Farmer Interviews

Background

Farmers, the hands-on managers of agroecosystems, have enormous stores of knowledge about what works and what doesn't and why. They understand the locality in which they farm, the variations and extremes in its weather, the insects, weeds and pathogens that must be contented with, the crops that respond best, and the soil and what it needs to remain productive. Regardless of how (un)sustainable an individual farmers' practices are, his or her knowledge is an important resource, and his or her concerns and points of view are something the agroecologist must take into account. For these reasons, a central tenet of agroecology is that local, farmer-based knowledge is a key starting point in the movement toward sustainability.

Interviewing is a commonly used method of information gathering and knowledge transfer. Interviewing is a skill that can be learned, which is what this lab is all about. For agroecology, interviewing is a skill that can allow us entry into a farmer's routine, their culture, practices, and land ethic. However, the art of asking questions, transcends this lab and will be helpful beyond your lives as students; probing for information and searching for knowledge are aspects of our daily lives. Skills developed in this laboratory will aid future research, job, and personal relations allowing insight into our fellow human beings, enabling clarity in verbal expression.

Synopsis

A farmer (or group of farmers) is interviewed to learn about his or her practices, motivations, challenges and how they are resolved, and goals for the future. The information gained from the interview may be used for later collaborative problem-solving in service-learning projects, and/or to help us plan our activities at the Cove Creek farm.

Objectives

The goal of this laboratory is to get you, as students, acquainted with a variety of interviewing methods and a chance to practice in the field. The interview itself offers the opportunity to understand the human element of agriculture and investigate farming as ethnoscience. Moreover, the interviews may help to bridge the gap between the local farming community and the university, setting the stage for future collaborative, participatory endeavors to make agriculture more sustainable. Information gained will form a baseline of knowledge about farming in the county. be shared within the course and possibly used to determine appropriate farming possibilities for the Cove Creek Farm.

Interviewing – Methodology and Technique

If all the problems of question wording could be traced to a single source, their common origin would probably prove to be in taking too much for granted.
S. Payne, *The Art of Asking Questions,* 1951

Interview techniques range the face-to-face interchange, focus group discussion, as well as questionnaire, and survey forms. They can be structured, unstructured, designed as a narratives, and/or group efforts of sharing experiences. Style and technique depends on the goal of the information gathering experience; how will the information be used, dispersed, shared, interpreted, calculated, marketed, etc.

For the purpose of this laboratory, the semi-structured interviewing technique will be applied. Semi-structured interviews are perfect for time dependent situations. This technique entails minimal control over the informant's responses; however, a question guide is utilized for direction.

In class we will develop a common list of 8-10 questions for the interviews. This will serve as our guide during the interview process. The list of questions will also provide a basis for comparison of farm composition, structure, maintenance, and character.

Notify the informant of the use of the interview, as a class project. Basic disclaimers are important for protection of both you as the desiree of knowledge, and the farmer as the giver of knowledge. Also, taping of interviews is a common method of recording and remembering the interview experience. Please be aware that this requires consent and may or may not change the feeling of the interview itself.

Details of interviewing techniques can be found in the handout Unstructured and Semistructured Interviewing by Russell H. Bernard, 1995; published in *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches.* 2nd Edition.

Data collection

1. The informant is the "owner" of the knowledge you request. Acceptance and respect are of utmost importance. Allow the informant to be "experts" about their own experience. In effect, the interview can be a conscious-raising experience for you and the informant (Montell, 1999).

2. Learn as much as possible about the farmer prior to the interview. This can help you create a well-adapted guide of intelligent questions. Consider also the cultural dynamics of the situation; it may be necessary to do preliminary research of the region/area's cultural characteristics.

3. Questions, answers, and conversations are only part of the interview. Be aware of your surroundings and strive for comfort between you and the informant. Attempt to

be as equalitarian as possible (from a researcher's perspective), allowing the informant to be the "experts" about their own experience. Your interview presentation should include personal observations as well as documentation of questions, answers, and conversations.

4. Probing successfully is an art. Some questions stimulate a deeper response than others. "Silent probes" or letting the informant just continue their train of thought, may produce insightful information that your guide did not allow. It is generally 'good' to stay away from yes and no questions in the semistructured interview. For example, instead of asking "Do you use integrated pest management on your farm?" one might ask, "What techniques for pest management have you found most successful?" or "What are your favorite strategies for insect pest controls?" or maybe as simple as "What do you do about bugs on your crops?" Each question will elicit a somewhat different response. Each may also apply to a different style of farming.

5. Gliessman (2000: 297) suggests that one might focus not only on what the farmer does but *why* it is done this way. Therefore one can gain a better understanding of practices, problems, motivations, farming history, and logic. However, do not question their farming methods and opinions (e.g., don't say "That's a stupid way of doing things"or "I/my father/great-aunt... would never do it this way"; but, you CAN ask "Why do you do it this way or that way?").

6. Although semistructured interviews will be utilized for this investigation, it is important to note the importance of participant observation and unstructured interviews including the narrative. These techniques increase the breadth of information available for the researcher. These are the most comprehensive techniques, each requiring a significant amount of time and energy.

7. Be sure to allow for at least one hour after the interview to write down thoughts, observations, ideas, and any related information that the interview brought to your mind. This process may continue for a few days after the interview as it all seeps in. Think about the role you, as an agroecologist might play in their future. Describe problems and challenges the farmer may have addressed, what alterations or additions could help the farmer become more sustainable, etc.

Write Up

The purpose of this laboratory is to introduce you to farmers, their methods, and the role of interviews as an information gathering technique. But it doesn't end there. Analyzing and evaluating your data are the next steps. The write up should incorporate three main topics.

1. A transcript of the interview, including questions and answers and descriptions of subsequent conversations. This does not have to be a literate, word-for-word account of the interview, but can be a summary of main points and issues raised in each

question reconstructed from key-points written down during the interview and recollection.
2. Personal observations from the time of the interview. Include what the farm looked like, felt like, etc. Include you feelings of the interview process; in effect, critique yourself.
3. An analysis of the data addressing issues described in number 7 in the Data Collection section.

References

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