SHORT TAKES

Ethnographic Debriefing

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Debriefing is not a substitute for ethnographic interviewing but a complement to it. It may be about content, context, or both. It is helpful in situations or descriptions of events in which recording is not possible or permitted. It is one of the best methods for supplying ethnographic contest to interviews that the interviewer may have overlooked-it then becomes art interview about an interview. Debriefing my be self-debriefing, one-on-one, one information giver to a group of debriefers, or a group session. Particularly the latter is an excellent teaching tool for ethnographic methods.

Have you ever been with a group of people who left an important event, meeting, or interview only to find that nobody took notes, the notes were lost, or no one was allowed to make recordings or take notes? Have you found you simply did not have the time to transcribe and analyze a recording? Have you ever wondered about the context of an interview recorded by another ethnographer? Or have you ever had to make sense out of what an ethnographer was telling you about her or his fieldwork but were unable to get the point he or she was trying to make?

We anthropologists and other social scientists frequently find ourselves in such situations. While conducting research and getting reliable information may be becoming more and more difficult, we are not without tools adaptable to new situations. One of these tools is the technique of debriefing. Some readers may have heard of debriefing when astronauts are interviewed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) staff after a long flight. Although the technique of debriefing used by NASA and the military is classified (Werner and SCHOEPFLE 1987), enough is known for us to reinvent debriefing and adapt it to our ethnographic purposes.

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WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHIC DEBRIEFING?

Ethnographic debriefing is an ethnographic interview of or about an interview or an ethnographic interview about a meeting or some other event that someone has witnessed but not recorded.

A debriefing may be conducted in small groups, one-on-one, or alone. Small-group or team debriefing, usually involves several questioners and one informant.[1] It sometimes resembles a friendly interrogation. At other times, it may involve one questioner and several speakers or several questioners and several informants. One-on-one debriefings are very much like ethnographic interviews. In self-debriefings, the individual speaks into a tape recorder, then listens to the tape recording and comments on what was recorded, thereby adding more information to what he or she is trying to recall.

WHO SHOULD BE DEBRIEFED?

In our experience, the most common form of debriefing has been the team project. The team includes one or more ethnographers not present or privy to an event. These ethnographers, in turn, interview the rest of the team (i.e., one or several of their peers or native coresearchers who were able to obtain the information that could not be recorded). Also, the native researchers speak the native language (e.g., Navajo) and thus have access to information the ethnographer does not.

We have also used debriefing as a teaching tool with students to help them reflect on their ethnographic experiences. The goals of the interviews were for the student to hone their interview skills and to dredge up more contextual information about the interviews they had conducted. Thus, the debriefing was especially useful for obtaining information that the student ethnographer took in but never noted or recorded. Obviously, one does not have to be a student to dredge up contextual information through debriefing that can be useful to the project's research goals. Thus, it may be good policy to follow any ethnographic interview with a debriefing concentrating on context. This is particularly true of research conducted by a team.

In general, any person, ethnographer, or native who experiences something significant or knows something of value to the research project is a potential source for debriefing.

HOW TO DO A DEBRIEFING

Debriefings proceed in four phases: (1) preparation, (2) debriefing proper: content, (3) debriefing proper: context, and (4) debriefing proper: quantification.

Phase 1. In preparing for debriefings, it is important that everybody agree on the ground rules. The most fundamental ground rule is that of egalitarianism, which is obviously most important in group interviewing. Here, egalitarianism means specifically that the goal of debriefing is to coproduce an accurate description, not to highlight the knowledge or memory of one participant at the expense of another. At the same time, all participants must be equally open to being corrected.

The second major ground rule is that of orderliness. In group interviews, it is generally best if one person takes the lead to ensure that the interview remains systematic and focused on the topic at hand. Egalitarianism again applies, and any member of a group interview should be free to insert information or questions that may have been missed by the interview leader.

The third ground rule follows from the others and can be summarized as "If you don't know, you don't know." Informants-all participants in the debriefing, in fact-may not be able to recall everything accurately, or they may forget some aspects completely. The team will notice this situation most acutely when pushed during debriefing to provide information. For example, they will be unable to recall verbatim citations of speech events, or they miss estimates of how long various events lasted, or they vary in estimating how many people attended. Again, the egalitarian rule applies; no one should feel that they have been deficient in recalling events during a debriefing. At the same time, no one should feel that they cannot improve their abilities to observe or, when encouraged, to recall more information!

Phase 2. Eliciting content involves conducting the debriefing according to a specific logical strategy, such as eliciting specific texts, cases, taxonomies, attributes, the internal sequencing of events, or cause-effect relationships of events, and any other logical relationships.

The debriefing interview itself can be conducted as a classic ethnographic interview. That is, it can start with grand tour questions, which are then followed by mini tour questions. During this phase of debriefing, it is often best simply to let the informant(s) tell the interviewer(s) what they know and relate this information any way they can. In this phase, however, the informant will often provide the interviewers only with content information he or

she considers important or with what he or she consider significant highlights of an event. The informant will usually leave out much contextual detail.

Phase 3. In this phase, the interviewer(s) again asks the informant(s) grand tour questions, followed if necessary by mini tour questions, but from a different logical perspective. The focus is the ethnographic context: what events surrounded the main event, the elicited knowledge, or other content elicited in Phase 2.

For example, if the informant(s) have provided a grand tour and mini tour description of a causal chain of events or a summary of major meeting's decisions, the interviewer(s) may elicit the information as a temporal sequence of specific events. Verbal action plans are the best method to systematize such information (see Werner 1992). The interviewers ask for every conceivable detail that happened at this meetings regardless of how unimportant the events may appear to the informant(s). Usually, there is a tendency for the events to be recalled as "One person said X, and another person said Y in response" (see Werner and SCHOEPFLE 1987). Such recall may be slightly distorting. For example, the informant or observer will tend to delete unfinished statements or statements to which no responses were made, particularly when many people are talking at a meeting. Nevertheless, that additional information is important.

If an experienced researcher is conducting a self-debriefing, it may sometimes be possible to collapse the second and third phases into one and even reverse their order. Ethnographers may discipline themselves to first recall contextual and sequential information of an event, meeting, or interview. Then, second, they recall the main events that transpired combined with more detail that provides more information. The contextual information recalled first can be very useful in helping to recall the content of an event, meeting, or an interview.

Phase 4. This phase requires that informant(s) provide information, often estimates, on counts or measurements. Such questions might include what time a meeting started, on what date an important event or meeting occurred, how much money was budgeted for a program, how many people attended a ceremony, or any other quantifiable information. Many times, informants may not have paid attention to such detail but may be able to infer it from other knowledge they have about the event. For example, they may remember how many sheep were butchered but not how many people attended. The number of sheep may help them estimate the number of guests at a ceremony. Ct~ they may not remember on what date a family reunion occurred, but they

may be able to estimate it by describing other important events in their lives that occurred before or after the reunion or that brought the reunion about. Such ancillary recall may help bracket the event by establishing times before and after which the meeting could not have occurred. Bracketing is particularly important here because additional events may be recalled that brought about the event in question or that simply provide more ethnographic information.

Another measurement question elicits the identity of specific individuals, places, or things. Examples include questions such as who exactly attended a family reunion. While it might be at times awkward to elicit such information, it can provide more information about the conditions surrounding an event. Instead of bracketing a time period, informants can bracket their answers by discussing who could have precipitated an event, who could conceivably have been present at an event, and why or why not.

The first author found this approach to be particularly useful in investigating social structure and the intensity of interaction among various groups of people. By identifying specific individuals, the informants were able to tell how they were related to one another and the importance and intensity of their relationships. By identifying such relationships, it was then possible to begin describing the social structure and intensity of the social network connections between members of a social system.

These types of questions of measurement or specifics are important for two reasons: First, they help the interviewers get a good idea of the thoroughness or accuracy of an informant's knowledge and observations. For example, informants' ability to estimate the time of an event by bracketing suggests that they have a good command of their information. Second, these questions provide more ethnographic detail because they help elicit still more of the social contexts that bring about these events.

The end result of a debriefing should be very similar to an ethnographic interview. Each debriefing event should be transcribed verbatim. However, the classification of the resulting texts depends on the participants. If the informants are native coresearchers or consultants, the debriefing text is pan of the interview corpus. This is especially true if the debriefing is conducted in the native language. If the informants are ethnographers who are not natives, the text belongs in the journal and needs to be (if possible) checked with native speakers. If the debriefers are a mixture of native coresearchers and normative ethnographers, the language should be the deciding factor: Native language texts are equivalent to ethnographic interviews. Ethnographers' language texts are filed with journal material@

THE BENEFITS OF DEBRIEFING

Debriefing is a powerful tool to ethnographers and other social scientists from the standpoints of research and research management. For research, the above discussion shows that it represents a complement to transcribed interview texts. It provides valuable contextual information that often cannot be obtained any other way.

From a research management standpoint, it is important in team building and as a teaching tool. In general, the uses of systematic ethnographic methods help train students, native research collaborators, or social science collaborators from other disciplines in how to conduct interviews quickly. Lead researchers can train different staff members within a matter of weeks in how to elicit and analyze cases, taxonomies, verbal action plans (sequential information), folk definitions, complex causal chains, and other structural information. The long apprenticeship between the anthropology student and professor can be abbreviated considerably by debriefing interviews of student ethnographers. All participants in a methods seminar may participate in such an event. We found ethnographic instruction through debriefing particularly useful in training native ethnographers.

Debriefing facilitates this ethnographic apprenticeship in two ways: First, it makes the apprenticeship much less arbitrary. During debriefing, lead researchers, students, or native collaborators learn to understand each other's thought processes because both are operating with similar logical processes, assumptions, and in the end, data. Students and native collaborators are less likely to see the lead researcher's questions as arbitrary or as making up the rules as one goes along. The principle of egalitarianism is a powerful motivator for learning because the newcomer gets a chance to participate and learn.

Second, researchers can more easily articulate the research goals and what needs to be accomplished because they can tailor tasks to what the students or collaborators already know. Thus, it is easier to avoid lapses in communication or-perhaps even more important-expose hidden biases in team research. These biases can result from a student or collaborator's acquiescence to a lead researcher's conclusion simply to avoid confrontation or faulty translation of specialized terminology from different disciplines or from the native language into the language of the research. In this sense, a debriefing can function as a forum for negotiating meaningful questions--especially in a culture and language very different from that of the lead ethnographers.

In extreme situations, the first author has been able to work with ethnographic field school students who maintained they had not gathered

information sufficient for an ethnographic report. I debriefed them without allowing them to refer to their field notes and was able to highlight for them what they already knew, organize this knowledge into a logical schema, highlight what additional information they needed to gather, and help them set priorities for the information they could realistically collect in the remaining time of their field work. Quite often, these students returned later with different and better structures than had been proposed, after they had had time to analyze their field notes and observations and conduct and transcribe more interviews.

CONCLUSION

Debriefing is not a substitute for ethnographic interviewing, interview recording, interview transcription, observation, or maintaining journals. It is a complement to ethnography that helps optimize an interviewer's or observer's memory under less-than-ideal ethnographic situations. It is a valuable tool for information gathering from participants when recording of events or of formal interviews is not possible. It is perhaps most valuable in the elicitation of the context of an interview, meeting, or some other event.

It is a valuable means of team building for collaborative research, teaching in ethnographic field school settings, and individualized instruction that can build a solid base of mutual understanding among researchers, students, and native collaborators, as well as among social science collaborators from other disciplines.

NOTES

One possible problem--and a big one in ethnography--is the innocent or premeditated fabrication of information by natives as well as ethnographers. But triangulation and independent confirmation can help detect such misinformation and correct inaccuracies.

A transcribed group interview of an individual or individual interview of a group still depends on the native informant's memories of what he or she saw or head, As we (Werner and SCHOEPFLE 1987) observed, "the records are at least one degree removed from the event that forms the focal topic of the debriefing." Ethnographer's observations of reports on conversations are: at least two degrees removed. In my ethnography, the researcher should therefore keep his or her journal texts separate from the texts of elicited, transcribed interviews. The reason has long been clew: Individual journals we subject to an ethnographer's bin,

particularly in the early stages of research. Only after time has elapsed and the researcher has a better understanding of the culture, he or she is studying do the two kinds of texts begin to converge (Werner and SCHOEPFLE 1987). Even then, it is best to keep the two texts separate because the degree of convergence is difficult to ascertain (Werner and Schoepfle 1987).

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[1] *Because of the differences in the debriefing format and an ethnographic interview, we call the information giver informant instead of our usual consultant for expert information giver. The debriefing's information giver is not necessarily an expert but an experiencer, hence the label informant seem to us justified and mom appropriate*.