

What to do with “I Don’t Know:” Elicitation in Ethnographic & Survey Interviews

Hilary Parsons Dick

Published online: 29 March 2006

When a researcher enters an interview, she has already construed it as being a standard type of communicative event. This article considers how a researcher’s construal of a communicative event as either an ethnographic or survey interview shapes the production of information. Interview standards entail epistemological assumptions that directly inform the type of information sought and produced. I consider this process through a comparison of the elicitation techniques I employed in survey and ethnographic interviews conducted during research in Mexico. I draw on theory in linguistic anthropology on the nature of meaning in language, examining how dialogicality and interaction are essential to understanding the construal of communicative events.

KEY WORDS: interview methodology; survey; ethnographic; communicative events; language and meaning; Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

In *Learning how to ask: A sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research* (1986), Charles Briggs describes interviewing Silvanita and George López. Because Briggs and the Lópezes shared a “strong friendship” (p. 44), he expected a felicitous interaction to unfold in their interview. But surprisingly, the questions Briggs put to Lópezes garnered a response of “*Ooo, pos [sic], !quién sabe!* (Oh, well, who knows!)” (p. 91, emphasis in original). This non-responsiveness was not attributable either to non-compliance—the couple had readily agreed to the interview—or to a lack of knowledge—they were experts in the subject Briggs researched: woodcarving. What was inspiring their resistance?

Correspondence should be directed to Hilary Parsons Dick, Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 323 University Museum, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6398; e-mail: hilarydi@sas.upenn.edu.

In this classic work, Briggs explores the social science interview as a communicative event. Such events are of many types; each entails culturally-specific norms of conduct. The Lópezes saw their interactions with Briggs as pedagogical encounters in which they should be in control of the flow of information. Briggs's attempts to control this flow by initiating questions conflicted with their expectation of how the interaction should unfold. Their non-responsiveness, therefore, was an effort to thwart the type of interaction Briggs was engaging them in and redirect it to one they found more appropriate (Briggs 1986, p. 103).

As Briggs's work elegantly demonstrates, the construal of a communicative event—that is, what type of interaction participants see it to be—shapes both how people ask for and receive information as well as the information produced from that interaction. I apply this insight to a comparison of two types of social science interviews: survey and ethnographic. Of interest here are standardized communicative events: models of events that speakers laminate on top of live interaction. Survey and ethnographic interviews are such events, for there are pre-existing ideas about what they are and how they should unfold. When a researcher enters an interview, she has already construed it as being of a standard type, and this construal influences the development of the interaction. How do researchers employ interview standards and what kind information is produced by this process? I consider this question through a comparison of the elicitation techniques I employed in ethnographic and survey interviews conducted during research in Mexico. In this, I focus on the role of the interviewer, examining moments in which I sought to draw out information after an initial response of “I don't know,” for in these moments I most explicitly endeavored to control the interviews' unfolding.

TERMINOLOGY AND DATA

I use the term “ethnographic interview” to refer to interviews that combine elements from semistructured and unstructured interviews (Bernard 2002, p. 205): They have a list of guiding questions, but are characterized by a minimum of control over responses and an emphasis on having speakers express themselves in their own words. These interviews are conducted in the context of long-term ethnographic research, wherein the interviewer participates in the life of the research site for at least several months. As such, they emerge from in-depth participant observation and exist within the pragmatic frames typical to it. For instance, ethnographic interviews are typically conducted with people with whom the interviewer has more than a passing relationship. While the internal characteristics of ethnographic interviews can be very similar to other types of qualitative interviews, the larger frame of ethnography creates a difference in kind between ethnographic interviews and their qualitative cousins.

The ethnographic interviews I analyze were realized by the author as part of a research project on migration from Mexico to the U.S., conducted for my doctoral

dissertation in cultural and linguistic anthropology. I was interested in documenting the discourses respondents employ to explain migration from Mexico to the U.S. and how these discourses work as interpretive frameworks that shape who migrates, when and how. During this research, I spent a year each in two research sites: Chester County, Pennsylvania and Uriangato, Mexico, realizing 81 ethnographic interviews. These interviews followed months of participant observation, and were held with people with whom I shared on-going friendships and neighborly relations.

I use the term “survey interview” to refer to a structured interview administered using a pre-tested questionnaire (Bernard 2002, p. 241). Such interviews are conducted as part of a large-scale social survey. As such, each interview is part of a larger set conducted across many people using the same pre-categorized response continua. The relative uniformity of survey interviews produces data that allow for consistent comparison across respondents; thus, researchers interested in producing quantitative data favor them.

The survey interviews I analyze were realized by the author as part of the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), a research project administered by Princeton University and the Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico (Massey and Durand 2005). The MMP instrument contains a series of tables requesting information about migration, work, and family. Researchers are allowed to formulate questions independently, though always with the aim of filling in the survey tables. The MMP instrument focuses on the elicitation of information that is objectively verifiable, such as the educational level of household members. Post-collection, the MMP team uses the tables to generate statistical data. I participated in the MMP to supplement my ethnographic research with an aggregate perspective on migration patterns from Uriangato to Chester County. I conducted 170 MMP interviews in Uriangato and 17 in Chester County. In accordance with the MMP protocol, the households I interviewed were selected at random and the respondents were unfamiliar to me. *Both the survey and ethnographic interviews presented below are drawn from my research in Uriangato.*

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In arguing that the researcher’s construal of an interaction shapes the production of information, I begin from the premise that interviews are foremost communicative events (Briggs 1986; Mishler 1986) and draw from a literature on standardized communicative events (Agha in press; Briggs and Bauman 1992; Hanks 1987; Silverstein 1993; Urban 1996). Theorizing the relationship between event construal and information production first necessitates a discussion of how meaning is produced in language (cf., Briggs 1986; Chase 1995; Farnell and Graham 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Mishler 1986; Wortham 2001).

Briggs, building on work in linguistic anthropology (especially Hymes 1971a,b; Silverstein 1979, 1981), demonstrates that social science research typically entails a *referential* theory of language (Briggs 1986, pp. 42–57, 116–19). This theory reduces the production of meaning to language’s ability to establish correspondences between the content of expressions and a putatively objectified, material world (Briggs 1986, p. 42). In this theory, the sign forms of language, such as words, produce meaning by *referring* to things: The word “table” refers to the object we call a table. Let us consider one way this referential view of language is limited.

Take the statement: “John is a *very* intelligent fellow” (Briggs 1986, p. 42, emphasis in original). This statement has a referential meaning: The person “John” is classed with people who are “very intelligent.” But how might the construal of this statement change if the speaker’s voice rises and then falls in uttering the word “very”? This pitch change could signal that the intended meaning is the opposite of the referential content: John is not “very intelligent,” John is a “dolt.” In this case, pitch change produces what is called *indexical* meaning, meaning that is, “. . . dependent on some feature(s) of the context in which an expression is uttered” (Briggs 1986, p. 42). Grasping the intended meaning of this phrase requires coupling the referential meaning of “very” with the context-dependent (i.e., indexical) emergence of a change in pitch. As this example illustrates, language produces meaning through the interplay of referential and indexical meaning: This interplay refers to the material world, while also constructing that world through the creative manipulation of language that indexes the context in which it is uttered.

The indexicality of language has two important consequences for the analysis of interview types. For one, it means that the production of meaning is *dialogic* (Bakhtin 1996/1935; Briggs 1986; Tedlock and Mannheim 1995, p. 1–32; Wortham 2001), emerging through the interaction of individuals in particular contexts. This is not to say that people produce meaning without regulation. Actors are constrained by a variety of factors—from cognitive limitations to commonly accepted forms of conducting interviews—as well as agentive: They combine these constraints in inventive ways (cf. Agha *in press*; Holstein and Gubrium 2000, pp. 103–04). In interviews, questions and answers are co-constructed by participants through this process of “constrained agency.” Regardless of the type of interview, the interpretation of interviewee responses depends on knowing how that co-construction unfolds and why. When researchers remove context-specific co-construction from the documentation of data, they recreate it during analysis, an approach that can diminish accuracy because such recreations are not necessarily representative of the interaction that produced the data (Mishler 1986, p. 12, 23).

Secondly, information production in interviews is always contextually-grounded (Briggs 1986; Mishler 1986). “Context” can refer to many aspects of

the situation in which an interview is conducted, from the physical setting, to the larger socio-cultural milieu, to the ages, genders, etc., of participants. There has been extensive discussion of these features of context (see, for example, Bernard 2002, pp. 230–35; Mishler 1986, pp. 96, 108), but too often this discussion does not consider language as constitutive of context. No context is a pre-existing object inside of which linguistic interaction is then placed. Context is an animated process shaped by the unfolding discourse just as profoundly as by the location, the pre-existing roles of the interlocutors, and so on (Briggs 1986, pp. 21, 71–2, 107–10). As speakers produce discourse that indexes these other features of context, they not only draw these things into the interaction, they (re)produce them, and in so doing help build the context in which speakers interact.

The dialogicality of interviews may seem obvious. And yet, the role of the interviewer in shaping interview context and meaning is frequently problematized as producing unwanted “bias.” An understanding of indexicality makes obvious that the interviewer is an inextricable part of the interview (Briggs 1986; Mishler 1986, pp. 21, 110). Therefore, investigation of the contribution that the researcher makes to an interview is most profitably motivated not by an effort to remove the interviewer, but by an interest in the type of dialogicality that produces interviewee responses (cf., Clifford and Marcus 1986). One key determinant of this dialogicality is how the interviewer construes the interview prior to its occurrence.

I have detailed four constant features of the production of meaning in language: It is referential and indexical; it is contextually-grounded; context is produced in part through speech; and meaning and context emerge dialogically. In the interviews examined in this article, these constants of language exist in a feedback relationship with the researcher’s construal of interaction as an instantiation of a standard interview type. This construal does not determine how the interview unfolds, but moves the interview’s unfolding in particular directions, thereby shaping the production of information (Briggs and Bauman 1992, p. 149). In order to consider this process, it is necessary to outline the standard construals of these interview types, which researchers then employ in live interaction.

STANDARD INTERVIEWS AND THEIR APPLICATION

Survey and ethnographic interviews are both question and answer series that seek information about a subject of predetermined interest for the interviewer. Although they operate within normative and culturally-specific expectations of linguistic communication—such as those governing turn-taking strategies (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, pp. 125–29)—interviews are specialized forms of communication in which the interviewer’s desire to know about a subject impels interaction. Survey and ethnographic interviews are differentiated by how researchers construe them as types of communicative events, and—most fundamentally—by the

epistemologies these construals entail (Bernard 2002, pp. 3, 17, 21–3; Schweizer 1998, pp. 42–9).

Survey and ethnographic interviews occupy different points on an epistemological continuum. On one end is a positivist view, in which reality is understood as an external object awaiting observation. In positivist research, the primary subjects of interest are quantifiable and easily decoupled from their contexts of utterance, such as the number of migrants in the U.S. On the other end is a constructivist view, in which reality is understood as constructed by the significance people attribute to things in the world. In constructivist research, subjects of interest are not easily quantified nor easily decoupled from their contexts of utterance (cf., Geertz 1973, pp. 3–30), such as the hermeneutics migrants employ to make sense of migration. Survey and ethnographic interviews can, and often do, contain elements of each reality (Bernard 2002, pp. 203–79). The difference is one of emphasis: In survey interviews the guiding principle of investigation is positivist, while in ethnographic interviews it is constructivist.

This difference can be observed in how researchers treat interviewee responses. In survey research there is a greater willingness to corral responses into categories predetermined by the researcher (Bernard 2002, pp. 203–279; Mishler 1986, pp. 9–34). This willingness is made possible by the positivist assumption that the objects of investigation are part of a uniformly observable, external reality to which language transparently refers. Therefore, who sets the terms of discussion is not particularly relevant. By contrast, in ethnographic research there is much more emphasis on allowing the interviewee’s words to set the terms of discussion (cf., Chase 1995). This emphasis emerges from the constructivist assumption that the objects of investigation are part of a constructed reality based in context-specific hermeneutics. As such, the particular words people use to articulate those hermeneutics are of fundamental importance.

Certain types of questions more readily align with a positivist research agenda, while others more readily align with a constructivist one. For example, fixed-term questions delineate response categories, which pre-determine either the set of answers (such as “yes” or “no”) or the range of acceptable answers (such as one’s migrant destination). Thus, they allow researchers to establish the terms of the discussion prior to the interview; consider Table I.

Table I. Survey Interview: Respondent Questioned about Migration Experience

Line	Spkr	Spanish	English
1	HPD	¿Y alguna vez usted o su esposa se ha ido a Los Estados Unidos buscando trabajo?	And did you or your husband ever go to the United States looking for work?
2	RSP	Mi esposo	My husband
3	HPD	¿Como cuántas veces?	How many times?
4	RSP	Una vez	Once

Note. Spkr = Speaker; HPD = Interviewer; RSP = Respondent.

In this exchange, one observes fixed-term questions working at their best: The researcher poses queries with seemingly obvious answers and the interviewee responds without difficulty. This fixed-term dialogue establishes the putative facts of migration, as a positivist reality is transparently revealed through their elicitation. Because fixed-term questions compress a respondent’s answers into predetermined categories, the documentation of these answers obscures the ambiguity and interpretation that leads up to them (demonstrated below). The erasure of ambiguity and interpretation imputes to these data the appearance of their transparently reflecting events and objects in the world. In other words, the very nature of fixed-term questions not only assumes a positivist reality, it *constructs* that reality.

Open-ended questions, by contrast, entail a more constructivist reality. While open-ended questions point the respondent in specific directions, the objective is to bring the respondent to consider an issue in his own words, leading the interviewer towards the areas of greatest import for the respondent; consider Table II.

In line 5, the interview shifts frames when I ask the open-ended question: “And why did you go [to the U.S.]?” This question allows the interaction to become more conversational: The respondent takes much longer to answer the question, and I encourage him by interjecting affirmative reassurances, as in line 7. But more to the point is that in lines 6 and 8 the interviewee begins to interpret his experience. Quite at contrast to the effort in Table I, the primary effort here is not to fix observable facts about migration, but to bring the respondent to articulate this

Table II. Ethnographic Interview: Respondent Questioned About Migratory Experience

Line	Spkr	Spanish	English
1	HPD	¿Y, a ver, usted ha ido alguna vez a Los Estados Unidos? Sí, ¿verdad?	And, let’s see, have you once been to the United States? Yes, right?
2	RSP	Pues, fui, pero duré como unos . . . bueno, un mes	Well, I went, but I was there some . . . well, one month
3	HPD	Un mes. ¿Y a dónde se fue?	One month. And where did you go?
4	RSP	Aquí a California. Redondo Beach	Here to California. Redondo Beach
5	HPD	Uh huh. ¿Y por qué se fue?	Uh huh. And why did you go?
6	RSP	Porque allí estaban unos hermanos de ella. Y era la ilusión en ese tiempo, ¿verdad? De que le daban a uno, pues, la oportunidad de ir. Le daban a uno para salir de . . . pues, a otro nivel de aquí, ¿verdad? Porque siempre aquí lo que ganaba fue muy poquito . . .	Because there were some brothers of hers. And it was a dream in that time, right? That they would give one, well, the opportunity to go. They would give one [what one needed] to move to . . . well, to another level from here, right? Because here what you earned was always very little [pause]
7	HPD	Sí	Yes
8	RSP	Y se da uno cuenta en fin de que los que se fueron para allá para . . . pues a ver que se le ocurría a uno, ¿verdad?	And one realizes finally that those who went there . . . well [you wanted] to see what would happen [for you], right?

Note. Spkr = Speaker; HPD = Interviewer; RSP = Respondent; . . . = Discourse trails off.

interpretation. The reality elicited here is constructivist, produced by hermeneutics generated in the respondent's own words.

Because survey and ethnographic interviews often contain a mixture of question-types, it is impossible to make an absolute distinction between them based on these types alone. However, because fixed-term and open-ended questions construct the realities emphasized by survey and ethnographic interviews respectively, they can be treated as emblematic of their distinction. Therefore, in the remainder of this article I consider the use of the former in survey interviews and the latter in ethnographic interviews.

Elicitation in Survey Interviews

Before beginning the MMP survey, I received training from MMP members in the U.S. and Mexico, during which I reviewed the survey instrument in detail and ran several mock interviews. Through out the training, all of which was conducted in Spanish, I was taught how to ask the types of questions and the question order that the MMP deems most effective for eliciting the information required by the survey instrument. In this, my trainers—both Mexican nationals and native Spanish speakers—helped me obtain a basic communicative competence (Briggs 1986, p. 43) necessary for the successful completion of the interviews. All of the questions I was trained to use were fixed-term questions geared towards the survey form. The primary form of elicitation I employed in the survey interviews was simply asking these questions. Many of them were unproblematic for respondents. Other questions, however, were consistently problematic, yielding an initial response of “I don't know” or “I can't remember;” these questions were those that required the interviewee to remember dates, locations of border crossings, or work salaries at specific points in the past. I was trained to use three types of elicitation to convert an initially data-empty response into one yielding information. Only after exhausting all three was I to write “unknown” on the survey form.

I call the first of these *redirection elicitation*, in which the interviewer re-frames the initial question. If the survey asks for the years of birth of a respondent's children, and the respondent says she cannot remember, then the researcher *redirects* the question by asking the ages of each child. Redirection does not alter the object of investigation (such as the children's years of birth), but is merely another pathway to that object. In this, the researcher continues to carve out the existence of this “fact” by not allowing the respondent to deny its relevance.

I call the second type of elicitation *logical deduction elicitation*. In this case, the interviewer uses information already provided by the interviewee to work out the likely answer to a question. Consider Table III.

First note that it is not until line 6 that the respondent understands the question, illustrating that the meaning of fixed-term questions—however transparent it may seem—is in fact dialogically constructed. From here, observe that lines 6–10 offer

Table III. Survey Interview: Respondent Questioned About Age at First Employment

Line	Spkr	Spanish	English
1	HPD	¿Entonces, a que edad empezó a trabajar usted?	So, at what age did you start to work?
2	RSP	En . . . ¿o sea, en mi negocio?	In . . . um, in my business?
3	HPD	No, desde chico. Todos los trabajos que ha tenido	No, [I mean] since [you were] little. All of the jobs that you have had
4	RSP	He tenido . . . ¿todos que he tenido?	I’ve had . . . all [the jobs] that I’ve had?
5	HPD	Sí. ¿Entonces, a que edad empezó a trabajar por la primera vez?	Yes. So, at what age did you start working for the first time?
6	RSP	En la secundaria o la primaria, más o menos	[I was] in junior high school or elementary school, more or less
7	HPD	¿Entonces tenía como 10 años, o cuantos?	So, you were about 10 years old, or how old were you?
8	RSP	Algunos 12, ehm . . .	About 12, umm . . .
9	HPD	// 12 años	// 12 years old
10	RSP	// o 13 años	// or 13 years old
11	HPD	¿Y en que trabajaba?	And in what were you working?

Note. HPD = Interviewer; RSP = Respondent; // = Overlapping Discourse; . . . = Discourse trails off.

examples of logical deduction elicitation. In line 6, the interviewee suggests a range of time within which he started working. But, for the survey, I need a specific age from which I can calculate the year he began employment. I elicit this information by offering a possible age that follows logically from his time frame: elementary through junior high school. The age I offer inspires a more specific response as he answers (lines 8 and 10) that he was 12 or 13 years old. I interrupt him after he says “12” and repeat “12” as the answer I am going to mark down (line 9); in reviewing this survey, I found that I indicated “12” as his age at first employment. I then move to the next question and do not clarify whether the respondent was 12 or 13 years old when he began working.

Although I seek a discrete fact (the year this man began working), the absolute truth about whether he started working at 12 or 13 is not important. This is partly for practical reasons: There is a small time spread between these ages and each effectively establishes the work history start date. But more importantly, the preceding example suggests that there are gradations of positivist reality tolerable in survey interviews. And yet, note how seemingly precise data is generated from ambiguity and interpretation. In plowing through the interviewee’s generalist response to obtain the specific one required by the survey, I not only slough off naturally and indexically-rooted ambiguities, I construct a reality in which there is an easily documented point at which this man began working: a wholly co-constructed and interpreted, but now seemingly uncontestable, “hard fact.”

I call the third kind of elicitation *co-construction elicitation*. In co-construction elicitation, the interviewer suggests possible answers based on her previous knowledge of a topic. Typically this form of elicitation leads to a

Table IV. Survey Interview: Respondent Questioned About Migration History

Line	Spkr	Spanish	English
1	HPD	¿Y alguna vez usted o su esposo se ha ido a Los Estados Unidos buscando trabajo?	And did you or your husband ever go to the United States looking for work?
2	RSP	Mi esposo	My husband [went]
3	HPD	¿Como cuántas veces?	Like how many times?
4	RSP	Una vez	Once
5	HPD	¿Y a dónde se fue?	And where did he go?
6	RSP	Emm, no, no sé	Umm, no, I don't know
7	HPD	¿Ni el estado? ¿Era Tejas, California, Chicago, Pennsylvania - -	Not even the state? Was it Texas, California, Chicago, Pennsylvania - -
8	RSP	¡Pennsylvania me parece!	Pennsylvania seems right to me!
9	HPD	¿Y sabe como se llamaba el pueblo donde estaba?	And do you know what the town where he was called?
10	RSP	No, no sé	No, no I don't know
11	HPD	A ver, le voy a decir unos: Kennett Square - -	Let's see, I am going say some to you: Kennett Square - -
12	RSP	O sea, que el se fué antes de casarnos nosotros	It's that he went [to the U.S.] before we got married
13	HPD	¿Entonces, nunca le ha platicado //	So, he has never told you //
14	RSP	//No	// No
15	HPD	donde estaba? [pause] ¿No?	where he was? [pause] No?
16	RSP	No	No

Note. HPD = Interviewer; RSP = Respondent; // = Overlapping discourse; - - = Discourse interrupted; . . . = Discourse trails off.

back-and-forth negotiation, in which the interviewer and respondent reach agreement on an answer, as in Table IV.

In line 6, the seamless question-and-response dialogue of lines 1–4 breaks down. In response, I list U.S. states to which her husband may have migrated. Prior to this interview, I knew where people from Uriangato most frequently migrate; I also knew that a majority of Uringatenses consider Chicago to be a state. At the mention of Pennsylvania, my interlocutor cuts me off and says that sounds right. In line 11, I dig further, and the informant resists (line 12). But I continue to probe, asking if her husband never told her where he was in Pennsylvania, and she says “no” twice. Then, I desist, recording the location as “Unknown, Pennsylvania.”

In co-construction elicitation, I establish a positivist reality in the way described for the preceding example: From ambiguity and interpretation, I generate a fixed object of observation. In this example, I do so by drawing on my observations of migration from Uriangato to the U.S. This is a deeply dialogic strategy, one that seeks to build a consensus between my observations and the respondent's. Yet, the survey form documents nothing more than the phrase “Unknown, Pennsylvania.” And the dialogicality that led up to this bit of discourse would have been lost if I had not tape-recorded and transcribed this interaction.

One feature uniting all the survey interview examples is that the data produced from these exchanges has a built in recontextualizability (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Silverstein and Urban 1996). Fixed-term questions produce data that is not only seemingly uncontested, it is also easily quantifiable. In employing this type of question, survey questionnaires facilitate the convertibility of information into statistical data (Mishler 1986, p. 22). In their incarnation as statistics, this information is endlessly recontextualizable—that is, researchers can employ it in a variety of new contexts with relative ease. In this, we observe the emphasis in positivist research on referential meaning, meaning that is not highly dependent on the initial context of utterance.

The preceding examples are also illustrative of the character of dialogicality in survey interviews, which are marked by a strong degree of influence from the interviewer. Consider Table III again. Observe the man’s response in line 6, where he provides a generalist answer that indicates he does not consider the exact start year of his work life significant. Interviewees frequently responded to such “year questions” with a generalist attitude. I noticed outside of interviews as well that exact times and dates were typically not considered a meaningful way to record social life in Uriangato. And yet, in my survey interviews, I insisted on pinpointing exact years. This insisting not only moved interaction toward the production of discretely documentable, referential meaning, it also generated a hierarchical interaction in which my agenda was dominant (Briggs 1986, pp. 120–25; Chase 1995). This state of affairs was made acceptable by the positivist orientation of survey research, which maintains that there is a uniformly-observable reality. By contrast, ethnographic interviews—although they are also directed by the interviewer—are differentiable from survey interviews in the degree to which they allow respondents to shape interaction.

Elicitation in Ethnographic Interviews

Because I conducted my ethnographic interviews as an independent researcher, I was not beholden to a fixed interview protocol. My training was given to me as part of my general preparation for a doctorate in anthropology; from this training, I designed a methodology that prioritized my gaining emic communicative competence. As such, I did not conduct ethnographic interviews until I was conversant in the topics and interpretive frameworks people in my research sites use to make sense of migration. My ethnographic interview questions, therefore, emerged from my understanding of the perspectives and priorities of my respondents.

Since the primary aim of an ethnographic interview is to access a respondent’s interpretive frames, a response of “I don’t know” is not necessarily a problem, for it is an indicator of the information an interviewee construes as meaningful. Above all, ethnographic interviewers aim to have respondents to break into self-motivated

interpretations; thus, a central challenge of the ethnographic interview is to identify the questions that will trigger this sort of break. Therefore, a key elicitation conundrum is how to draw a respondent out when he gives one-dimensional (i.e., fixed-term) answers.

In my ethnographic interviews, I was most interested in getting respondents to talk about why they think people migrate to the U.S. Normally, I introduced this topic by asking: “Why did [X person] go to the United States?” Sometimes this question immediately stimulated a rich response, but more often I got a one-dimensional answer at first. I handled such responses by using the respondent’s own words and the entailments in his statements to query further. This method is similar to that described for logical deduction elicitation, but differs both in the value it places on the respondent’s own words and in the relative degree of freedom of response it allows. Because this type of elicitation draws on the vernacular of the respondent, I call it *vernacular elicitation*. Consider Table V.

In line 2, the respondent gives a one-dimensional answer to my question. I repeat his answer as a question in order to encourage him to talk more about what it means to migrate “out of necessity.” He does so, saying he needed economic help, but this is still not a rich response; my attempts to approach the subject from other angles (lines 5 and 7) are also ineffective. Then in line 9, I make a more successful rhetorical move: I use the statement “I migrated out of necessity”—which implies that the man could not get work in Mexico—to ask about his work options in Mexico. This question triggers the kind of response I want, one that interprets his experience of migration. Once he finishes his interpretation (lines 12 and 14), I rephrase what he has said (lines 15 and 17); he confirms my evaluation and proceeds to offer more detailed information (lines 18 and 20).

This vernacular elicitation continues throughout the interview. Some two minutes after the above exchange, I return to the topic of why people migrate to the U.S. I confirm that he believes that the best migration strategy is to have the family in Mexico while one member works in the U.S. Once he says “yes,” I ask him: “If that is true, then why do so many entire families go to the U.S.?” This leads us into a different set of interpretations—namely, that people go to the U.S. because they are tempted by all of the goods and diversions available there. Ultimately, my tactic of drawing the respondent out on his own terms yields a much more detailed and complex hermeneutic than the initial response that people migrate out of necessity.

The elicitation illustrated in this example is typical of my ethnographic interviews and it creates a sharply different world than that of my survey interviews. For one, the direction of the unfolding discourse is no longer overwhelmingly in the hands of the researcher, but emerges more evenly between participants. This makes this type of interview potentially more democratic. Beyond this, there is a very different reality of emphasis elicited through the ethnographic interview. There are, of course, points of empirical reference: The respondent migrates to

Table V. Ethnographic Interview: Respondent Questioned About Reasons for Migrating

Line	Spkr	Spanish	English
1	HPD	¿Y por qué se fue a Los Estados Unidos?	And why did you go to the United States?
2	RSP	Por necesidad	Out of necessity
3	HPD	¿Por necesidad?	Out of necessity?
4	RSP	Necesitaba una ayuda para uno - - una ayuda para . . . pues, económica - - ayudarse economicamente	One needed help for oneself - - help in order to . . . well, economic - - to help oneself economically
5	HPD	Sí. ¿Y ya estaba casado?	Yes. And were already you married?
6	RSP	No	No
7	HPD	No. ¿Y, es de, y se fue a Pennsylvania siempre?	No. And, um, you always went to Pennsylvania?
8	RSP	No, a Texas	No, [I also went] to Texas
9	HPD	A ha. ¿Entonces, no tenía trabajo aquí? ¿O qué estaba pasando aquí?	A ha. So, you didn’t have work here [in Mexico]? Or what was going on here?
10	RSP	Sí tenía trabajo, pero pues aquí se gana más poco que ni estando allá . . .	Yes I had work, but well here you earn less than even being there . . .
11	HPD	Sí . . .	Yes . . .
12	RSP	Estando allá y llegando y trabajando . . . pues, sí se ayuda uno aquí, ¿verdad? Allá, pues, ya sé que estando allá se gaste igual que aquí. Pero aquí es donde rinde un poquito lo que uno ahorra allá, rinde un poquito más . . .	Being there and arriving and working . . . well, yes it helps one here, right? There, well, I know that being there one can spend the same as here. But here is where what one saves there goes farther, it goes a little farther . . .
13	HPD	Sí . . .	Yes . . .
14	RSP	Es lo que . . . es lo que se ayuda a uno ahorrando un poco, y mas un poquito acá es donde rinde, pa’ uno, para la familia	That’s what . . . that’s what helps one, saving a little, and here it goes more than a little farther for one, for the family
15	HPD	Sí. ¿Y es de . . . entonces usted se sentía como que: Ah sí puedo sobrevivir en México, pero para seguir adelante //	Yes. And um . . . so you felt like: Ah yeah I can make do here in Mexico, but in order to get ahead //
16	RSP	// ¡ Sí!	// Yes!
17	HPD	para hacer más con mi vida, tengo que irme allá?	in order to make more of my life, I have to go there [to the U.S.]?
18	RSP	Sí, pues si yo no me hubiera ido pa’ allá . . . si no hubiera ido, no hubiera podido tener aquí la casita en que vivo, a lo mejor. Hubiera pagado renta también . . .	Yes, well if had never gone there . . . if I had never gone, I wouldn’t have been able to have here the house I live in, probably. I would have paid rent as well . . .
19	HPD	Uh hum, uh hum	Uh hum, uh hum
20	RSP	Gracias a las idas que yo he dado, pues tenemos aquí una casita donde vivir todos y no pagar renta	Thanks to the trips [to the U.S.] I have given, well we have here a little house where we all live and don’t pay rent

Note. HPD = Interviewer; RSP = Respondent; // = Overlapping discourse; - - = Discourse interrupted; . . . = Discourse trails off.

real places, at real points in time. But the world elicited most thoroughly is that generated by the respondent’s hermeneutics. In bringing the respondent to make his interpretive frameworks explicit, I foreground a constructivist reality. This move is wholly informed by my construal of our interaction as an ethnographic

interview and stands in sharp contrast to the discursive interaction I encouraged in the survey interviews.

The data sought by ethnographic interviewers—detailed information about social dynamics and the hermeneutics people employ to make sense of them—resist categorization and quantification. In reporting these data, it is difficult to mask the dynamics of ambiguity and interpretation from which they are generated because of the emphasis on the respondent's words. Thus, these data appear more subjective than the data produced by survey interviews. Furthermore, the data produced by ethnographic interviews are not easily recontextualizable. Their interpretation requires reference to its original context of utterance, and, in this, we observe the emphasis on indexical meaning in ethnographic research. As a result, hermeneutic data are more cumbersome and have more difficulty circulating across contexts.

CONCLUSION

Researchers regularly put on different “epistemological hats;” and which one they wear leads to different results. In my survey interviews, I was interested in “the facts,” discretely observable tokens of referential meaning that I could easily document on the survey form. In this, I embodied the classical positivist, proceeding from the belief that there are objects in the world that can be objectively recorded. In my ethnographic interviews, I was interested in the interpretations people develop about the world. In this, I was the classical constructivist, proceeding from the belief that the world is created by our interpretive lenses. And the type of interview I saw myself engaged in dramatically affected the unfolding discourse and the information produced through it.

Although the objective of this paper has not been to valorize one type of interview over the other, my argument does cohere with previous literature (such as Mishler 1986) on the ambiguity or subjectivity entailed in survey data. Survey data appear more definitive and objective because survey methods obscure the ambiguities and interpretation that produce them. Mishler's argument (p. 23) that survey methods are flawed because they remove the context of the interview, only to reinsert it later in an ad hoc and implicit fashion, is cogent. All good research methods must develop a way to document and reconcile the influence of dialogically-produced context; otherwise the potential for misinterpretation of data is great.

I do not believe, however, either that survey data is irreparably flawed or that hermeneutically-based methods are necessarily less prone to the distortion of context (cf., Clifford and Marcus 1986). All research methods benefit from a consideration of interviews as communicative events. The first thing this means is that researchers should tape or video record interviews when possible; this provides the most effective documentation of interview contexts (Mishler 1986, p. 43–4).

Beyond this, it behooves researchers to acquire not only emic communicative competence, but also an understanding of the interplay of referential and indexical meaning prior to conducting research. For these skills most productively prepare researchers to grasp the significance of interviewee responses.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Douglas S. Massey in particular for providing feedback on this article and for encouraging me to submit it for publication. Thank you also to Greg Urban, Asif Agha, Paula Sabloff, Kristina Wirtz, and Cati Coe who contributed feedback on drafts of the article. Finally, I would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviews of *Qualitative Sociology* for their support and suggestions for revision.

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