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Participant Observation and Phased Assertion as Research Strategies in the Canadian Arctic

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Participant observation is the basic and defining research strategy for cultural anthropologists, a useful tool for building rapport, establishing trust, and gaining an understanding of culture as experienced by its members. This article uses the author's experience working in an Inuit community in Canada to explore another use of participant observation: the acquisition of communicative competence. In small, bounded communities such as those in the Canadian Arctic, the development and display of cultural and communicative competence is necessary to overcome apathy and sometimes hostility toward researchers. Furthermore, establishment of these abilities allows for the use of phased assertion as an interview probe. Phased assertion works not only as a data collection technique, it reinforces communicative competence and improves informant rapport.

Keywords: *participant observation; phased assertion; interviewing; ethnography*

The Eskimo[1] peoples of the North American Arctic have long fascinated social scientists and other people south of the Arctic. Originally famous for their ability to survive and thrive in some of the harshest environments on the planet, the Eskimos later drew attention for the degree and speed at which they were incorporated into the U.S., Canadian, and Danish states. In recent years, scholars have paid increasing attention to global warming and climate change in the Arctic, especially as related to the cultural survival of Native peoples.

All of this interest has meant that northern villages were and are popular destinations for researchers of all types: academics, government scientists, activists, and policy makers. Although the presence of researchers provides for certain economic benefits, largely in the form of seasonal jobs, fees for equipment and house rentals, and informant payments, there is a significant trade-off: These people ask questions. Sometimes, researchers follow in the footsteps of other researchers and ask the same questions. Sometimes, they

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ask deeply personal and inappropriate questions. Based on my own experience with Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, this questioning has created a certain amount of apathy toward research and researchers. Because of this and other features of Inuit culture that I will describe here, researchers may be frustrated by their interactions with Inuit or even be unaware that their data may be suspect.

This article discusses some of the particulars of fieldwork in the Canadian Arctic, using my own experience in Ulukhaktok, where I have worked since 1992. Below, I discuss three issues of importance to the conduct of fieldwork in the Canadian Arctic.

The first issue is the process by which one gains approval to work in the North. The ability to engage in research in Inuit communities is a formalized and bureaucratic process, but community approval to do research does not guarantee that Inuit will actually cooperate.

The ability to get beyond institutional access is the second issue. As the article demonstrates, success depends heavily on the researcher's willingness to engage in participant observation, devoting the time and energy necessary to display communicative competence and develop rapport with Inuit.

The third issue involves using the benefits of acquiring communicative competence most efficiently. Here, I will focus on the use of a probing technique called "phased assertion" to uncover detailed knowledge about specific cultural domains.

Phased assertion has received a fair bit of attention in the literature on interviewing and research strategies (Douglas 1976; Agar 1980; Kirk and Miller 1986; Bernard 2006) as a means of drawing out and convincing informants that the field researcher is already an insider. This technique can involve varying degrees of deception, and it sometimes has been regarded as either adversarial or unethical (but see Agar [1980:93–94], for a discussion). My own take on phased assertion is a bit more nuanced and is based on Douglas's (1976:178) "presumption that the truth is best gotten by a combination of trust and cooperation with the other."

Phased assertion is a technique that exists within the context of fieldwork; it is just one mechanism by which the anthropologist demonstrates the kind of competence necessary to become regarded at some level as an in-the-know insider. Successful use of phased assertion necessarily requires possession of some prior insider knowledge, a demonstration to the informant that the researcher is ready for more detailed knowledge about a particular topic.

Although this article is based extensively on my own experience within a single Inuit community, the lessons from my fieldwork are equally applicable to the conduct of fieldwork in other small, bounded communities in

which anthropologists commonly work. Participant observation as a strategy for acquiring competence not only aids in developing rapport but also allows one to ask questions and collect data in a culturally appropriate manner. Phased assertion as a probing technique further establishes rapport while demonstrating competence to the informant.

Why write about these issues at all? Anthropologists have traditionally made their living through the use of participant observation, engaging in the lives of the communities under study. It is our bread-and-butter research strategy. In recent years, however, it seems as if long-term engagement with people and communities has fallen by the wayside in favor of more rapid-assessment approaches to the study of specific problems in small communities. Unfortunately, at least in the Arctic, such rapidly conducted studies often claim to be representative of a complex reality when, in fact, these studies tend to be very limited in scope and, as I will discuss, may capture something quite different than the researchers think they do. The greatest problem in field research may be an increasing reliance on what informants say or report, which, in the absence of significant time in the field, leads to two mistakes. The first mistake is assuming that informants are genuinely interested and committed to helping the researcher. The second is that a cultural beginner is very likely to misinterpret the contextual cues that surround the interviewer–interviewee interaction.

FIELD RESEARCH IN ULUKHAKTOK

Community Background

Ulukhaktok (formerly Holman) is a small Inuit community (population around 410) on Victoria Island, in the western Canadian Arctic. The vast majority of residents are Inuit. There is a small population of non-Native residents, but they are, with a few exceptions, transients working as nurses, teachers, and police officers, most of whom will spend 2 years or less in the settlement. The town itself was initially settled in the late 1930s, when the Hudson Bay Company and the Roman Catholic missionaries consolidated their regional operations and relocated to the current site. Although Inuit in the region immediately began trading at the settlement site, and some Inuit began living there, it wasn't until the late 1950s that Inuit began moving to the settlement to take up permanent residence. This was a lengthy process, but for the purposes of this article, it suffices to note that the transition from land- to settlement-based living was driven in part by access to public housing and increased social services, which the Canadian government began

providing around this time (see Condon [1996] for a discussion of Ulukhaktok; see Damas [2002] for a discussion of the Arctic in general).

Even though most Inuit were living "permanently" in the settlement by the mid-1960s, most continued to pursue an economic strategy in which hunting, trapping, and fishing were prominent. Termed a mixed economy (see Wenzel 1986; Langdon 1991), economic strategies are generally characterized as a combination of subsistence hunting and fishing supplemented by seasonal wage labor and fur sales, with fox and seal accounting for the bulk of sales.

This mixed strategy continued into the early 1980s, when a European Economic Community–mandated boycott on sealskin imports caused the collapse of the fur economies in the Arctic (Wenzel 1991). Since 1983, when the boycott went into effect, most observers have noted that Inuit have relied less on subsistence hunting and the cash generated by fur sales and more on wage labor and transfer payments (primarily in the form of social assistance) to generate money. Furthermore, money is increasingly used to purchase imported, processed, industrial foods (Duhaime, Chabot, and Gaudreault 2002) from the store. Today, only a few Inuit families generate the majority of their income via a combination of traditional activities, including trapping foxes, hunting seals, and guiding sports hunters. Even in these cases, however, these "old-timer" hunters' incomes are supplemented by at least some wage labor.

Hunting and fishing remain important to the local economy for a variety of reasons (Condon, Collings, and Wenzel 1995; Collings, Wenzel, and Condon 1998). Nevertheless, it is clear that community residents have experienced significant social, economic, and political changes over the past 40 years. These changes have attracted many researchers interested in documenting both the changes themselves and their presumed effects on Inuit culture and society, including (1) apparent growth in alcohol and drug use, (2) decline of the hunting economy, (3) poor prospects of economic development, (4) assumed loss of traditional knowledge and value systems, and (5) environmental change. All have been viewed as problems that have received significant research attention, both in Ulukhaktok and across the Arctic.

Community governance is accomplished by two different, sometimes competing institutions. The Hamlet of Ulukhaktok is the municipal government, led by an elected mayor and Hamlet Council. Hamlet administers and manages much of the community, assuming responsibilities similar to that of most municipal governments in North America. Hamlet is also the arm of the territorial government: Public housing management, social services, economic development, recreation, health, and education are all, to some degree, controlled by the municipality. The municipal government is the largest employer in the community.

The Ulukhaktok Community Corporation (UCC) is the local governance arm of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC). IRC and its attendant subsidiaries were the entity created by the land claims settlement between Inuit in the western Canadian Arctic (who, with the exception of Ulukhaktok, call themselves Inuvialuit rather than the more familiar Inuit). As a Native corporation, IRC's purpose is to regulate and manage affairs of local concern to UCC and IRC beneficiaries. In real terms, the UCC manages a range of cultural and economic affairs, occasionally overlapping Hamlet's jurisdiction. As an example of community corporation functions, one subdivision of the UCC, the Hunters and Trappers' Committee, oversees sports hunting, regulates access and use of Inuvialuit-owned lands, acts as a liaison between territorial wildlife managers and local hunters, and oversees IRC-funded, hunter-support programs. Other community corporation subdivisions at the local and regional levels include the Elders' Council, the Youth Council, the Economic Development Corporation, and the Land Administration, to name a few.

The existence of two governing entities in arctic communities has some implications for researchers. By law, before research can be conducted in Native communities, the project in question must be licensed. In the Northwest Territories, applications for a research license are made to the Aurora Research Institute (ARI), which reviews applications and grants licenses to researchers.

The application process is relatively straightforward with one caveat. ARI encourages community consultation for all projects that will be conducted with Native peoples, in Native communities, or on Native-controlled lands. It is generally expected that research projects will receive community approval before the application for a research license is filed with ARI. Even so, ARI conducts its own community consultation with the local municipal government and community corporation about the suitability of a project before it grants a license.

ARI, the municipal government, and the community corporation, then, form a three-headed gatekeeper that all researchers must satisfy before they can conduct any fieldwork. Given the small size of the community, a few individuals can and sometimes do wield a powerful influence over who does and does not receive a research license.

Obtaining a License and Gaining Access

It was partly because of the presence of these gatekeepers that I devoted significant time and resources toward licensing in one recent research project. During the summers of 2004 and 2005, I secured funding

to travel to Ulukhaktok to consult community members about the proposed project. In July 2004, I spent my time in the community visiting with Inuit, soliciting ideas about what form a research project on economics and subsistence hunting should take, how such a project should be executed, and how Inuit would be involved in all phases of the research process. I returned in 2005 to formally present the proposal for community approval. Despite prior consultation with community members, the outcome of the meeting was unclear to me.

My apprehension was probably misplaced, though justified. The previous summer I had witnessed an ugly scene in which a mining and exploration company was denied access to Inuvialuit lands. The decision was based both on the representative's condescending approach toward Inuit and on a perceived threat to an important caribou hunting ground. After a lengthy debate, the community declined to support the proposed work. The representative, however, declared his intentions to explore anyway by stating that his company would ignore the community's wishes. The company appealed directly to the federal government for permission to access those lands, which was ultimately granted. One year later, community members were still bitter about the incident.

A more immediate concern was my own social position in the community. I had long been affiliated with a family that was in opposition to the family that controlled the community corporation. The chair at the time was as openly hostile to me as an Inuk could publicly be. He had already attempted to disrupt the scheduling of the meeting at which I would request letters of approval. So I was a bit anxious as my own meeting began. I handed out copies of a document summarizing the research proposal. I began by explaining the project's aims, methods, and expected results. Not 3 minutes went by before a hand was in the air.

> What kinds of benefits will we see from this research? What good will your research be to us?

Ooooh! I was excited on hearing a question I expected, even hoped, to hear. Trying not to sound too smug, I launched into my prepared answer: A database on subsistence production and food networks would be invaluable for community-based decisions on wildlife management and hunter-support programs.

I had hardly started in on my explanation when I noticed a woman tap the questioner on the shoulder. She whispered but loudly enough that everyone in the room could hear her.

It says on page 3 he is going to give us lots of money.

The questioner turned back to me. "OK, it's good then."

There were no more questions. The letters of support were ready the next day.

In retrospect, I should not have been surprised that money would be the deciding factor in obtaining a permit, although money as an issue did not occur to me until I began filling out ARI's licensing paperwork some time later. The first section on the application form asks for the investigator's address and affiliations. The first question in the second section? How much money from the research will contribute to economic development? That is, how much money is the investigator going to spend in the community? Only later on the application form were applicants required to explain and justify the research project. To me, the message was quite clear: From ARI's perspective, the most important issue in community-based or collaborative research, at least in the western Canadian Arctic, is financial. That this appears to be the case here is noteworthy, particularly considering a growing trend in collaborative research and academic activities not only in the North (see Clifford 2004; Huntingdon et al. 1999; Krupnik and Jolly 2002, but also in the discipline generally see Lassiter [2005] for a discussion and multiple examples).

Access and the Research Script

The trouble with the licensing process is that most researchers seem to believe that receiving approval for research is a final step. Once the community and ARI license the project, researchers think they have unfettered access to the community. Unfortunately, there is another layer of access that most outsiders neither penetrate nor, I suspect, even perceive. "Research" is not a novel phenomenon in Arctic communities, and during any given period of time, there may be multiple projects under way. There is also a high probability that these different projects are collecting similar if not identical data. As an example, during a period of fieldwork in Ulukhaktok between March and November 2007, there were seven projects in some stage of execution or completion. In addition to my own project, a graduate student was collecting data on climate change and economic development, and an archaeologist was examining early European contacts and running a field school. Additionally, several surveys were under way: a food consumption and nutrition study, an education and household survey, a long-term project on cultural literacy, and a long-term

harvest study. Finally, two mining companies were carrying out exploration activities, and the local school was administering an environmental education project.

Given the high volume of researchers who move through these communities, it should not be a surprise that the act of research has become highly scripted. For Inuit, the act of data collection invariably involves interviews, of which there are various kinds. Economic and household demographic surveys, food consumption surveys, and harvest surveys are some of the more common ones. Inuit who are interviewed expect to be paid for their time and the information they provide.

The interviews themselves are also scripted. During an interview, respondents tend to assume a rigid posture and adopt a monotone when answering questions. For older informants, translation is also expected, although nearly all Inuit in Ulukhaktok today comprehend English very well, and many speak it fluently. Translators are also paid for their time, though in most cases, their labor is in providing a transcription of the taped interview. Translators rarely, if ever, translate Innuinaqtun into English during an interview.

Despite these expectations about what research is, however, the exchange of money for time and information does not necessarily mean that the information provided will be accurate or that Inuit, by agreeing to participate, are necessarily interested in the research that is being conducted. Some of this reluctance has to do with Inuit ideas and values about the invasive nature of direct questions, which I will discuss. Another source of reticence must certainly be the frequency with which Inuit are faced with research projects.

One research exercise that has been popular over the past 2 decades is the collection of life histories from Inuit elders. This interest is clearly a kind of salvage ethnology, though most projects tend to be unfocused collections of stories from what are variously called the "old days," "long ago," or "traditional times." Collectors include all manner of social scientists and government officials, but Native organizations periodically send their own employees to communities to capture stories and images on film. Generally, interviewees are rarely questioned about specific topics and are merely asked to tell a story. "What was life like long ago?" seems to be a common question, for example. The interview is simply an uninterrupted narrative, taken at face value and, it seems, rarely analyzed afterward.

I discovered some of the consequences of this tradition of data collection during my dissertation research in 1997, during which I examined Inuit life course construction (reported in Collings 2000, 2001). As part of that fieldwork, I spent quite a bit of time and energy interviewing Inuit elders about life stages and life course transitions.

One of these interviews was with an elder named William (a pseudonym). William was one of the oldest Inuit in the community, highly regarded as a wealth of information, and most important, willing to talk. I sat down with him and his granddaughter, who acted as a translator, and explained the research project and the informed consent procedure. Once we finished with these introductory items, I began the interview by asking about the Innuinaqtun terms for different life stages.

William responded to the question by relating his early childhood memories, which focused on where he remembered living when he was a small child, what camp life was like, and how difficult life could be in those long-ago times. William's response was nowhere close to answering the question I had asked, but I had enough experience to know that Inuit often answer questions by referencing personal experience, and elders occasionally use metaphor to answer a straightforward question. I figured that it would soon become clear what William's answer was.

After 10 minutes, however, and by exchanging glances with the translator, it was clear that the question had not even registered with William. In his mind, he was being interviewed, and he had been interviewed enough times to know that I, like every other outsider who had interviewed him, must be interested in his life story. Cognitively, I think William simply hit the play button on his mental tape recorder and told me the same story he had told countless others in the past. Ultimately, it took several sessions after he had given me the highlights of his life story before William understood that I was interested in other information. Only then could he be convinced to talk about the kinds of topics I was interested in recording.

Fortunately, I had the time to make repeated visits, and I had a translator (his granddaughter) who both understood the kinds of data I was interested in collecting and was motivated enough to provide a running translation of William's narrative. Too often, researchers have limited time to spend in a community and are handicapped even further by translators who conform to the script. Elders simply tell their story without interruption, so there is no point providing a running translation; transcribing the tape later is often thought to suffice.

These handicaps and their effects on the quality of interview data were most evident in a research episode I witnessed during the spring of 2007. I had been back in the community for a month and, during a visit to the coffee shop one afternoon, stumbled into a discussion between two government employees from Inuvik. They declared their intention was to collect data from elders about a place called "Parry's Rocks." I was intrigued by this, mostly because no one present seemed to know where Parry's Rocks was or who, indeed, the mysterious Parry was. The agents themselves were in

Ulukhaktok on other business and were doing this interviewing on behalf of a colleague. When I left the coffee shop, I was sure that I wanted to watch at least one of these interviews for no other reason than to try and figure out what it was they and the historian backing them were interested in.

My wish came true the next evening. Earlier that day, I had given John (a pseudonym) some starter rope for his gas-powered ice auger. John was very happy and insisted that I eat with his family that evening. After we finished dinner, the government agents entered the house to visit and to conduct an interview. While we had tea and visited, the discussion of the interviewing project emerged, and there was a debate about who Parry might have been and where Parry's Rocks might be. No one else in the room was sure about either the person or the place, but after a few minutes, it became clear to me: The agents had confused Sir William Edward Parry, the British naval officer and explorer, with Robert Peary, the first to reach the North Pole. Parry had wintered on Melville Island from 1819 to 1820. During that time, he explored Viscount Melville Sound and traveled far enough on the ice to have spotted and named both Victoria Island (on which Ulukahktok is located) and Banks Island to the west. I explained this to the others in the room, which caused both surprise and discomfort. Inuit were surprised that I possessed such detailed knowledge. The agents were clearly uncomfortable, as they realized at that moment that they were in the presence of an apparent expert.

Parry's Rocks itself is more widely known as Winter Harbour and is about 500 miles north and east of Ulukhaktok. The agents were trying to collect local knowledge about the site and about whether Inuit had ever visited there to either trade with Parry himself or, later, to raid the cache of supplies that Parry left behind. With the subject matter now defined, we adjourned to the living room. As the interviewer set up her equipment and the translator was seated next to John, I took the opportunity to ask John a simple question in the confusion: Have you ever been to that place?

The response, which I will paraphrase here, was, "Long ago, when I was a young man [in the early 1950s], I traveled by dogs to Melville with some other people. We were hunting bears. But we went the other way; we never went to that place. I don't know anything about it."

As far as everyone was concerned, the interview was over even before it started. John knew nothing specifically about the place itself, except where it was. Even if he knew anything, he would have qualified his knowledge by stating that he had only heard about it from other people but could not know for sure.

My initial question and John's response were in English, as John's is very good. But the research script called for a translator, so the official,

recorded interview followed. John was asked the same question I had asked, and he responded in the characteristic manner of the interviewee: a rigid, stiff posture and monotone typical of older people who are answering interview questions and reciting a life history.

My Innuinaqtun is quite limited, but it was clear to me from the outset that John was not answering the question. To my mind, the question he seemed to hear was, "Tell me what you know about early explorers," not "Tell me what you know about Parry and Winter Harbour." He spent 30 minutes telling stories he had heard from his father-in-law about meeting Stefansson, an explorer who traveled widely in the area during the early 1900s. The interviewers had no way of knowing this, as they were not receiving a translation and did not have the kind of access that would have encouraged John to provide a frank answer. John was following the script and relating something that he thought the researchers might like to hear. In return for his time, John was paid $120.

TWO STRATEGIES FOR DATA COLLECTION: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND PHASED ASSERTION

There are other anecdotes I could include here, but those reported above stand out as both mildly humorous and uncomfortable commentaries on the process of doing research in Inuit communities. It is relatively easy to poke fun at poorly trained interviewers, exemplified by the Parry's Rocks episode. The episode is, however, a subtle reminder that all field researchers are at risk of being misled. Witnessing the episode certainly caused me to reflect on my own situation within the community. How can I be certain that I am not being misled? Do I have access beyond that of the institutional gatekeeper? How would I know if I did? The answer is that I am reasonably confident that I do have the kind of access that allows for the collection of good data. In the following sections, I will describe two strategies that generate that confidence in my own data collection.

Participant Observation and the Acquisition of Cultural Competence

There is a large body of literature on the merits of participant observation as a research strategy (much of it summarized in Bernard [2006]), and there is no need to repeat it here. There are, however, some elements of participant observation that are critical to conducting successful field research. These include the importance of building rapport and developing trust with informants, becoming involved in community life as a participant

and not merely a researcher, and most important, developing what Briggs (1986) calls "metacommunicative competence." At the root of all of these elements is time: Field researchers must be willing to spend the time in the field necessary to adequately succeed.

These are, of course, rather basic elements of participant observation, but it seems that awareness of them is lost somewhere between the graduate course in ethnographic research methods (assuming there is such a course) and the completion of the fieldwork itself. The literature on and about working with Inuit, discussed below, makes this abundantly clear.

For people specializing in Eskimo peoples, it has been long known that Eskimos place an extraordinarily high value on the autonomy of the individual and have a deep respect for individual integrity. This emphasis on integrity has consequences in different cultural domains. Crago (1992; Crago, Annahatak, and Ningiuruvik 1993) explores these issues of autonomy from a linguistic socialization and child development perspective. In particular, she and her colleagues note that Inuit methods of instruction place greater emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge by observation rather than direct instruction. Children are expected to be seen and not heard and to comprehend instructions but not ask questions. According to Crago, Inuit generally see no need to directly engage their children in conversation: Adults, who already have knowledge, do not need a child's knowledge to be repeated back to them. Children are expected to display their readiness to acquire additional knowledge through their behavior, which demonstrates their maturity and ability to process adult knowledge and concepts. Likewise, Briggs (1970) notes that asking questions is a sure sign that the questioner generally lacks wisdom and social grace (or in local terms, *ihuma*). The implications for fieldwork should be clear: Anthropologists and others are very much like children, especially when they first enter the field. They do not understand the web of social relations in a community, lack important understandings of basic Inuit concepts, and are, economically and socially, effectively helpless. Further compounding the problem is that the researcher begins asking questions about very specific, often complex, and occasionally sensitive cultural domains.

Both Fienup-Riordan (2001) and Morrow (1996) have noted that among Yup'ik (an Eskimo group in western Alaska), direct questions are frequently viewed as coercive acts. One cannot deny a direct request even if it violates the principles of individual autonomy. Furthermore, both Fienup-Riordan and Morrow point out that Yup'ik tend to choose the path of least resistance when they are exposed to questioning simply to escape the uncomfortable situation. That is, Yup'ik (and, by extension, all Eskimo peoples) are more likely to answer minimally, withhold information, lie, or

provide an answer they think the questioner wants to hear, provided that their behavior will end the questioning.

Searles (2000) likewise notes these features of Inuit culture and describes his own initial attempts at data collection in Iqaluit on Baffin Island. After a period in which his innocent questions were met with evasion and hostility, he describes the process whereby he slowly discovered how to acquire knowledge by observation and to gain a certain degree of cultural competence. Demonstrating his own competence, in turn, improved rapport and acceptance by Inuit. Eventually, he was even able to ask questions, albeit in a culturally appropriate manner.

From reading this literature, one gets the sense that Inuit personality is a significant hurdle to field research or that asking questions is a kind of cultural taboo. My sense, however, is that Inuit themselves are not inherently hostile to questions. Inuit ask each other questions all the time, make demands, and, most certainly, place each other in uncomfortable situations. The problem with asking questions is not that Inuit dislike questions or questioning per se but rather that most outsiders are in violation of basic cultural norms. Briggs (1986), for example, in his discussion of fieldwork in Mexico, notes many of the same issues with his informants as anthropologists have seen with Inuit: Questions are considered rude, informants tend to be indifferent or outright hostile to interviewers, and interviews tend to be less than ideal.

Briggs asserts that the problem is one of acquiring metacommunicative competence. For Briggs, interviewing during fieldwork can be a less than satisfactory experience because the interviewer–respondent interaction suffers from significant problems. Many interviewers lack even a passing familiarity with the normal rules of communication, yet they, in the context of an interview, tend to focus on esoterica. Interviewers who have yet to master even the basics of culture begin demanding information about cultural domains that are best left to the cultural experts. In addition, it is the interviewer who controls the interview: asking the questions, recording the answers, and displaying characteristics more typical of juveniles and abruptly changing topics, interrupting the respondent, and pursuing topics of interest to the interviewer rather than the speaker (Briggs, 1986).

All of these issues are clearly at work in Inuit communities. Transient researchers generally display the communicative competence of children, and by asking questions of Inuit, interviewers expect that a cultural expert will cede control over a conversation to a rank novice. It is no wonder that research has become a script in which Inuit feel no necessary connection to the interviewer or to the veracity of the statements they make within the context of an interview. In this light, the script of the interview is also a kind

of mechanism by which Inuit and especially elders protect themselves: By responding in Innuinaqtun, the elder has little worry of being interrupted or having the course of the narrative shifted from topic to topic. By refraining from translation from Innuinaqtun into English, the respondent can pick and choose the topics of interest.

Participant observation is often championed as a means of gaining access to informants, building trust, and understanding culture as its members experience it. If a researcher desires to acquire sophisticated and detailed knowledge about specific knowledge domains, there is no shortcut: One must spend time in a community to both develop rapport and acquire the competence necessary to interact with others appropriately. Unfortunately, in the contemporary Canadian Arctic, although the number of individuals engaging in research has seemingly increased, the time that these researchers are spending in the field—acquiring competence and becoming engaged in the lives of Inuit—seems to have declined precipitously.

Phased Assertion as an Interviewing Technique

Because asking direct questions is considered an inappropriate demand of a person and because questioners are often viewed as rude and childish, bearing the label "researcher" is rarely considered a good thing. Fieldworkers must, by necessity, find a more suitable means of collecting data. Even in my own case, with a great deal of time under my belt and significant inroads within the community, the suggestion of an "interview" is generally not a good idea; data are better collected by other means because of the script that accompanies the interview. However, sometimes, the interview is unavoidable. If one intends to compensate informants for their time, the interview is one venue in which such payments become formalized. Nevertheless, the interview remains an arena in which Inuit may not be truthful even when the interviewer has a high degree of rapport with informants.

By far the most effective method I have used in interviewing Inuit is the probing technique called "baiting" (Agar 1980:93) or "phased assertion" (Kirk and Miller 1986:48). Bernard (2006:221–22) discusses the use of this probe in the context of his own work with Nähñu. The method, however, is much older. Evans Pritchard (1976), for example, used the technique in his work with the Azande.

The basic premise of the technique is that the interviewer acts as if she or he already has some knowledge about a topic. By hinting at the possession of some specialized knowledge, the informant is motivated to provide more information. Agar (1980), in particular, champions this method as a means for promoting rapport and gaining some control over how an informant

might respond to a question. An assertion of prior knowledge should, for example, lead to greater openness; a deliberately incorrect assertion should lead the informant to correct the interviewer. Kirk and Miller (1986) tout the utility of the method as a stepwise process to data collection. The assertion of prior knowledge leads to acquisition of a bit more knowledge, which, in turn, leads to more detailed knowledge, until a more complete understanding of a particular domain is achieved.

In the above cases, the success of the probe can sometimes rest on deception, convincing the informant that the interviewer possesses information he or she may not actually have. My own use of the method was a bit different. I did not have to pretend I already had knowledge to convince informants to open up. It was clear to my informants that I already knew some of the answers to the questions I was asking, and there was no point in informants trying to withhold other information.

The use of my modified phased assertion came quite by accident during my first fieldwork in Ulukhaktok in 1992. During that year, I was collecting what are commonly known as harvest data, information about where informants were hunting and fishing, what they were taking, and with whom they were sharing their catches. Informants were interviewed every second week.

I quickly discovered how sensitive Inuit could be to the intrusiveness of these interviews. Interviews followed most of the script, with only the translator being the missing element. This ambivalence toward interviews was made explicit during one visit with an informant. I had stopped in one evening during a period of bad weather, and my informant and I had spent more than an hour playing cribbage, drinking tea, and talking about the day's events. I asked if I could interview him about his hunting. His response was icy: "Gee, and I thought you came over here to visit. As a friend."

After that rebuke, I switched strategies and began visiting informants much more frequently, taking care to separate visits that were designed to be purely social with those that were arranged ahead of time as interviews. It was during these social visits that I discovered I was actually collecting more information than I was during interview visits. I had not chosen to visit socially with the intent of collecting data, but hunting and fishing are important activities for Inuit men. During a social visit, it was simply natural for Inuit to talk about hunting and related topics. These social visits found Inuit to be much more open and expansive about topics I was interested in myself, so they would talk at length about a recent hunting trip, the activities of their parents and siblings, the state of their hunting equipment, and future plans.

By the time an official interview was scheduled, I usually had detailed knowledge about a good many questions on the interview form. My interviews would therefore begin with statements about where my informant had traveled,

what he had caught, and how long he was out on the land. Inuit were then left to elaborate on these assertions, providing details about particular routes taken to get to a location, trail conditions, and the quality of the game taken. Because I already had this basic knowledge of an informant's hunting activities, I was able to ask questions about food exchanges between households, data that I was collecting but that were much less a part of the public domain and not information Inuit would share in casual conversation.

It did not take very long for informants to become accustomed to the regularity of these interviews and to understand that I already knew a great deal about their activities. Some of the more active hunters began to use me as a resource for their own purposes. Realizing I had detailed knowledge of what other hunters were up to, I was commonly asked about trail conditions, where other hunters had found animals, or how much another hunter had caught. One informant, who also became a close friend, frequently opened our visits by questioning me, asking, "What's new in town?" When it was time to interview, he would merely open the interview by stating, "You tell me what I did, and I'll see if you got it right."

Subsistence is in many ways a very public domain for Inuit. Not only is subsistence highly salient culturally, it tends to also be very obvious. Inuit not only like to talk about hunting and fishing, but it is relatively easy to observe such activities, at least tangentially. In Ulukhaktok, there are really only two routes in and out of the settlement: by open water or sea ice in Queen's Bay or over land by the airport road. The activities of hunters are easily monitored with a pair of binoculars and a little knowledge about the snowmobiles and boats that individuals own. So, in a sense, phased assertion with harvest studies might hardly be construed as a novel technique.

A second example is perhaps more appropriate, as it involves the use of single, lengthy interviews about personal food-sharing networks. During 2007, I was in Ulukhaktok again, collecting both harvest data and food-exchange data. As part of this data collection, I worked with a sample of Inuit and asked them to report on whom they shared food with and the intensity with which the partners they named shared with each other. The interview required that I generate a list of alters whom the informant shared with, followed by the informant's assessment of how strong his or her ties were to those alters. Food-sharing behavior is generally much less public and can be very subtle, and it is not normally a topic of conversation. Indeed, that people share with each other is a general expectation, a cultural pattern that often goes unquestioned.

My initial attempts at these interviews yielded rather short lists of sharing partners. One problem was that even though I was doing interviewing, the way that I was interviewing was entirely novel. I had a computer with

me, for one thing, and this alone was unusual. I was also asking questions that no Inuk had really ever been asked before: "Name all of the people who you share country food with" was an unusual request to say the least.

I later learned that the first informants I interviewed really did have very small networks, but it was nevertheless clear that it would be necessary to prod informants to uncover regular sharing partners. When an informant came to what he or she believed was the end of the list or at least enough, I would ask a series of simple questions to encourage him or her: "What about your x? Surely, you share food with your x?" x being a category of relative. This kind of general phrasing, asking for a kin category, worked in two ways. The most important way was that it reminded the informant I had command of the kinship network. My command of kinship was reinforced by my assertion of the informant's relation to an alter, as the alter was named in the list. This was a perception reiterated later in the interview, when I specifically asked for the informant's relationship to each of the respondents and could assert that, for example, "So-and-so is your older brother," using the appropriate kinship term in Innuinaqtun. The second benefit of naming kinship categories was that it led the informant to consider other possibilities, jogging his or her memories about sharing partners.

These kinds of demonstrations of my knowledge about kinship, however superficial, convinced informants that I already had at least some detailed knowledge about sharing networks and, consequently, encouraged greater detail on the part of informants in assessing their relationships with others in their networks.

The logical extension of this technique—demonstrating detailed knowledge of the domains I was interested in—was that new and unexpected information began to fall into my lap, material previously uncovered. One example of this kind of new (to me, at least) knowledge occurred toward the end of my most recent trip during a visit to a friend and informant. Over the course of the previous year, Simon (a pseudonym) and I had made a number of hunting and fishing trips together, and his house had become a regular stop on my evening rounds. I usually stopped by for tea every other night. During one of these visits, Simon had his maps out, the topographic maps that every hunter has in his house and that are frequently at his disposal. Such maps are useful for pointing out to others the locations of specific kills and travel routes or reminiscing about outpost camps and growing up on the land.

On this evening, we were sitting and talking and getting ready to travel to Fish Lake, some 50 miles away, a popular place for fishing for arctic char. Because of some bad weather that had blown the land clear of snow, Simon had decided that he didn't want to make the trip this year: Too many exposed

rocks would damage his machine, and given that Fish Lake was a regulated fishery, he would be limited in how many fish he could take. Innocently, I asked if there were any other places closer to town where one could catch spawning char. We discussed some large lakes closer to town and noted that some people did fish at those lakes with some success. I pointed at another large lake in the same vicinity and asked why no one fished that lake. Surely, given the depth and length of the river, there must be some char in there. Why didn't people fish it for char?

A pause, longer than normal, tipped me off that I was about to get some new information. "Well, there are fish in that lake. But no one knows about that except my dad and me. Not even my younger brothers know." He went on to describe some different places where there were spawning beds and also noted that there were rocks on the shore that his grandfather had placed to mark the location—but not Inukshuks, the usual markings. It made intuitive sense: Simon had grown up in that place, as did his father, and they spend considerable time in that area even now. His parents fish there in the fall, sometimes going to set the nets before freeze up, using ATVs, when they go to their cabin for a couple of weeks each year.

How secret was the knowledge? Given the small number of Inuit who grew up in that particular location, it would be possible to keep knowledge of that place reasonably quiet. Only one individual admitted to knowing the location, which he had discovered himself, some decades previously. Inquiries with other Inuit, however, did not yield the same information. Indeed, I was told by others that there was either no way there could be very many char in that lake (for various reasons) or that they had never heard of anyone fishing that lake for char.

It is worth noting that my use of phased assertion as a technique is a bit different from that of others. In the literature, much of the discussion about phased assertion as an interview technique tends to focus on how one does it and what the consequences of phased assertion might be. My sense, however (and I am also paraphrasing Briggs 2007), is that the technique, like the interview, is not a separate, isolated piece of the research puzzle but rather part of the entire research enterprise. In a way, long-term participant observation itself is a kind of phased assertion, a process by which the researcher acquires and demonstrates competence in a way that begins to feed on itself, leading to greater cultural insight.

As for consequences, my position is that using phased assertion as a technique simply to try and fool people into giving up information will not work in small communities. Just as the fieldworker is studying the community, so, too, is the community studying the fieldworker. In the Arctic, it becomes obvious very quickly whether a researcher is culturally competent.

Simply making assertions in hopes of acquiring more information is not likely to work in the absence of other kinds of rapport and trust building.

Although this discussion has been based on my own fieldwork among Inuit, this view of phased assertion as a component of participant observation would be applicable in virtually any research setting. After all, phased assertion is really a two-part process. One part of the process is the basic substance of the assertion, or the *what* of the process. What is it the researcher wants to ask about? The other part and the one that is much more subtle is the *how* of the process. How is the assertion phrased? By necessity, the use of phased assertion requires some basic insider knowledge of how to communicate and demonstrate to others that one is, indeed, an insider worthy of greater access to knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

Researchers who wish to work in Inuit communities in Canada are by law required to gain permission before they can begin collecting data. However, institutional access does not equate to rapport or guarantee that Inuit will willingly participate in research. Simon would not tell just any outsider about secret fishing spots or drug distribution networks or complex spiritual beliefs. Anthropologists and other researchers, however, seem to expect that such knowledge is ready and available to any and all who ask. For Inuit, research tends to conform to a specific script that includes expected behaviors on the part of both interviewer and informant and seems designed to protect Inuit integrity. Inuit are under no obligation to fully cooperate or tell the truth. Because of these constraints, one must find ways to escape the limitations of the research script or somehow convince Inuit to cooperate with the researcher.

Participant observation as a research strategy allows the fieldworker to overcome some of the limitations of being defined as a "researcher" in an Inuit community. However, although the frequently stated goal of participant observation is to become acclimated to the cultural setting, to build rapport with informants, and to understand the culture from the insider's perspective, I suggest here that participant observation is necessary as a mechanism for acquiring communicative competence. The principal goal of participant observation, at least with Inuit, is to demonstrate an understanding of the cultural rules of interaction and to build trust with informants by displaying some comprehension of Inuit culture beyond that of a child.

Once such competence is on display and informants are willing to open up, phased assertion as a probing technique is very effective as a method

for encouraging informants to provide information about a particular topic. The method has the additional advantage of further demonstrating cultural competency.

The underlying issue for both of these techniques is time. Participant observation and the acquisition of cultural competency require time: time to both understand how to behave and interact appropriately and to build trust and relationships that will lead informants to care enough to provide useful and accurate information. It is perhaps both ironic and alarming that, at least in my experience, the trend in Arctic fieldwork is for researchers to spend less, not more, time in the field.

NOTE

1. Following standard practice, *Eskimo* here is used as a categorical term to refer to peoples who speak a language within the Eskimo branch of the Eskimo-Aleut family. These include Yup'ik, Inupiat, Inuit, and Kalaliit, among others—all of whom would refer to themselves using their own designation.

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