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Background

The field manuals were originally intended as working documents for internal use only. They were supplemented by verbal instructions and additional guidelines in many cases. If you have questions about using the materials, or comments on the viability in various field situations, feel free to get in touch with the authors.

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11. Towards a socio-cultural profile of the communities we work with

David Wilkins (with special help from Eve Danziger, Penny Brown and Eric Pederson)

The ultimate purpose of this questionnaire is four-fold:

- (i) to help give each member of the group some feeling for the field situations that other members of the group work in
- (ii) to give those members of the group who are not specialised in Anthropology some hints and guidelines as to the types of ethnographic observations it would be useful for our group to know about (within the context of our research goals)
- (iii) to determine the feasibility of developing a more sophisticated comparative overview of the current social and cultural features of the communities we work with
- (iv) to shed light on the sort of socio-cultural factors that may explain both intra-community and inter-community variation in both linguistic and cognitive tasks

This is not a checklist, and it is not intended to be used for any form of comparative quantification. Our research observations and claims so far have been about the linguistic and 'cognitive' behaviour of members of particular communities. The intent of this survey is to enrich our understanding of the various socio-cultural contexts in which this linguistic and 'cognitive' data have been collected. This is needed in order to explore the role which societal, cultural and contextual factors may play in determining and/or explaining our linguistic and 'cognitive' observations. We would prefer not to talk about results from a particular Language or a particular Culture, but instead about results drawn from a particular speech community at a particular place and time. As such, none of us is able to rely (completely) on published ethnographies for the type of observations that are relevant for our research, and so we must compile that information ourselves. In this we continue to pursue the goal of securing a more balanced view of the interplay between language, culture and cognition.

You are not intended to work through this whole questionnaire with a consultant. Most of the questions can be answered by observation. Indeed, those of you who have worked in the same fieldsite for a long time will be able to answer most of these questions without going back into the field. Please avoid hypertraditionalising the community you work with (e.g. in discussing games or sports, if members of the community now play basketball or football due to contact, and have given up any traditional games, it's important to know that). While you may wish to pursue some questions with consultants, do not overburden them with too many questions from this questionnaire. Throughout, please bear in mind whether the question would be answered differently for different generations and/or different genders.

[NOTE: See also §4, 'Pilot questionnaire to investigate social uses of space']

General Background Information

Location of fieldsite (country and place):

Community (or communities) worked with at that site:

Is the community isolated from other communities, or integrated or overlapping with other communities? (Explain)

Approximate number of people in the community:

What age groups do you work with on a regular basis?:

Do you tend to work primarily with men or women?:

Are you well known to all of the individuals which you collect information from?:

Is the community to be considered a minority group within the country?:

What languages are (commonly) spoken by members of the community?:

What is the rough degree of individual multilingualism (with what languages?):

What language is the focus of your research in that community?:

Is that language a recognised official language of the country, or an unrecognised minority language (or some other status)?:

Is that language spoken anywhere else outside the primary fieldsite (explain):

Approximate number of speakers of the language (overall, considering all the places it is spoken):

Is that language still being learned as a first language by children in the community?:

Is that language being taught as a second language in the community? (to whom?):

Is the language written? (since when? 100's of years? 20 years?):

Is the community relatively homogeneous or diverse (with respect to ethnic make up, intermarriage, religious diversity, places of origin, etc.)?:

Does it make sense to talk about a "Traditional lifestyle" (with a long history) with respect to the community under investigation? (explain)

- Are people still pursuing an essentially traditional lifestyle?
- Has traditional lifestyle been affected/changed by cultural contact
- Has traditional lifestyle been affected by technological change?
- Has traditional lifestyle been affected by the manner in which the community was formed [e.g. mission/mining town/town camp])?:

Residence and Mobility

What relationship do members of the community have to the area that they live in? (Is it their traditional country? Do they "own" it? Is it of religious significance to them? Have they moved/been moved there from some other place? etc.)

Is the area sparsely or densely "labeled" with place names? Do those names reflect any regular naming practices? (i.e. are the names compositional? do they refer to topographic features? plant species? animal species? the history of the area? the acts performed by ancestors? etc.[What languages do the names come from?])

What is the environment like in terms of both climate, vegetation and topography? [small tropical island with dense vegetation?; inland desert with some rocky ranges, and sparse vegetation?; etc.]

Do people live in built "dwellings"?

What form or forms do such dwellings have?

Are such dwellings close together or widely spread? (explain)

Do the dwellings together form a coherent camp or village or town or city (or an apartment block)?

Is there electricity in the community? [Where?; All homes? Generated how?]

How is water accessed? [central well?; river?; plumbing?; soakage?; etc.]

Is there any clear pattern to the placement and organisation of dwellings? (Is this due to geographic concerns, or occupational concerns, or social organisational concerns?)

Roughly, what is the density of occupation?

- For a single dwelling?
- For the whole site that you work in?

How urbanized is site?

Do families tend to live as extended units?

Do families live together in the close vicinity of other members of the community?

What various significant parts do dwellings and collections of dwellings possess (rooms? fireplace? central well? grain storage areas, etc., etc.)

Is there a special pattern to sleeping arrangements (Do the men sleep in a separate place from the women? Do all the children sleep with the parents?)

Do people tend to live for very long periods of time in the same dwelling? (If not, why not?)

Do people tend to live for very long periods of time in the same local village, or camp? (If not, why not?)

Over roughly what area do people tend to move around on a habitual basis? (thousands of kilometers?) For what reasons? (to visit family? seasonal movement of livestock? etc.)

What are the primary modes of transport?

Social Organisation, Kinship and Politics

What are the most significant social parameters which govern the organisation of the community and the patterns of interaction in the community (royalty? class? caste? gender? kin relations? age? land ownership? etc.)

Are decisions made at a community level? How and by whom? [dictated from above? consensus? vote?]

Is there any formally constituted governing body within the community? How does this relate to other governing bodies in the region and country?

What do networks of interaction look like? Who can interact with whom on a familiar basis? Who must avoid interacting with whom? (Can unmarried men and women interact freely in public view?; Can in-laws speak with one another? etc.).

Can one discern any patterns of alliance when it comes to socio-political matters in the community?

Are there "factions" within the community? [How are they constituted?; Do they tend to be longlasting, or do they shift constantly?; What is the "function" of factions?]

What are social/political relations with adjacent communities like?

Within the community, are there clearly structured rules of avoidance and/or deference, etc.?

Do people tend to marry people from the same community?

Does marriage involve movement of one of the parties? Who moves where (and over what distance)? [Patrilocal? Matrilocal? etc.]

Do married couples acquire their own dwellings or live with relatives?

What is the general structure of the kinship system (classificatory?; moieties? subsections?)

When does a boy become a man?

When does a girl become a woman?

At what age does marriage take place?

At what age do women generally start having children? How many children do women tend to have? (How many children is it considered normal to have? Do people favour male children over female children, or vice versa?)

Are there big differences in lifestyle and responsibilities depending on one's gender?

Religion

What religions are represented in the community?

Do most people profess to belong to one religion? (Which?)

How important is religion to the life and organisation of the community?

Are there daily practices associated with religious belief?

Are there cyclical practices associated with religious belief? (yearly initiation? harvest ritual?)

Are there centers (areas or buildings) in the area where the community lives which are devoted specifically to religious concerns? (initiation grounds? churches? mosques?)

Lifestyle, Economy and Manufacture

What is the main "employment" for men in the community? (farming? raising livestock?)

What is the main "employment" for women in the community? (farming? weaving?)

Are members of the community dependent on the government for any form of welfare?

What is the range of variation in wealth within the community?

Can you roughly characterize the gross annual income of the people you work with? [Is your contribution significant? In what sense?]

Do people live where their employment is, or do they have to leave the community to work?

Do people hunt or collect their own food? (for their complete needs? or as a supplement?)

Is there cultivation? (for their complete needs?; as a supplement?; or for someone else?)

Is there raising of livestock? (for their complete needs?; as a supplement?; or for someone else?)

Who owns the various means of production? (the people themselves?; local government?; international businesses?)

What animals are kept by people and for what purpose? (Dogs?, Horses?, Chickens? etc.)

What foods and drinks are imported from outside?

Are any forms of mind-altering/ behaviour-altering substances manufactured and used? [On what occasions? For what purposes?] (Include nicotine and alcohol as such substances)

To what extent is there a cash economy or a bartering economy, etc.?

Are there stores in the community?

Are there traders who come to the community? (Where from, and trading what?)

What artifacts that are used on a daily basis are actually manufactured by individuals for their own use? (dwellings? canoes? spears? nets? mats? etc.)

What artifacts that are used on a daily basis are actually manufactured in the community, by specialists?

What artifacts that are used on a daily basis are purchased or acquired from outside the community? (Where or who from?) (cars?, bicycles? pots? etc.)

What artifacts are manufactured in the community primarily for use by people outside of the community? (pots?; microchips?; etc.)

Does the community produce art or handicrafts for sale? (What and for sale to whom?) Who is involved in such manufacture?

What types of clothing do people wear? Is menswear different from womenswear? Is there traditional clothing? Is it still worn? (on what occasions?)

Are medicines manufactured locally? For what ailments?

What is the degree of reliance on a community-externally organized medical system?

What is the general level of health?

Are there particular diseases, hereditary disorders or other health problems that are common in the community?

What types of recreational activity do adults engage in? (cards? social drinking? rodeos?)

Are there any forms of gambling?

What types of play activity do children engage in?

What is the general level of violence and unrest both within the community, and in the local context that the community is part of?

How different is the current lifestyle and economy from the (community's own notion of) traditional lifestyle?

Language Attitudes

What do people in the community think about their own language (or languages)?

- Do they hold it/them in high esteem?
- Do they consider it/them a "real" language (relative to other linguistic varieties that they know or know about)?
- Does it make sense to people that outsiders would want to work on the language? [How do they understand it? In what terms does it make sense to them? What are their expectations?]
- Do people think of their language as easy or hard to speak? [or easy or hard to learn (relative to other linguistic varieties they know, or know about)]

- Is the language something that is believed to belong to a place, or to a particular social group, or to a particular deity, or...?

Is language thought to be "owned"? [By whom? In what sense?]

Are there people in the community who are responsible for language matters? [Who? Determined on what basis? What language matters? Does one have to speak a particular linguistic variety in order to be considered responsible for that variety?]

Is speaking a particular variety considered to be one of the criterial properties for ascribing membership to a particular group?

Is language considered to have experts?

- Oratorical experts?
- Storytellers?
- Writing experts?

Do people believe that there are good speakers and bad speakers of the language? (explain)

How do older people characterize the language of teenagers versus children versus babies?

Is there formal instruction in any language matters? (Is this considered traditional?)

At what 'age' is a person said to know a language 'properly'?

Is there much child directed speech?

Is there a special form of caretaker speech used with babies? (until what age is it used?)

Are there specific beliefs about how to talk to children? How much children understand? How children should learn language?

Is there a metalinguistic vocabulary for discussing language?

- How are languages named? [Are names mainly ascribed from outside, or are they recognised as local intragroup designations?; Are names formed according to a particular principle? (e.g. based on the name for a particular region? based on the name for a particular group?); Is the language designation distinct from the group designation?
- What is the word for language? How is it formed? Is it distinct from the word for 'word' or 'speech'?
- Are there ways of talking about different registers?
- Are there names or expressions for different genres? (e.g. traditional narratives versus any old story versus conversation etc.) What are they? What are their characteristics?
- Do people have ways of characterizing the sounds, rhythm or stress of different linguistic varieties?

What do people think that other people's (i.e., outsiders') attitudes to the language is?

Other Semiotic Systems

What graphic art practices are there in the community? (painting? drawing? body painting? textile designs) What general design properties do these have? (extremely symmetrical? abstract patterns? highly symbolic? very depictive? aerial view? etc.)

Is there any form of traditional (depictive) mapping practice?

Is there traditional dancing?

- What is it like? [group?; individual?; couples?; men-only? - enactive? symbolic?; high-stepping?, etc.]
- Who knows it? [specialists?, adults above forty? everyone?]
- Is there any form of accompaniment (music?; singing? etc.)
- When is it performed?
- For what purposes is it performed? (fun?; ceremony? etc.)]

Are there local or traditional poems and or songs? What are they like? How many different varieties? (nursery rhymes?; sagas?; etc.) Do they involve any form of accompaniment (musical?, dancing?, enactment?)? When do they tend to be performed? Who are they performed by? What purposes do they have? (entertainment? love magic? etc.)

What important ceremonies exist and what ritualised behaviour is involved? [shamans being taken over by ancestral beings? mimetic depiction of historical events?, etc.]

Are there important oral narratives which are transmitted across generations?

Is there a stock of stories specifically for children?

Are there any game languages used?

Are there any special auxiliary languages or registers? (e.g. for initiation? for interaction between in-laws?) When, where, why and between what interlocutors?)

To what extent are there conventionalised signs or gestures? (i.e. what types of quotable gestures are there? is there an indigenous sign language?) When are they used and for what purpose?

Education, Literacy and Numeracy

Are there schools in the community? (What levels?):

Who runs the school(s)? (Mission? Government? Local community?)

Where do the teachers come from?:

What is the language of education?:

Is attendance consistent?:

Is the school a center for other community activities? (Is it housed in its own building, or located in its own area?)

What level of education have most members of the community achieved? (Have many gone to High school?) [It would be useful to provide a breakdown by education.]

Roughly, how literate are people in the various languages they control?:

What is writing used for? [i.e., under what contexts? is it mainly used in situations of cultural contact?]

Can most people write their name?

Can people read and write down numbers?

Can most people write messages or letters (or some other longer piece of connected text)?

Can most people read (at least simple books)?:

Is there graffiti in the community? Is it mainly written? (in what language(s)?) Is it mainly depictive? (i.e. iconic representational/graphic) What are the main themes?

Are there signs with writing around the community? (in what languages?) For what purposes?

Are there signs with pictures in the community? (What sort of things do they depict?) For what purposes?

Are the signs discussed in the previous questions for members of the community or for other people (e.g. road signs for people passing through, etc.)?:

What sort of things do people read? (comics?; children's books?; magazines?; the bible?)

Is there much written material to be found in homes? (or elsewhere around the community):

Do people receive mail? (Is it mainly bills?, letters?, other?, do you know from whom?)

Do people write letters? (to one another; or outside the community?; Are there special letter-writers in the community?)

Can people do basic mathematical calculations (subtraction and addition)? In written form? In their head? For what sort of problems (and in what sort of contexts)? What sort of quantities? (tens or hundreds or thousands?)

Media

Are there radios in the community? (Who owns and uses them?) What programs do people choose to listen to?

Are there cassette players in the community? What sort of things do people choose to listen to?

Are there TVs in the community? (Who owns and uses them?) How many channels? What programs do people choose to watch?

Are there video machines in the community? (Who owns and uses them?; What sort of videos are available? What sort of videos do people watch?)

Is there some form of cinema in the community? (What languages is it in? Dubbed? Subtitled?)

Who produces the programs that people listen to on radio or cassette, or watch on TV or video or in the cinema?

What language do the various forms of media tend to be in?

Is there any form of local community media? Local newsletters? Local radio broadcasts? Local magazines?

Do people make use of non-local newspapers, magazines, newsletters, etc.?

Are there public rallies or addresses? [For what purposes? Organised internally or externally to the community?]

Other

Are there particular historical facts that are relevant to one's understanding of the community and its operation?

Does this community appear to be unique in its basic patterns of organisation and interaction, or is it essentially very similar in important details to other communities in the region? (In the country?)

What are the hot topics of the day that are galvanizing the community into political action? (Land ownership?; local government?; education?; means of subsistence?; wages?; work conditions? etc.)

How would you describe the nature of the community's integration with the world system? (Is it a labour pool for international companies?; A consumer of internationally produced products?; etc.)

Are there other facts not captured in the above questions that are of particular relevance to the community under consideration?