



A Manual for Field Ethnography

This manual builds on the introductory document, *The Topos Approach to Interviewing*.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

The strength of the anthropological approach is to provide a deeper view into people's experience of the world. The primary tool of anthropology is ethnography – the observation and description of people in their natural environments, and the effort to engage with people on their own terms, rather than on terms imposed by the researcher. In practice, the Topos' ethnographic research entails a certain amount of observation, but mostly engaging people in impromptu conversations. To be considered useful, interactions take at least 4 but no more than 30 minutes, depending on how much time and willingness a given subject had to delve into the topics. The conversations are sometimes one on one, but also include three or four-way exchanges.

One of the keys to the ethnographic method is to allow patterns to emerge from natural interactions as much as possible. In the brand of ethnographic research that Topos undertakes, we decide ahead of time what kinds of topics we would like to cover – what terrain we want to be on, so to speak. We design questions and comments that are structured enough to put us into that terrain, but loose enough to elicit unexpected responses and rejoinders. Researchers are trained and experienced in the techniques needed to maintain and direct these kinds of semi-structured conversations.

SAFETY

Your own security should be a top priority at all times. You should never feel pressured to take part in any interactions or situations where you feel uncomfortable or which could place you in any jeopardy. We recommend interviewing in public places with ample foot traffic, or semi-public settings like porches, yards and places of business. Exercise caution in interviewing in non-public venues like people's homes. (If you choose to do so, you might make a point of calling or texting us your location – you can say you are required to as a security precaution.)

As a person conducting public opinion research you do not need permits or express permission from local authorities to interview in public spaces, but try to be respectful about constricting traffic or impeding people from local businesses, etc. Malls are

private property and do not normally permit survey research. If you are ever questioned about what you are doing (by a store manager, security officer, etc.) be polite, explain it is public opinion interviewing, and move elsewhere if asked to.

EQUIPMENT

It is *extremely important* to familiarize yourself with your taping equipment. Do a thorough sound check well before the actual interviews (preferably days before, so that replacement equipment can be purchased). Schedule some time to practice so that working with it is second nature. We require use of a lavalier / lapel mic for any interviewing outdoors. Carry spare batteries and spare memory cards as needed.

It won't always be practical, but whenever possible be cognizant of how your surroundings affect recording. Positioning an informant's back to the wind can improve sound quality, as can asking someone to step away from loud noises like traffic or music.

After each interview double-check that the conversation was recorded in good quality.

For more on videotaping we have a separate manual, A Manual for Shooting Video.

THE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Familiarize yourself with the protocol. Although you can have a printout or notebook with you to consult, most of the interview should feel like a natural conversation, with you as an interested party. As much as possible, it should not feel like you are reading from a list of questions. Most protocol questions are designed to fit into such a conversation.

The Research Lead should give you instructions about how closely to follow the written protocol, but usually it is meant to serve as a guide for a conversation rather than a script to be read. An order is suggested, but that can change in the flow of conversation. Often, many of the questions will be answered without you having to pose them at all. Underlined questions are ones that we'd like to make sure you ask in every interview. (Questions in parentheses) are suggested follow-ups and probes, though you should ask follow up questions regardless of whether the protocol includes them or not. [Text in brackets] are additional instructions for the interviewer. Wording and phrasing can be adjusted to your own voice and the flow of conversation, but you should clarify with your Research Lead whether there are parts of the protocol that should be said verbatim.

RECRUITING AND ENGAGING WITH SUBJECTS

In many ways this is the most challenging part of ethnographic interviewing. It takes a combination of skills to be able to approach a stranger, introduce yourself as a researcher, and establish enough instant rapport to engage them in a conversation upon a topic. It also requires thick skin and a certain amount of social stamina, since inevitably many people will not want to speak with you.

Yet it is not impossible, and there are a number of strategies that can help increase your chances of success.

The Intro:

“Hi, I’m working on a research project – a sort of public opinion poll about X. It takes 3 or 4 minutes if you’d be willing to take part.” An introduction like this reassures potential subjects that you are not soliciting money, nor trying to sell them something, nor proselytizing for a church or a cause. The “3 or 4 minutes” lets them know that this is not a long investment of time – but importantly, once people engage in the conversation they usually stay much longer.

The Topic

“a sort of a public opinion poll about public attitudes / about the state of Arizona / about why some people vote and others don’t

It is important to hit on the right explanation of what the research is about, and that can take some trial and error to see what inspires people to stop and what might cause people to shy away (maybe it sounds “too political” or they feel ignorant about the topic or for some other reason). In one location little or no explanation may be needed, while in another people may want to know what they are getting into.

The Attitude

We’ve stressed the importance of curiosity, and it is doubly important here as you enter into a conversation with someone who may be busy wondering what your hidden agenda is. As people come to understand that you really just want to hear what they think, they settle into the conversation.

Importantly, as researchers conduct more of these interviews they usually notice that people often thank them and express gratitude for having been listened to. The sense that we don’t have to apologize for imposing on people, but can approach people with a more generous attitude of engagement subtly helps researchers convey a positive, inviting attitude.

The Settings

Topos researchers conduct interviews wherever people are present and willing to talk. Parks, neighborhoods, downtowns, strip malls, grocery store parking lots, fairs and festivals, campuses, markets, shops, and basically anywhere that people are present in sufficient numbers. Assume you will try out numerous settings, some of which will pan out and some of which won’t.

The demographic demands may also help determine what types of settings you go to. If you have mostly spoken with older people it might make sense to go to a local community college for a younger set of people. If you are speaking mostly to Latinos,

then do some research to find out if there are parts of town where they are more prevalent.

When in doubt, consult with the Research Lead on a plan for identifying research sites, as they will usually have a wealth of experience on this.

The Demographics

You will be given instructions on the demographic makeup of the desired sample. Some outings you'll be talking to everyone. In other cases, you might be speaking only to Asian Americans, people over 50, or women. But unless otherwise instructed you should strive to get a diverse sample of people in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and political leaning.

The Extra Incentive

Offering \$5 is an option for some projects, and we will reimburse you for these "informant fees". Offering this kind of thank you can be off-putting for some people – but sometimes – especially with younger people, lower income people, or a person who is wavering about stopping or not, it can be useful as an incentive. If you are comfortable offering cash, you can do so, but use common sense about flashing sums of money in public. Some ethnographers have preferred to purchase and offer \$5 gift cards to a local café or Starbucks.

The Reassurance

If someone really doesn't want to take part, you don't have to convince them, but sometimes they'll have common doubts and questions that you can address. Here are some suggested responses:

Who do you work for?

"I work for Topos Partnership – we do research into public opinion. The client is a non-profit that works on things like public policies and wants to understand what people are thinking – what they think should be done – shouldn't be done and so on."

Why do you need to film / tape me?

"The video / recording is for research purposes, and to show people who work on this issue what people have to say. It's not for TV. You won't get famous this way."

[if they inquire further, your Research Lead should have given you specific language.]

"This is for our client, a non-profit. The video / audio is mostly so I don't have to take notes, but this helps illustrate to them and for others when they want to

show what people have to say on the topic. Your name's not associated with it in any way."

Do you have to tape me?

"It's better if we videotape, but we don't have to. I can audiotape it. I'll just point the camera away, and that way we get a record of what you have to say."

(You can still attach a mic if they are willing. And consider asking again to videotape once better rapport has been established.)

As long as I don't end up on Youtube!

If they insist they don't want their image made public, "put on the internet", or otherwise express serious concern about this, please include a note to this effect. We can make sure video from the interview is only used internally with the client.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW

Refer to the *Topos Approach to Interviewing* for the basic guidelines of a Topos interview.

Ethnographic interviews can last from 4 minutes to 30 minutes or more. Your Research Lead can let you know when we'd prefer a lot of quick interviews (as for example when we are field testing a message) or when we are happy to have longer 20+ minute interviews (as for example when we are conducting exploratory ethnography).

Make an effort to conduct some interviews / conversations in group situations. An important reason for doing this as *ethnography* is to see what kinds of things people are willing to say in front of friends, as well as others who they may or may not know well. Any observations you can make about that will be useful, so be sure to make notes afterwards. (i.e. do people take it for granted that it is natural and acceptable to criticize government versus talking in positive terms about it?; are there contexts when people seem reluctant to talk about gender or race?, do people always agree and if not, how do they go about disagreeing?, etc.)

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION

Depending on the project you may be called upon to observe as well as speak with people. For example, during a project on civic engagement you might be asked to attend and observe a town meeting or demonstration, in which case you'd write up and share field notes. But even in projects where the focus is mainly on talking with people you should always have your anthropological eye open for things that fall outside the interview transcript. Whether that means observations about the contexts for these conversations, relevant social interactions you observe and analyze, or a chance event that is relevant to the topic at hand, we ask you to add that information to our reservoir of data.

BETWEEN INTERVIEWS

Take 10 minutes or so to write down your thoughts, observations, context and so on. Note the things that struck you about the conversation – or any observations that might be important for us interpreting their words. Follow the Research Lead's instructions for submitting those notes.

Reflect on the demographic makeup so far and whether you are working toward a diverse sample of people.

Double check the sound quality of both yourself and the subject. Make any adjustments necessary for the next interview.

END OF THE DAY

The videographer is responsible for handling video data (as laid out in A Manual for Shooting Video) including uploading it each day for us to view. For handling and submitting other digital recordings, including proper naming, please consult with the Project Manager and the Research Lead.

Update the demographic spreadsheet where we record the daily output including demographic and other information on the people spoken with.

Give us feedback on the research instrument. If you find certain questions or comments elicit particularly interesting and rich talk (or others do not), let us know as we adapt this protocol. Your real-time experience of what is working and not working in the protocol is important feedback for us, and we often make adjustments from one day to the next.

Finally, we also ask for brief ethnographic field notes that contain a mix of raw observations and potential analytical insights.

OUR EXPECTATIONS

Specific expectations will be outlined in your "Researcher Agreement."

We expect to familiarize yourself with the research materials and training manuals and follow their instructions. Please reach out to the Research Lead or Project Manager whenever you have questions or concerns.

Finally, we expect you to conduct yourself in a careful and professional manner, and to not do anything that reflects poorly on Topos or our clients.

Good luck!

ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND: COGNITIVE ANALYSIS

The analysis of elicitations data, based on principles of cognitive anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. It does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It does not look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for

more default reasoning patterns, that are likely to be stable and durable. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between *rhetorical mode* – in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse – and *reasonable mode* – in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think.