

Humanities 208 Violence, Myth, and Memory (Spring 2008)
A Step-by-Step Guide for Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork and Interviews
Prepared by Cheryll Alipio

1. *Contact your potential research informant or interviewee NOW.*

- To see if she or he is interested in your project, and would be willing to be interviewed and/or observed.
- Schedule an appointment for an interview and/or observation.
- The day before your actual interview or observation, contact your research informant or interviewee for confirmation.

2. *At the beginning of the interview or observation:*

- Introduce yourself.
- If interviewing an elder of a community or conducting your interview in a family setting, you might want to think about bringing a little gift to show respect and gratitude. Often in Southeast Asian cultures, this is just a norm.
- Explain why you want to interview the person and explain your research project briefly.
- Thank her or him for agreeing to be interviewed or observed.
- Ask if you can write down notes while you interview or if you can digitally record the interview. When writing field notes during the interview or observation, try to be as discreet as possible so that your informant won't be distracted or uncomfortable. If you do not take notes during the interview, immediately after the interview or observation is done, write down as much as you can from your memory.

3. *During the interview:*

- Keep the interview as conversational and natural as possible. Maybe start by introducing your selves. Find some common ground and repaire as a way to begin the interview.
- Ask broad, open-ended questions to elicit a longer, more thoughtful response and discussion. During the interview, try to pick up on something that the interviewee has said that interests you and ask her or him more about it. This gradually funnels the topic from broad to narrow.
- Avoid asking specific, detailed questions unless you want the same kind of responses in return. Before you even enter the interview, you should have written down a few of your research or interview questions, themes, or topics you want to make sure gets addressed during the interview so that you will not forget them and to also keep your interview on track.
- Give discussion rather than instigate it. Do not press a question or issue if your informant seems uncomfortable or hesitant. You always want to make sure your informant is comfortable and feels safe when talking to you. Remember, she or he is doing you a favor.
- Let your informant speak as much as possible. Do not frame questions too much.
- Write brief field notes during the interview about informational data (e.g. names, dates, places, important quotes) and descriptive observations (e.g. manner of speaking, gestures and facial expressions, changes in emotion, their dress, environmental surroundings). Record as much as they say but also record and pay attention to detail. Remember that anything and everything is a possible field note. You may have to adjust the amount of

writing you do during the interview as it can be disruptive during the conversation and can make your interviewee uncomfortable or reluctant to divulge information.

4. *After the interview:*

- Immediately thank your informant.
- Ask if she or he has any questions for you or about you. This gives them a chance to also gain something from the interview, and it shows to them that you are really interested in making a connection with them.
- Give your contact information in case your informant wants to contact you about the interview or if they might have any questions later on.
- Also, make sure to write extensive and elaborate field notes, or a transcription, of your interview as soon after the interview is over in order to retain as much detail as possible.

5. *Giving back:*

- Remember to think of ways of how to “give back” to the individual you interviewed and worked with. I want to stress that this is a really important part of ethnographic research because we want to emphasize an ethical fieldwork method, where your informant is not just the topic of research but that they can also benefit from your research in some way. We do not want an extractive type of research or interview but rather a research and interview process that is meaningful to everyone involved. Some would consider this a feminist ethnographic method or a decolonizing methodology. Or when your research subject has a role in the actual design or implementation of your project, this becomes a collaborative or participatory ethnography.
- The way you give back can also act as a way to stimulate conversations. For example, the most simplest way to give back is to ask your interviewee at the end of the interview if they have any questions for you or if they would like to know more about you.

6. *Other things to remember:*

- Have fun! This project is for you to also find out more about a topic you are interested in. It is also a way for you to practice doing fieldwork and ethnography as a way of exploring these topics. So we are not looking for perfection; it is all about the process and the difficulties (or not, if you're lucky) you encounter and how you deal with them and reflect back on them.
- So it is also a learning experience as well, not just academically but it could be personal as well. So take a risk and welcome the personal growth you might gain from doing fieldwork. Your own personal experience with all this makes your ethnography that much richer.
- Be willing to adjust and be flexible in everything. You might have to change your research style or may have to adjust your attitudes, preconceived notions, or personality, for example, when you do fieldwork. So be prepared for changes and disappointments in your fieldwork, but also remain open to possibilities that you wouldn't have thought before.
- Finally, allow yourself time to reflect, process, and take everything in.