code-switch when the recorder goes on: they become less likely to chatter idly and more likely to explain things in detail. That means many of them have a sense of some audience beyond that microphone. I don't think this is as artificial as it might seem. The interview *is* an artificial construct, whether or not it's recorded. If your goal is to acquire as much information about a subject as possible, there's no harm in having your informants try to cast their presentations in ways that provide as much detail as possible. If you're recording a normal conversation between people (say, family members or friends at a bar) and the presence of the recorder changes the character of the conversation, then you have a problem that must be reckoned with. But if the only effect of the recorder in your interview is that it gets your informant to provide more detail than would otherwise be provided—thank that machine and keep on working with it.

When the machines are introduced can be more disruptive than whether they are introduced. Introducing the machine at a later stage of the study makes a statement of some kind (what depends on the circumstances) about some change in the value of the information or relationship that the researcher assumes has taken place. I often have my machines visible early on though I may not actually use them for some time. If I'm starting work in an institution, for example, I may walk around for a day or two having conversations and getting the feel of the place before I take a photograph or tape an interview, but I'll almost always have my Leica M-4 with me the entire time. That gets people used to seeing me with machines and it means they're not surprised when I begin using them at some later point.

Folklorists, unlike sociologists and unlike most anthropologists, are just as interested in the specific form of the utterance as they are in the abstractable content of the utterance. It's true that the recorder has people talking to it as much as the interviewer, but that may make them more likely to perform rather than to report, which can be to the folklorists' advantage.

Sometimes starting the tape recorder is a good way to make the shift from normal conversational discourse to interview discourse. It can let your informant know that you're doing business now, that you're no longer chatting idly. "When I am ready to begin the interview," writes Ives,

> I pick up the mike and say something like, "Well, let's get started." Then I speak directly into the mike, not looking at the informant at all, while I say, "This is Friday, September 29, 1980, and I am up in Argyle, Maine in the home of [*Now I look at the informant*] Ernest Kennedy, and we're going to be talking about the days when he was a river-driver. My name is Sandy Ives and this is tape 80.3." Then I put the mike back in its place, sit back and relax, and continue, "O.K., now that's taken care of. Now. . . ." That is to say, I involve myself with the machine to begin with, then I involve the informant, and the interview is suddenly underway. I try to do it all in an offhand, diffident way. At the same time, I have made it unmistakably clear that the interview has begun. (1980:51)

Ives's technique nicely separates the interview from the conversation immediately preceding it. An interview is *not* a normal conversation; the rules are different and so are the expectations. A Brownian random motion that might be perfectly acceptable in conversation might not be at all appropriate or useful in an interview about a specific subject or group of subjects. The interview may demand a measure of detail not necessary or appropriate to a conversation about the same subjects. The statement starting the interview off is like the words at the beginning of a ritual that separate ritual time from regular time and that distinguish ritual behavior from quotidian behavior.

The interview situation permits you, the interviewer, to ask far more questions about far more subjects and in far greater detail than would be permissible or reasonable in conversation. Once in the interview mode, most informants understand that a greater measure of detail may be necessary, so they don't automatically think you're stupid if you ask for a step-by-step explanation of a process or if you ask the names of things or a lot of other questions. Very often people will shift their eyes from you to the microphone when those questions are asked, as if to say, "I know Edna here understands this, but this explanation is for you people out there in tape-land." Some individuals who are interviewed frequently become very good at this kind of shift. Whenever he is interviewed for print media, for example, civil rights attorney William M. Kunstler spells every name without breaking his conver-

sational flow: "The judge in the case, Judge Rickover—that's r-i-c-k-o-v-e-r—said to me, 'Are you accusing the government of. . . .' "

Control

For the interview to work, both you and your informants must continue to get what you want and need. You want to find out something specific; you want them to give you information that will lead you on to other things that matter that you don't yet know about; you want their perception of events or facts or people, you need *something* to hand to your professor. There are other reasons for you to be there and it's possible that many or even all of them are operative at once. Some of that information can be extracted with questions you had in mind or in your notebook when you arrived at the door, but more often a good informant will lead you to questions you didn't know beforehand you should or would be asking.

The informants, as I said earlier, have agreed to be interviewed by you because they like you and want to help, because they owe you a favor, because they think the information you collect and transmit will do them some good, because they think the information you collect and pass along will help someone or some cause they want helped, because they are bored and therefore happy for the opportunity to talk to someone not noticeably bored by their rambling, because you are paying them for their time and talk—or for other reasons buried so deep in the mind neither of you will ever know what they were. By the time you sit down to talk, the decision to help you has been made. They want to give you what you want and what you need, at least insofar as giving you those things is consonant with their own wants and needs. But if you don't handle yourself carefully, you can miss the most important information they have to give you.

I once worked on a film with a director who was desperately anxious to have everyone think he was hip to what was going on. He wanted them to accept him as if he were an insider. Even if he'd been successful he would've been disastrous to the project—you don't talk the same way or about the same things to insiders and outsiders. But he *wasn't* an insider and everyone knew it. When we were interviewing cops, he told cop stories he'd gotten from his cousin the detective; when we were interviewing gangsters, he told gangster stories he'd gotten from his cousin the gangster; when we interviewed a bartender, he told bartender stories he'd gotten from his cousin the bartender. It never ended. After he finished jabbering and establishing himself, the interviews were almost always dreadful.

It's really okay to be what you are. That's the role you know best, the one in which you'll impress your interviewee as being the most honest. People don't expect you to know everything about their subject; if you did, you wouldn't need them. Most people are happy to know you're interested. Nothing kills an interview faster than an informant's realization that you've been faking your interest so far.

It's good to let them know you're interested—but it may not be good to let them know too much about the specifics of your interest. If, for example, you respond enthusiastically to certain kinds of things and not enthusiastically at all to others, the informant learns quickly what to express and what to suppress. The informant's decisions won't always be right, since you yourself won't know until later what you're really going to find useful and important. You go into a field situation with certain background information and certain questions; but you learn from the field situation more background information and you learn to ask questions you didn't previously think to ask.

Your task is to keep the informant informing without you imposing so much direction on the performance that you foreclose the possibility or likelihood of getting new information. You needn't and shouldn't be a phony about what you want and what you're doing, but you have to impose some measure of self-control on your actions and reactions so the informant can feel safe in offering information and won't cripple the study by preediting in the direction your interests seem already headed.

Never turn off the tape recorder when you're doing an interview. Every time you turn the tape recorder on or off you're giving the informant an instruction about what you think is valuable and you force a reconsideration by the informant of what should be considered valuable and what should be considered useless. Every time you turn the recorder off you're saying, "What you're talking about now doesn't strike me as being important or interesting." Even if what's being said *is* unimportant and boring, you don't want to communicate that message so clearly. It's far better to waste a little tape or to redirect the conversation by a question or a comment than to make the exclamation mark statement by pushing that button.

I don't mean *absolutely* never turn the machine off. If everyone leaves the room you can turn the machine off, or if the informant asks you to turn it off you should do it. Otherwise, there are few reasons for stopping the recorder before you're done with the session. Tape is cheap. If you don't like what you've got, you can use the tape again. The recording opportunity is difficult to achieve and impossible to repeat.

The first time I did fieldwork I started and stopped the tape recorder a lot. Then I realized that every time I turned off the recorder I was also turning off the informant, and often by the time I turned the machine back on the informant was so far into what he or she was talking about that I missed the beginning. If I asked for a recap, the spontaneity was lost; if I didn't, the information was lost. When I'm recording sound now, interviews and discussions especially, I just let the machine run. With a cassette recorder, turning the tape over or putting in a new one takes only a few seconds, so it's easy enough to keep the interview going without puttering with the machine. (One bit of putter you should always remember with a cassette after you flip it over is to fast-forward it a moment before going into record again so you get past the five seconds of leader.) The great advantage of a tape recorder over a pen and paper for recording interviews is the tape recorder lets you maintain eye contact with your informants and it doesn't let them know what parts of what they're saying seem to you more important than others. But the machine can only free your eyes and help you keep from influencing content if you leave it alone.

There's another reason for keeping your hands off the machine as much as you can: even informants who are nervous about being interviewed generally relax after you've been talking for a few minutes, but they won't be able to relax if you keep reminding them about what may have made them nervous in the first place. Don't look at the tape in despair in the middle of a long story. You're already committed to the story, you might as well get the end, and it might surprise you.

You don't want to keep looking at your watch, either, and for the same reason. But if you're in a room with a clock you can position yourself so you can sometimes check it without seeming to be fretting about the time. It's good to have a tape recorder that shuts itself off when the tape runs out—with one of those, you'll hear the click when the control buttons pop up. If you're in doubt about whether there'll be enough tape for the next item or sequence of items or the next phase of conversation, turn the tape over or put on a new tape before the side has run completely out.

A Thief's Primer

I spent a few weeks in July 1964 doing interviews and recording worksongs at Ramsey state prison farm in Texas, a few miles from the country towns of Brazoria and Rosharon. It was a Gulf Coast summer—massively hot and muggy. Most of my time during the days was spent recording convict worksongs in the live oak groves along the

Brazos bottoms and in the cottonfields closer to the old whitewashed brick building that held Two Camp's 800 convicts. The only room within Ramsey Two Camp that had air conditioning was the prison dentist's office. The free-world dentist was never there, but the convict assistant was. I talked with him a few times about slang. He told me nickname stories, defined words, suggested people who might be worth a conversation. I took to going up there for breaks and to hide from the weather in the worst part of the afternoon. At first, my rationale was that I was getting background on stories told me by other convicts, then after a while I really *was* getting background on stories told by other convicts. I sat in the dentist's chair and drank instant coffee. I put the tape recorder on the instrument tray and let it run while we talked. Sam answered my questions and commented on the interviews I'd been doing. He talked about his own prison experiences and later on about his work as a check-forger and safecracker. The recorder kept on running. The next few times I made field trips to the prison, I did more interviews with him. A few years later, he wrote that he was being paroled. I arranged to be there to pick him up. We visited his old haunts in Houston and San Antonio and Nuevo Laredo. All of this resulted in *A Thief's Primer* (1969), a book I hadn't planned on writing when I began my Texas research. It's about safecracking, check-writing, and Texas professional crime. Sam very much led me into the conversations that formed the substance of that book.

The raw transcriptions of those tapes themselves did not become the book; they became the *basis* for the book. After I realized that a subject was there that was worth specific attention, I had to develop a research strategy for managing that subject. One must determine what seems to matter, then ask further questions about those things; one must also come to some sort of conclusion about what's true and what's not. That's not because one publishes only verifiable facts—articulations of facts and perceptions of the past are, as I say in the conclusion to this book, facts themselves—but so one has some idea what logic the material demands. The decisions seem to make sense in retrospect, but at the moment they're largely intuitive. It's the tolerance for ambiguity characteristic of the humanities scholar that makes complex fieldwork possible, not the desperate need for certitude of the scientist.

I spent more time with Sam discussing what seemed to me themes of importance. As long as Sam was commenting on my conversations with other people, there was no need to explore with others Sam's statements as they related to Sam's career and the kind of career Sam said he'd had. But once Sam's career became the subject, then Sam

could no longer be the only informant. I interviewed other people about specific aspects and general themes that had come up in the conversations with Sam, and those interviews helped form the basis for future questions and discussions with Sam. We re-covered ground we had passed over quickly in earlier meetings.

I worked on the transcripts and edited what I thought was the story in them. You might have found another story in there, just as different sculptors might find different figures in the same block of stone. One story isn't necessarily more valid than any other (though neither are all equally valid), but the writer's job, at a minimum, is to find one that does no injustice to any fact he or she knows. Anyway, that's how I work once I get a great mass of recorded spoken material.

With Sam's story my sensibility of things wasn't enough. He provided so much technical information that I wanted comments by experts. So I gave copies of the portions of the interviews I planned to use in the book to several experts: police, lawyers, other safecrackers and check-writers. Their comments became part of the book, for they were able to gloss Sam's statements with an authority I couldn't claim.

What happened, then, was conversation with an informant opened an area of investigation I hadn't planned. That area had its own set of questions that demanded development of a new fieldworking and analytic strategy, which in turn became a new project that grew alongside the first like branches from a common trunk.

Don't be afraid to follow an informant's lead. You can always come back to your main subject, but you may get lucky and come upon a story or genre you didn't even know was there. If you're working on folktales and the informant begins a long digression on truck tires, you might want to engage in a little subtle redirection—but not until you're sure the person isn't going to tell you interesting trucking stories.

If you keep your mouth shut whenever possible, if you listen rather than lecture, if you don't load the conversation, if you follow their lead, you get taken places you didn't know were there. If the places are dead ends or boring or irrelevant, you can always steer the conversation back to where you hoped it would be going, and you can do it directly: "But before we talk more about the truck tires, I'd like to hear a little more about the time you were on the ice floe. Just how did you get off of it and what happened to the two fishermen and the dog?" People might be a little insulted if you change the topic entirely in favor of something that interests them not at all, but if you're just returning to the main topic of the day, that's usually accepted easily. You can always ask questions about what you think matters.

Asking Questions

In the right context you can ask anything; if you misperceive the context, the wrong question may close things down entirely. Before you ask personal questions—sex, politics, family relationships, money, crime, religion—be sure that your relationship with the informant licenses such questions from you and that the recording situation (who else is nearby or who else might hear the tape) doesn't restrict the answers.

Remember the notion of stranger value: outsiders can often ask questions insiders can't. Some kinds of things are discussed freely before people perceived as representatives of an institution or agency, but not at all with people who are known and appreciated as individuals; researchers doing sex studies are regularly told, "I've never told this to anyone. . . ." Some things we don't like to discuss with people we know because the preexisting intimacy makes the new revelation embarrassing—the revelation says, "I'm not who or what you thought I was." Other things are hard to discuss because we assume that insiders know parts of the answers already, so basic questions asked by them immediately produce an artificial response. But if you're honestly naive, you can ask simple questions about basic things (the best kind), and sometimes you may even be excused asking tactless or inappropriate questions.

Every question makes a statement, and some questions make multiple statements. A question tells what you're interested in, which is fair enough, but it may also reveal answers you're assuming, which isn't at all useful. Other than "Do you want the change in quarters or dimes?" there aren't many neutral questions.

The questions that tell you least about the interviewee's categories are questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. Most of the time, that yes or no is a full sentence, and the last thing you want in an interview designed to elicit information is a bunch of one-word sentences. Questions with yes-or-no answers don't give the informant a chance to give you the collateral information that makes facts meaningful. Many times slight rephrasing of a question puts it in a form that demands a discussion rather than a word. Instead of "Did you like what she said?" ask "What did you think about what she said?" Instead of "Did you always want to be a potter?" ask "How did you become a potter?" Instead of "Have you heard other versions of this song?" ask "What other versions of this song have you heard?" The differences are not minor. Putting the question in a way that elicits discussion rather than a single word gives the subject a chance to talk, and it indicates that you value the response.

How a thing is said is part of *what* is being said. The same word or line or story can have very different meanings if it's uttered rapidly or slowly, or if it's told at the instigation of someone else or on one's own. The best way to collect stories is when stories are being told by people who normally tell them to the people who are the usual audiences for those stories. But the best way isn't necessarily the most efficient way; fieldworkers often ask questions designed to elicit discussion or performances of items. You do what you can to make those responses as free and easy as possible and to make those performances as natural as possible.

Part of the task is being sensitive to the rhythms of utterance. Native New Yorkers, for example, rarely have notable pauses in their conversations; when pauses occur, other speakers usually leap in. Native Americans frequently have pauses; leaping in is rude. Furthermore, the order in which facts are presented is a fact itself, and often one of great importance; we understand different things from the order of facts if the order comes from the order of an interviewer's question sheet or if it comes from the informant's natural flow of associations. The goal of an interview might be as much to get the performer's style of saying what is to be said and the performer's ordering of matters as it is to get the facts the performer has. I find it best, therefore, to ask as few specific questions as I can. I'd much rather have someone ramble for a while than I would plunge in myself and impose my order on the conversation.

Interviewers talk of two kinds of interview style. *Directive interviews* involve specific questions posed by the researcher; the interviewee's comments are welcome only insofar as they are part of the answers to those specific questions. *Nondirective interviews* are totally open: the researcher listens, the subject talks. The term "nondirective interview" comes to us, says William Foote Whyte, from the therapeutic style that had patients expressing themselves about whatever they wished for the ear of a listener who was interested and sympathetic. "Whatever its merits for therapy, a genuinely non-directive interviewing approach simply is not appropriate for research. Far from putting informants at their ease, it actually seems to stir anxieties" (1960:352). Whyte notes a number of similarities and differences in what therapists and researchers expect from their interviews:

> Like the therapist, the research interviewer listens more than he talks, and listens with a sympathetic and lively interest. He finds it helpful occasionally to rephrase and reflect back to the informant what he seems to be expressing and to summarize the remarks as a check on understanding.

> The interviewer avoids giving advice and passing moral judgment on responses. He accepts statements that violate his own ethical, political, or other standards without showing his disapproval in any way. Generally he does not argue with the informant, although there may be justification for stimulating an argument as a prod to determine how the informant will react. This, however, should be a part of a conscious plan and not be done simply because the interviewer disagrees with the informant and cannot contain himself on the point.
>
> The therapist is told not to interrupt. For the researcher the advice should be: Don't interrupt *accidentally*. In normal social intercourse a person interrupts because he is impatient and needs to express himself. This is no justification for interruption in a research interview. However, some people will talk forever if they are not checked. Since they seldom pause for breath, anything that anyone else says to them is necessarily an interruption. Such people circle the same topic with an infinite capacity for repeating themselves. The interviewer who waits patiently for new material will hear only variations on the same theme. (1960:353)

Folklore interviews tend to be a mixture of the two styles. Fieldworkers have specific things they want to know about (objects, processes, stories, beliefs, whatever), but they want to know about those things as they function and have meaning in the informants' world. The fieldworker *wants* the informant's opinions, biases, attitudes, beliefs, phrasings. The investigation should be as objective as possible, but the information gathered is more useful the more subjective it is.

Often the most interesting responses are produced by *follow-up questions*—questions you ask after you get the first answer. The follow-up question interrogates the response itself: someone tells you what was done, the follow-up asks why it was done, or why it was done that way, or when and how often and by whom it was done; someone tells a story, the follow-up asks what the teller thinks the story was about, and whether the teller believes it, and whether the teller heard it any other time. Anything to expand the dimension of the response and help you better understand what's being said. Many informants respond with only part of what they know—because they don't want to bore you, because they don't know how much detail you really want or need, because they don't know how much of what they just said you really understood. The follow-up question lets them tell you more of what they want to tell you.

Prosthetics . . .

Most things are hard to talk about in the abstract. You can sit at a table talking about carving with a carver and you may get good in-

formation about technical procedures and aesthetic concerns, but you'll probably get much more specific technical detail and more extensive aesthetic remarks if you're talking in the presence of the physical objects involved—the tools and the things carved by that artist and by others doing similar things. (You can take photographs of the objects later on so you have visuals to go along with your audiotapes.) While the conversation is in process you can point to things that you don't understand or things you'd like to hear more about: "But why did you make this long deep cut here?" and "What is the purpose of this double-sided knife?" Talking in terms of specific objects lets you discover if you need to ask about things that are so obvious to the informant he or she felt no need to mention them but that are of vital importance if an outsider is to understand them.

Some novice interviewers are embarrassed about asking questions they think they can answer; they fear that the informant will think them naive or foolish. I've found that when informants understand (as most do quickly) that it's *their* perceptions that matter to me and the potential users of the discussion, few mind digressions into the obvious. In most interview situations two people grope toward areas of shared concern. The interviewer has categories of information he or she wants filled but doesn't know what portions of that information the interviewee has; the interviewer knows nothing about things the interviewee knows but which haven't been identified as categories. The interviewee wants to help and is usually trying to find out what the interviewer really wants to know and trying to decide what's worth telling.

Physical objects can provide part of the meeting ground, but only if you make your questions as specific as possible; otherwise, later on you might not have any idea what your informant is talking about. "Why is this cut like this?" is less helpful than "Why is this cut crosswise to the grain when all the others are with it?" Interviews are talking events (unless you're doing them on video, which is not commonly the case), but the things to which the interviews refer may be physical facts. Incorporate those physical facts whenever possible, for they'll help you ask intelligent questions and they'll help the informant provide specific information.

Sociologist Douglas Harper shows interviewees photographs he's taken of them and then asks them to comment on the objects and actions in the photographs and to discuss whether the photographic depiction captures the event or object properly. Many subjects come up in the conversations about the pictures that hadn't come up in previous interviews. Folklorists can extend Harper's device: sit down with an informant and go through a family photograph album or someone else's album. Go through the tools in a shop and ask what each one is for and where it was obtained. Anything that comes to mind. Such a device won't always work and the technique isn't always appropriate, but it can introduce you to areas you knew nothing about and can ease enormously the task of the informant who's trying to help you understand what's going on. (See Ives, 1980:74–79, for an extended discussion of similar techniques.)

I know of an instance where the family album technique was a disaster because the fellow using it hadn't bothered to think through what his interrogation meant to his informant. The informant was his mother, who at the time was in her early seventies. Archie taught folklore and literature. He read the very nice book on family folklore by Steven J. Zeitlin, Amy J. Kotkin, and Holly Cutting Baker (1982) and decided it was about time he struck close to home. He had been hearing his mother tell stories for years about this or that cousin, about what it was like when they lived in one town or another. So Archie invited his mother to his house (his first mistake—the conversation would've been better at her kitchen table) and hauled out the family albums. He set up his tape recorder, carefully placed the microphone so it would get both their voices, poured his mother a cup of tea and himself a cup of coffee. He yelled at the kids to turn the TV set off. He started at the beginning of the first album, pointing at a picture of a young woman he knew was his mother and a young man he didn't know at all.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Me on the left. He was a friend of mine." Long silence. Archie waited for her to go on with one of her stories. She went on with the silence.

"What was his name?"

"Charles." More silence.

"And where was this picture taken?"

"At the beach. You can see it's at the beach."

"And what about this picture? That's a great car."

"Yes, it's a nice car."

"Where was the picture taken?"

"Where we lived in Pittsburgh."

And so it went for nearly an hour. Archie didn't even bother starting on the second album.

"Nothing," he said to me later, "absolutely nothing. Every question I asked she answered with a monosyllable or with a single line. Not one story. I mean, she's always telling stories about her family. Why

not when I finally ask for them? Why not when I've got the tape recorder going?"

Archie's wife spoke up for the first time. "*Because* it's the first time you asked her to do it, idiot. Didn't you think she'd wonder why you were suddenly interested in stories that always bored you before? She probably decided you thought she was old and was going to die soon and you just wanted the tape for a family souvenir or something."

"I thought she'd be happy I was interested."

"You depressed the hell out of her is what you did."

Use whatever will help you get the information you need, but never forget you're working with human beings who have feelings and who think about the questions you ask and how you ask them.

. . . *and Prosthetic Damage*

We trust our machines. They relieve us of labors and they do things we can't do. That's wonderful. But there are two great dangers for the fieldworker who uses machines and they're exactly the same as the danger for the users of any machines: we tend to define our work in terms of what our machines can do, and we tend to relax our attention when we know the machine is on the job. Both tendencies can be costly; both should be guarded against. The only defense is vigilance: pay attention to what you're doing and why you're doing it, and pay attention to what's going on around you just as if the machines weren't there.

Almost every fieldworker I know who has done a lot of taped interviews has had the experience of realizing he or she had no idea of what was said in the past minute or five minutes. If I have to *remember* a conversation, I pay very close attention to everything my interlocutor says, I make mnemonic keys as we're going along, or I try to jot down key words and phrases so I can call it back later. If I know the tape is doing the remembering (far better than I could), I relax. I might think about the nail that seems to be working its way through my boot. I might think about the rest of the day's work. I might think about what he just reminded me of. I can . . . oh, damn: he's looking at me and waiting for an answer. An answer to what? You can feel pretty stupid when you're interviewing someone and you have to ask, "What was that you just said?" And the feeling is justified.

Not only does the machine let you miss some of what goes on in front of you, it tends to let you get by committing far less to memory than you otherwise would. And it's the same with images. If you're photographing a lot, there's a tendency not to jot down or even *see* details. The negative's got it all. Alas, too many times the negative doesn't have it all, and sometimes the negative doesn't have anything.

Force yourself to pay attention to what's going on and make as many notes as you can manage and make those notes as good as you possibly can. Whenever you have the time and quiet, make notes about what has happened, about what has worked and what hasn't, about how you got to a certain house and who was whose cousin, about your impressions of the day's encounters. In the note making you often realize questions you should be asking. Better to have that realization when you have three more days in the field than after you're back home when you can only kick yourself because you realize there are crippling holes in your data. If you can't come this way again easily, use your machines for whatever help they can give you, but don't ever depend upon them entirely.

Rules

Every field situation has its own rhetoric of interaction, and none of the rules is invariable. But here are some rules you shouldn't break unless you've got a very good reason:

1. Don't be so tight-lipped the interviewee thinks you're an idiot, and don't be so loquacious the interviewee can't get a word in edgewise.
2. Don't show off so much you seem more fool than researcher, and don't be so greedy for information you forget the informant is a person with feelings that must be respected. Be as normal as you can—but always remember why you're there.
3. Talk as little as possible and keep your talk as empty of content and opinion as possible.
4. Don't ask questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no unless you have a very good reason for asking such conversation-stoppers.
5. If you do ask yes-or-no questions, follow them up with questions that will put the answers into some kind of perspective: "But why did you do it?" "How did you feel about it?" "Why did you think it was true?" "What did it mean?"
6. Ask follow-up questions whenever you can, even if your previous question elicited a ten-minute narrative: "What do other people think about it?" "How do other people do it?" "Did it happen another time?" "What do you think about it now?"
7. If the informant tries to steer the conversation, go along for the ride.

8. Never turn the recorder off during an interview unless you're alone in the room or you've been asked to turn the recorder off.
9. Use whatever you can to help the informant provide as much detail as possible.
10. Use whatever machines will help you, but remember who's the boss: don't let the machines let you get lazy.

Experience helps more than anything. Go out and do interviews, come back home and listen to them carefully, and don't be surprised at the fits of embarrassment and depression that almost all honest fieldworkers go through when they hear themselves walking over an interviewee about to give an expanded answer, or when they hear themselves explaining to the interviewee what the interviewee "really" means before the interviewee gets to say it. Then go out and do it again.

8/Ordinary Talk

Fieldworkers in folklore, sociology, history, anthropology, and several disciplines employ interviewing techniques because they're efficient. The interview focuses the conversation and provides license for extraordinary questions and responses. It's like meeting your doctor in a supermarket the day after your annual physical. Yesterday you disrobed without question or embarrassment when told, "Take your clothes off." The same line uttered today, somewhere between canned goods and paper products, would probably strike you as inappropriate—and if you responded as you did in the examination room, your behavior would surely strike most other shoppers as inappropriate, albeit interesting. Examination contexts—and an interview is one of these—have special rules. Interviewer and interviewee know that the interview is not ordinary talk, so it's possible for the interviewer to pose questions he or she would not ordinarily ask, and it's equally possible for the interviewee to respond at far greater length than would ordinarily be assumed or expected.

There is a trade-off for the interview's efficiency, however, and it matters more in folklore studies than in the other fields I listed above. The formulation and performance of an item of verbal folklore uttered in an interview situation rarely is—and can never be assumed to be—identical to its formulation and performance in ordinary life. Much folklore is situational: it's performed in specific situations and the nature of the performance is often linked to various aspects of those situations. A joke or personal anecdote told in response to an interviewer's request may or may not have the same verbal content as that narrative told in an ordinary social situation; and it will surely have a different meaning.