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Lying Informants: A Fieldwork Experience from Ghana

Wolf Bleek

For its conclusion alone, I would not have written this fieldwork note. That conclusion is merely a truism: survey research cannot handle delicate issues. My reason for writing this note is a coincidental event, something almost anecdotal that occurred during my research in a rural Ghanaian community. That event showed how valid the truism is.

It is well known from countless anthropological field reports that not all informants are as enthusiastic about anthropological research as the fieldworkers themselves. Evans-Pritchard's (1940: 12–13) recording of his conversation with an uninterested and unwilling Nuer informant has become a celebrated example of that differential.¹ That an informant's unwillingness to cooperate increases as the topic becomes more intimate and embarrassing goes without saying, although anthropologists have thought it worth a considerable amount of words. Interviewers who ask personal questions about delicate topics, sometimes with more sense of duty than common sense, force polite informants into lying ones. Salamone (1977) has pointed out that such lying is a meaningful "form of communication and not its negation." Asking why people lie may lead to important new insights into personal, social, and cultural aspects of their lives. First, however, there must be an awareness that people *are* lying. Some researchers may never make that discovery.

In 1971 and 1973 I conducted fieldwork in a rural "town" in the Kwahu area of Southern Ghana.² The kinds of things in which I was interested were definitely delicate: family quarrels, suspicions of witchcraft, sexual relationships, and birth control practices, including induced abortion. Initially, I limited my research to the members of one lineage (*abusua*). I was then residing with the head of that lineage. My research approach consisted of "participant ob-

ervation,” a phrase that we all know to be somewhat presumptuous and misleading.

My doubts about the word “participant” arise from an impression that most fieldworkers who use this word to describe their research method hardly participate in the subject of their research, if at all. I am no exception. My participation in sexual relationships was slight, in birth control insignificant, and in witchcraft nonexistent. Ironically, anthropologists tend to be most interested in those transactions and affairs least accessible to them, those in which they cannot participate. This irony, I suspect, also applies to other research traditions. The inaccessible arouses curiosity; what is open to the public soon may lead to boredom.

By participant, therefore, I refer rather to my taking part in the general events of daily life in town. I attempted to live as much like other inhabitants as possible. I acquired a room, two by four meters, in an ordinary lineage compound. People who observed my way of life, the furniture I had, the quality of my food, my means of washing clothes and collecting water, noticed little difference between me and the other young unmarried male immigrants who rented rooms in town. Apart from the color of my skin and my European background (which implied hidden richness; see Bleek, 1979), the most conspicuous difference between other men and myself was vocational: I was not a farmer or a shopkeeper, not a teacher, a clerk, or a priest, but a researcher, an anthropologist, someone with an outlandish, unfamiliar profession. Many solved this definitional problem by regarding me as a student, and they were right. Some of the elders even called me a school boy. They too were right.

My “free time” was spent mostly in the company of others. I sat many hours in palm wine bars, joking, boasting, and gossiping with men, sometimes with women. I attended church services and funerals. Most frequently, however, I was in the compounds of lineage members, talking—often I recorded these conversations—and watching the work that people were doing: preparing a meal, feeding or bathing a child, repairing tools.

If the things in which anthropological researchers are interested are often inaccessible to them, they are probably also difficult things to observe. What then do these researchers mean when they speak of “participant *observation*”? The latter word strikes me as being as inapt as the former.

Anthropological knowledge is predominantly based on what people *say* they do, not on what researchers *see* them doing. If one wants to investigate something in the past or something occurring elsewhere, one has to rely on secondhand information. Yet even things taking place here and now often remain hidden to a researcher, because by their very nature these activities cannot tolerate the eye of an observer.

Since it is the fate of fieldworkers to remain dependent on information from others, it is of crucial importance for them to develop techniques to assess and improve the reliability and validity of such information. The techniques of participant observation consist largely of getting to know informants and

the contexts of reported transactions and issues. The method is, therefore, hardly what it claims to be: direct engagement with and observation of the object of research. In an indirect way, however, participant observation certainly does contribute to a more adequate understanding of issues under study. Still, observation never replaces interviews; the two methods complement each other. Observation sustains the interview, while the interview extends observation over a longer period of time and to other places.

Thus, by getting to know the members of the lineage among whom I lived, by conversing with them—sometimes casually, sometimes through a formal interview—and by cross-checking their information with other lineage members—let us call it gossiping—I gradually gained considerable knowledge and understanding of even the more clandestine aspects of life in which I had taken an interest. Let me give two examples to illustrate my progress: both concern the practice of induced abortion, which, viewed as extremely disgraceful, was therefore carefully hidden from others (see Bleek, 1981).

I was able to learn about abortion by getting to know those involved in the practice and the social context in which they maneuvered. Although I never witnessed an abortion, I learned much about their causes and consequences. I *saw* these causes and consequences. This enabled me to ask concrete questions and to interpret the answers. Informants were often evasive at first, but gradually shifted to become more truthful and confiding. Once people saw that I *knew* quite a lot already about abortions, they felt they could trust me.

The two excerpts below have been taken from my field diary. The first is about a girl of 17 who lived in the same house as I did. The second describes the reactions of townspeople when a woman died from an induced abortion.

After the long vacation Nina returned from Kumasi with a swollen leg. I asked what had happened and she answered that she would tell me everything later on. Some time after that I met her in front of the clinic, waiting her turn. Again a few hours later Nina's mother said she wanted to speak to me. She came with Nina to my room and showed me a deep wound in Nina's upper leg. She told me that, after an induced abortion, Nina had begun to feel heavy pains and had gone to her cousin for a (free) injection. (Note that the cousin, a farmer, is not qualified to give injections.) After some days the injection caused an abscess. Nina went to Kumasi and visited the hospital, where the abscess was lanced. She returned home, but the nurse of the local clinic refused to help her and told her to go to the Catholic hospital in Nkwawkaw (25 km. away). The mother asked me to mediate so that Nina could be treated in the clinic. I think she had two reasons for asking me this. She was afraid that the real cause of the infection would be revealed and that the police would hear about it. In the second place, she was thinking of the financial consequences of a stay in a hospital.

I still advised them to go to the hospital, and they said they would do so tomorrow because it was now too late to go. In the evening Nina came to me with a bucket of hot water and asked me to clean the wound. I answered that I could do nothing without clean bandages. The next morning Nina and her

mother left very early. Afterwards I discovered that they had not gone to the hospital but to a government clinic about 20 km. away, probably because medical help in government institutions is free. In the afternoon they returned. Nina told me that the nurse in the clinic had treated her and given her medicines. She had been requested to come back when the medicines were finished.

Afua O. died today at the hospital. Someone told me that she became pregnant in Accra and tried to get rid of it through the help of some people at the Accra hospital. The drugs she took did not produce an abortion, but she began to feel pains after some days. She could not bear the pain so she rushed to her home town to receive better help. At that time her condition was already precarious. She was taken to the hospital at A., where she died after two weeks.

People in town kept saying that the deceased died foolishly. She had two children already, so, if she did not want more, she should have been smart enough to see the family planning team.

Someone else told me that officially nothing was said about the abortion, because this could prevent her from being buried customarily. Her death would be considered as suicide and she would no longer be recognized as a member of the family. There would be no mourning, no donations, etc.

Through participant observation I came to the conclusion that induced abortion was a very common practice among the 19 women of this lineage. At least ten of them were found to have had an induced abortion; five had had three or more. Inducing an abortion was most frequently attempted to solve the problem of an undesired pregnancy while a girl was still in school or when there was no partner willing to accept financial responsibility for the child to come. But was abortion equally frequent in other lineages or other Kwahu towns? And were motives for abortion the same everywhere?

Doing my fieldwork at a time when statistical data enjoyed higher esteem than at present, I was often chided by colleagues about the statistical weaknesses of my research. Because my sample consisted of only 42 adults, its representativeness was challenged. I was advised to include a survey of a larger sample of the town population, selected in an orthodox way. And so, a budding academician, I yielded to the statistical temptation.

One hundred men, approximately between 18 and 60 years of age, were accosted on the street, in their compounds, or during visits to the local clinic. They were asked to spare half an hour to answer some questions. Forty-seven of the interviews I conducted myself. Two assistants, young teachers, did the other 53.

For the female sample, I followed another plan: 179 women with at least one child were interviewed during visits to a child-welfare clinic. It had previously been ascertained that women visiting that clinic constituted a representative sample of all town mothers. Six nurses from a nearby hospital carried out these interviews after brief training. All young, around age 20, they wore their uniforms during the interview to give the proceedings a medical air. It

was assumed that questions about sex and birth control would meet with the least resistance if put in a medical context. To prevent personal bias in selection, the names of women to be interviewed were preselected in the office and assigned to the nurses. I kept out of sight as much as possible.

Examining the results of the interviews, I soon realized that their reliability was low, an impression reinforced during an evaluation meeting with the nurse-interviewers. They told me that some women had given nonchalant and inconsistent answers; others had been far from cooperative; yet others had reacted indignantly and aggressively to certain questions, especially those referring to abortion (which was then, and still is, a criminal act). Some women had asked the nurses whether they were working for the police.³

Although the nurses sensed that many women were simply lying in response to some of the questions, they had no means by which to check because they did not know the respondents. Even more problematic, in my eyes, was that the respondents did not know the interviewers. Many women, shocked to hear strangers asking them such intimate questions, felt they had no choice but to lie in response.

It is not easy to measure "how much" an informant is lying. One method is to compare suspect answers with those of a control group of persons who,

TABLE 1 Percentage of Ghanaian women giving socially less-desirable answers in two small-scale field studies conducted in the early 1970s using different research methods

| Answer | Research method | |
|--|---|--|
| | Survey questionnaire response (N = 179) | "Participant observations" of women in lineage (N = 19) ^a |
| Does not belong to a church | 18 | 42 |
| Unmarried after divorce | 11 | 16 |
| Not legally married to present sexual partner | 11 | 21 |
| Divorced two or more times | 11 | 21 |
| Knows five or more methods of birth control | 15 | 58 |
| Ever practiced birth control | 14 | 63 |
| Ever used three or more methods of birth control | 1 | 21 |
| Had an induced abortion | 4 | 53 |

^a Considerable apology is in order for calculating percentages on the basis of so small a sample size. In defense of this procedure, this note does not have statistical pretensions; rather the intention is to sensitize fertility surveyors to the complexity of the issues they deal with in their questionnaires.

for some reason, are believed not to have lied. What I did was virtually the same thing, assuming that "I knew everything" about the women in my lineage (which was certainly not true). Table 1 shows the outcome of a comparison I made of answers to certain socially less-desirable topics given by women interviewed and women "observed."

Such a table is nothing new. For most researchers it confirms what they already know: embarrassing questions in a survey produce unreliable answers. For some diehard statisticians it proves little and, from their point of view, they are right, because the comparison of samples begs an essential question, namely, how can we be sure that the differences in answers are not caused by real differences between the two samples?

I must now relate the coincidental event referred to at the outset of this note. By accident I was directly confronted with the "fraud" that some women perpetrated during the survey interviews. I discovered that six women from my lineage had taken part in the survey. They had been interviewed without realizing that their responses would eventually come under my eyes. When I compared their answers with what I knew about them, I was abashed. They had lied lavishly, presenting themselves in terms that they expected would make the nurses respect them. Some of their answers were so far removed from the facts as I knew them that I was confounded. Although I know that things may not always be so far removed from reality, these six Kwahu women have filled me with a lifelong distrust of questionnaire research. If anthropology wishes to remain respected by other sciences, it should promptly impose censorship on this accidental discovery of my research.

In Table 2 I present examples of self-contradictory answers given by two women of the lineage. I should add that, somewhat masochistically, I have selected the two most colorful informants.

As announced earlier, the conclusion that emerges from this brief note is in itself far from sensational. Hardly anyone will contend that a survey-interview is suitable for eliciting information about intimate and embarrassing thoughts and practices. However, I want to make two remarks that may lend some piquancy to this conclusion's dullness. The first reflects back on myself, the ethnographer; the second concerns demographic researchers.

In an intriguing article Nachman (1984) suggests that the ethnographer should not turn *away* from lies to look for "the truth," but that he should look at the lying itself. Lying is a cultural phenomenon. It is a strategy for survival, a code to preserve one's own and other people's self-respect. Pressing for the truth, as anthropologists may do, can make people extremely uncomfortable. Persistent lying may then provide their only escape from embarrassment. I endorse Nachman's (1984: 538) remark that "in general lying is reprehensible, but in particular instances, it is justifiable. In other words people usually must have reason to lie." My Kwahu informants had ample reason.

In retrospect, my encounters with lineage members were not always characterized by the empathy and rapport that anthropologists tend to claim.

TABLE 2 Contradictory answers obtained from two women through the use of different research methods

| Information obtained from survey interview | Information based on participant observation |
|--|---|
| Opokua | |
| Married both according to custom and in Roman Catholic Church | Unmarried |
| Lives with husband | Has no husband |
| Eats with husband | Has no husband |
| Has been pregnant once | Has been pregnant twice |
| Has induced an abortion with a tablet (her husband helped her) | Has induced an abortion at the request of her boyfriend; she used a mixture of herbs, milk, and sugar |
| Nyamekye | |
| 24 years old | 31 years old |
| Divorced once | Divorced twice |
| Given birth to four children | Given birth to six children (two have died) |
| Has been pregnant four times | Has been pregnant at least nine times |
| Lives with husband in Accra (the capital) | Lives without husband in Kwahu town |
| A female servant prepares her meals | She has no servants |
| Has never used any method of birth control | Has experience with many methods of birth control |
| Never had an induced abortion | Had at least three induced abortions |

Some encounters were more like interrogations that could be managed successfully thanks to my detective-like approach mingled with strategic joking. Looking back I realize that this type of communication may indeed have brought to light several hidden facts, but it was also less than successful at times in helping me to understand the full meaning and psychological implications of these facts.⁴

Ethnographers and other fieldworkers writing about lying informants are themselves liars when they do not tell the whole truth about the way in which they collected the lies from their informants, thus obscuring the likelihood that it was their interrogating technique which *produced* the lies in the first place.

The second remark holds a caveat for those who study demographic issues, especially in non-Western cultures.⁵ Abortion and other methods of birth control are not only private affairs, tied up with feelings of shame; they are also “variables” for demographers who, infatuated with statistics, engage in large-scale survey research. Looking at the assertive figures published in some demographic surveys, I suspect that for some people the conclusion of this note may not be old hat after all.

If this note cannot persuade demographers to present their results with certain misgivings, let them take heed of the following statement by a Tiv informant, cited by Salamone (1977) as an epigraph for his article:

When I read what the white man has written of our customs, I laugh, for it is the custom of our people to lie as a matter of course to outsiders, especially

the white man. We ask, "Why does he want to know such personal things about us?"

Notes

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1 Evans-Pritchard (1940: 12) writes that the Nuer are "expert at sabotaging an inquiry," and he recommends their techniques to all natives "who are inconvenienced by the curiosity of ethnologists." A few lines from his conversation with a Nuer informant suffice as an example:

Who are you?

A man.

What is your name?

Do you want to know my *name*?

Yes.

You want to know *my* name?

2 The term "town" is a literal translation of local parlance. "Village" would sound denigrating to Ghanaian ears. The "town" had about 4,000 inhabitants. The Kwahu, who belong to the Akan or Twi-speaking group, are closely related to the neighboring and better known Asante (Ashanti).

3 It should be noted, however, that most people involved in an abortion case have little difficulty keeping police out of it. I found that no abortion had been reported at the local police station in the six months preceding the research or during the research, not even the case of Afua O., although the whole town, including the police, knew the cause of her death.

4 Rosaldo (1986) too points out that a context of domination affects ethnographic

accounts more deeply than their authors are prepared to admit. Discussing Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* and Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*, he sees some parallels between the inquisitor in the latter and the ethnographer in the former study. The historian based his book on the confessions that an inquisitor extracted from the Montaillou villagers. The anthropologist, a British subject, collected information from unwilling Nuer informants in a period when the British raided their camps. Rosaldo concludes: "The introductory section of *The Nuer* parallels that of *Montaillou* in doing the rhetorical work of separating the context of colonial domination from the production of ethnographic knowledge" (p. 93).

5 An anonymous referee of this note comments: "Before modern fertility surveys were first fielded in the United States, it was widely predicted that respondents' modesty, embarrassment, etc. would invalidate the responses. It was later triumphantly reported . . . that the apprehension was unfounded: surveys found that American women were far more reluctant to reveal, say, family income than details about 'intimate behavior.' Are things different in Ghana?" Two answers: In the first place, respondents who are *not* reluctant may still lie. Second, I think indeed that Ghana's cultural milieu differs markedly from that of the United States. Cultural rules indicate what can and what cannot be said. For most of my informants, sex was not something to talk about but to practice. One difference that seems particularly relevant is that surveys, with guaranteed anonymity, are a familiar cultural practice in the United States but not in Ghana.

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