# Master's Series on Field Research

A series of interviews with major figures in field research conducted in the early 1980s
by Peter Blanck

## Transcript of interview with
## Arthur Turner

Peter Blanck: I wondered if you could talk about clinical interviewing as you understand it and before even starting the interviewing what types of preparation usually interviewers go through or how they gain access or develop trust or get their foot in the door, these types of very initial issues? Do you just take the most successful person or do you always go to the Chief Executive Officer or do you use a friend that you know in the business or...?

Arthur Turner: Well I guess it usually works that, that you have a relationship with somebody in the organization or at least you know him or her, and I think that if it's part of the research project why you have be able to try to - you have to be able to have that client person - that contact person think that the research that you're doing is worthwhile in some sense, either because it will benefit that person or the organization in some way or more likely because they agree with you that the topic that you're looking into is one that is important and that will be useful. And so they have to have some kind of feeling of wishing to collaborate I think before you can really hope to get very far. I haven't had too much experience of having to go in absolutely cold with somebody that I didn't know before and where I had to completely start from scratch and, in explaining what it was I wanted to be doing. But I think the basic idea is that there has to some intention to collaborate or wish to be helpful on the part of at least one fairly important person in the organization as an initial way to get started.

Peter Blanck: And how do you, how is one way that you have developed this - I'm going to push on that a little - how, how do you develop that collaboration over a period of little projects that build up or personal relationships or...?

Arthur Turner: Well, some of it comes out of personal relationships or out of a past consulting relationship. I think I've had - I think it also comes from writing a letter, maybe to somebody that you don't know. We're awfully lucky here because our alumni network is a very important source of people who almost start with the supposition that you have some kind of a right to bother them. But I think for instance you can write a letter and describe basically what it is you're after and ask to have a meeting to describe your project more and have them ask some more questions about it and then they either do or do not indicate enough interest to proceed.

Peter Blanck: How do you initially describe your project - so now you assume you've got your foot in the door and in what type of terms do you try to couch your research project? How do you say, "Well they have just as much to benefit from as we do," or, "It would be nice for them to help in a scholarly effort...." How do you...?

Arthur Turner: Well I think it's this, it's this statement of a real world problem that you think the other person is also doing to identify as a valid issue about which more knowledge is needed and also as an issue about which if there was more knowledge, that knowledge would be practically useful to them. I think it doesn't want to be in very academic terms. It wants to be related to concrete reality that the person is wrestling with. For example I'm approaching various members of management consulting firms now with the idea of doing some research on what makes management consulting

relationships effective or ineffective, and I think just a statement that there seems to be a need for people to understand more about that, if you put it in simple language as something that a practicing consultant or a managing partner of a consulting firm automatically agrees with and so there's no problem, and so they're likely to say, "Well that sounds like an interesting and useful thing, let's talk some more about it."

Peter Blanck: Where you don't know the culture, do you recommend - the corporate culture - observation coming before this, learning about the culture and then from observation, from seeing how people talk about what they do and what they actually do then deriving the actual interview schedule...?

Arthur Turner: Oh yeah - I think that's right, and I was thinking more of how to get started on that initial contact, but I think the follow-up from that would be spending some time in that place before you start any series of more formal interviews. In the case of a manufacturing company, they usually want to show you around - I never feel I know how to begin to understand the more complicated aspects of a culture until I have some first-hand familiarity with what goes on in the place, and what the factory floor looks like, and what kind of stuff they're making, and what some of their business problems are. And I would think there needs to be a day or more of just kind of being there before you feel comfortable and before the other people feel comfortable in talking with you and the more of that preliminary time there can be, the better. I think an interesting question is whether the extent of which you tell people ahead of time what are the specific questions you're going to be asking and I think a lot of people do that. I mean that have a sort of interview guide and they share that with the people that are going to be interviewed ahead of time. I prefer not to do that. I prefer to have it more of a - to me that sort of gives the whole interview a kind of formality and gives the person a chance to prepare too much to what he or she's going to say to specific questions. But I think they do need to know what you look like, that you are an O.K. person, that you seem to be genuinely interested in what this organization is like and what kinds of things go on there and a little bit of the language so you can be seen as somebody who has some capacity to see things from their point of view.

Peter Blanck: And once you've made this initial contact from, and observe for a couple of days so you can talk in terms that they're familiar with, what would be the next step? You would draw up your schedule of questions, or the types of questions in terms that they could understand by which get at the types of areas you're interested in and the types of...?

Arthur Turner: Yeah, I'm most of this kind of thing that I've done has been very unstructured. So that rather than a list of questions, it's more likely to be a list of topics or areas, and I might have a conversation or two with the principal contact person where I would be saying that these are the sorts of things I'm planning to be exploring and maybe get some input from him as to whether other people would find those topics interesting and whether to leave off some, some aspect or even to add something else that he said - "Well why don't you also find out what they think about something else?" But I would really go in with nothing other than a list of maybe ten areas, and I don't care in what

order they're covered and in fact I like to give the person being interviewed a lot of opportunity to talk about whichever of these topics they want to first. So, I like to start with some open-ended question that allows them to talk about whatever they feel like talking about first, because I think the order in which different things come up can be an interesting and useful piece of information in itself and if the interview guide is too structured or if it's shared ahead of time with the other person, why then you're opposing your order on the other person.

Peter Blanck: I think it's interesting also that the order in which they talk about your questions - but what about other types of things while they're talking? Do you look for how they're dressed, what their office is like, how they answer certain types of questions - in a defensive way or in a certain type of manner? How do you take that into account in your scheme?

Arthur Turner: Well, I'm afraid I didn't do it systematically. I think I absorb it holistically to some extent.

Peter Blanck: What would you absorb - maybe if you could run through - it's sort of knowledge but...

Arthur Turner: Gosh, there are so many things. I suppose whether we stay at the desk or move over to another corner of the office, whether we're interrupted, whether the phone rings, whether the person seems to be enjoying this process by his sort of non-verbal behavior and body language, and I think the extent to which the other person is waiting for me to say something or the extent to which they've got lots of things to say and I'm sort of struggling to keep up with them are cues as to how important this is to that person and how much of an imposition it's being perceived as, and I think I would try to make some notes on those impressions and include those in the record, but I'm afraid I don't have any systematic scheme or even list of particular variables I look at.

Peter Blanck: How do you make your notes? What sort of things do you jot down? Do you write or do you write after the interview or do you use a tape recorder?

Arthur Turner: I haven't had much experience using a tape recorder though I have sometimes. I'm more comfortable using a little secretary's pad and writing notes in a kind of a short, illegible scribble, and then immediately after the interview, I dictate from those notes into a tape recorder or even write it out longhand - but different people do this in different ways and that seems to be what I'm comfortable with. One of the things about taking some notes is that it communicates that you're interested - it slows the pace down a little bit and somehow allows more time for being thoughtful and introspective at times, it also gives you a little sense of how nervous the other person is or open they're being, because the extent to which your note-taking bothers them - and often the simple act of closing the notebook or stopping to take notes before the end of hour or however long you have - can be a very useful kind of shifting of the gears and a whole new thing can come up then as a result of stopping taking notes. And if I weren't taking notes, I

wouldn't have the virtue of the stopping of it, which often seems to bring out something else.

Peter Blanck: But you walk in - let's say you come into the room and you start interviewing a person - how do you tell them basically that you're going to take notes or reassure them...?

Arthur Turner: OK. Well, I say that I hope you don't mind if I make a few notes. I find it really important to try to remember what different people say and, after talking with so many people, it's hard to keep it all straight, so if it's OK with you, I'll take a few notes. And it happens, some of the interviews in this kind of research are much more delicate than others. Some people are much more defensive than others or much more concerned or less trustful, and in those cases I think you can - by their reaction to the fact of your taking notes - you can maybe discover that and then stop taking notes if that seems to be the useful thing to do.

Peter Blanck: Do you gauge and change your style of note-taking interpersonal behavior as a function of...?

Arthur Turner: I think so. Yeah, I think so, and it's a problem, because then you end up with some of the richest and most exciting interviews, but you have the least amount of data because they've been ones where you really haven't taken notes, and maybe because of the scheduling, you haven't had time afterwards to sit down and dictate from memory as well as you want to, so it's really frustrating to come home and, if you've had three or four interviews during the day and you've only got just very sketchy notes on the best interview and to try to remember what went on - but, you know, I'm not very - I do it differently with different people.

Peter Blanck: And do you find you change systematically so as to get better interviews?

Arthur Turner: Well I guess that I don't know....

Peter Blanck: Go to IBM, wear a three-piece suit but you go to...

Arthur Turner: I suppose. I've never been very conscious of it. I think, Peter, one thing that's kind of interesting - and I wonder how it's coming out in your research - I think that some people are more interested and good at kind of adapting to different cultures than others, and I think I'm fairly good at that. I think it partly has to do with being brought up in other countries and having a lot of experience in other countries. I think that is sort of an intercultural sensitivity that one has that is very useful when going into different kinds of corporate cultures, and I think you absorb some of that without having to think very much about it. So, I'm sure that - I remember turning up years and years ago at one IBM place without a coat and tie and, so I guess that was an example of not thinking ahead of time about how you - and it made a difference. I was -.

Peter Blanck: What other types of skills do you think are necessary?

Arthur Turner: Well, I think that there are two basic things. I think there's this thing which is sort of a general curiosity and sensitivity to different kinds of cultural environments, being interested in trying to understand patterns of behavior that are different or strange to you and trying to see them from the other people's point of view that, I think comes from - I mean some people have that more than others and I think also certain kinds of training and experiences are useful. I think it's too bad that, in the old days in organizational behavior area, I think a lot more people came out of or had training in cultural anthropology than you see now and I think that's a very important kind of orientation and training for doing this kind of work and I wish that the cultural anthropologists hadn't gotten less interested industrial organizations and the human organizations and that the organizational behavior people wouldn't have gotten less interested in the anthropological tradition. I'd like to see that come back. Anyway, that's all under this one topic of generalized intercultural curiosity and seeing things from the functional point of view, sort of asking what purpose, for that social system does this piece of behavior perform and the second general area of skill or ability I think is more clinical psychological counseling orientation out of which comes developing the ability to listen to feelings as well as to facts and to implicit as well as explicit meanings and the ability to, test out as you're proceeding, your present understanding of what is being said. I was, as many of us, much influenced by some exposure to Rogerian counseling and a, and I think, and in fact the original orientation as you know that Mayo and Rothlesberger to conducting interviews was very similar to that listening for the feeling, and reflecting back the feeling that you're hearing in a tentative way that allows the other person - that is a skill that can be developed with practice and that I find absolutely essential to doing this kind of work, interpersonal sensitivity as well as intercultural.

Peter Blanck: What other types of - how do you think your own demographic characteristics and your own motivations - do you think they also influence - obviously the type of project you studied - but also the way you carry out a certain project, or your own behavior? Whether or not if you are attentive and open, how that draws out, do you find it tends to out people and build trust?

Arthur Turner: What I think I draw out and build trust more easily with some kinds of people than with others and I think somebody else would, would have the opposite you know. The people that quickly trust me might mistrust somebody else and vice versa. I think - for many businessmen or managers I'm maybe quieter, more laid back, less aggressive or whatever - more reflective and less proactive than most of the people that they interact with, whereas I think some of my colleagues would be the other way. I think the implication of this thought is that it's good to have a team of people doing this kind of research and not just relying on your data on one kind of personality, a team with different, different characteristic. But also I think that some people find me a person that they can rather quickly feel comfortable with just because I might be a little bit different or because that's just the kind of person that makes them feel comfortable and others don't. I think in general, I haven't found too much difficulty with being seen as sort of different or having a different accent or wearing different kinds of clothes or not being a baseball fan or all these things, it doesn't seem to matter an awful lot. One of my great

friends whom I wish you could interview for this series - Bob Guest - I learned a lot from him when we were doing work on automobile assembly lines years and years ago, but he always said that you have to, when interviewing automobile workers, you have to be all up on the latest baseball games and know all about that, and I wasn't much of a baseball fan and I didn't agree with him. I didn't find that it mattered very much and if they asked me what I thought about the game last night and I said "Gee, I don't really know", why they thought I was some kind of a kook, but it didn't seem to influence the interview very much so I don't think - I think you can be different from the people you're interviewing but very much interested in them, and if you are interested in them, the difference doesn't matter.

Peter Blanck: How do you know whom to interview, and how do you know how many people to interview?

Arthur Turner: Oh wow, I don't know. Obviously there's some kinds of more formal research projects where you want to have a significant sample of a certain kind of people or people that are at a certain level in the organizations and there are others where what you're really trying to do is just understand in a more impressionistic way how this subculture functions, or to collect material for a particular case, so it all depends. If what you want to do is - for instance, if what I want to do is understand how people in XYZ management consulting firm - what criteria did they have for effective consulting, I will probably be very unscientific about that and I'll ask my friend to recommend three or four colleagues that he thinks are interested in that subject that would be useful people to talk with and it would be more like a search for, informed and interested informants than it will be any kind of a sampling operation. I think you can if you talk with people who are interested in the topic and who are in a position to be well informed about it, and willing to be kind of a collaborator with you in trying to understand what's going on here, I think you can achieve an understanding of the total system that is just as adequate as you would get from talking with a much larger number of people.

Peter Blanck: Do your interviews - let's say you've just done one interview and then you've done another - the feedback you get from those previous interviews, do they shape your later interviews?

Arthur Turner: Yes, I allow that to happen. And even in more formal research where I have had a fairly well-structured series of questions or interview topics to cover, I've allowed myself to be influenced in that way so that in subsequent interviews, I may raise topics that I hadn't thought of because those were topics that had been raised in previous interviews and I may even say things like, "Some people around here seem to think that such and such is a big problem." Now how is it for you? Which I guess maybe you shouldn't do but I do that.

Peter Blanck: Is that a confidentiality issue?

Arthur Turner: Well, there is a potential confidentiality issue there. But actually the way in which one does that can communicate that you are keeping confidences, because you

are, you are doing that in a way which makes it impossible for them to identify who are the people were that said the particular thing, and so they're sort of saying, "This is a person who's being influenced by what he's hearing but he's also being very careful not to, in the way in which he treats what is being said." So, I think it can actually build confidence - doing that in the right way - whereas to pretend that you're not being influenced by what you've been heard makes you less understandable.

Peter Blanck: And how do you choose where to hold the interview? Is it because of power relationship or because of where the person might be more comfortable, or where you're more comfortable - does that influence where you hold the interview?

Arthur Turner: Yeah, I haven't given a great deal of that to that. We had - one of the first major researches that I was involved in was this automobile assembly line study, and we conducted interviews in the homes of the workers which was clearly an advantageous thing to do - very time-consuming and complicated to try to find out where everybody lived and try to find them at home - but one - but they talked in a much different way than they would have if they've been on the job and they were also just - what you saw of their homes was a very important part of getting to understand their life. But most of my interviewing has been in the organization, in the person's office or at or close to the person's workplace.

Peter Blanck: Are case-writing skills here related to interviewing skills? Do you think that better cases are written by people who are better interviewers?

Arthur Turner: Oh yeah, certainly, and I think that one part of what to me is kind of a decline in what I was calling earlier kind of a cultural anthropological orientation has been - that from my way of thinking of the cases that we have now, many of them are less - show less curiosity about what's actually going on inside the organization. It's as if the case writer is simply getting some facts and numbers rather than getting to understand the social system. But, yeah, I would think that to have a good case that includes real people and that includes some conversation and includes some statements about things in the people's own words, you have to be somebody who is very skillful at conducting these kinds of interviews.

I think the way to do it - the ideal way to do it, and it's very time-consuming, is to dictate and have transcribed a fairly verbatim account of the whole interview. I say "fairly verbatim" because no matter how good your memory is and how good your notes are, some of the best parts of the interview are parts that you did not take notes on, for you leave out a lot. But you end up with something which you put - which I write down as if it were in the other person's words even though I know that it is not exactly in the words. With maybe a few cases where there's sort of a parenthesis, so you then talk for five minutes about last night's baseball game or something, but basically trying to be a fairly accurate transcript of what was said and of the order in which it was said. Now, as I said earlier, I will have had maybe ten topics that I want that person to talk about, so it usually is fairly easy to go over that transcript and mark those topics, A, B, C, D or 1,2,3 in sort of opposite paragraphs or half pages or something of that transcript and then I would

have another copy of that which I would cut, take some scissors to and sort under, sort the pieces under those different topics. So, then, I can, if I want to get a feel for how people in a given department talk, how freely they talked, what topics were most important to them, what topics were hard for them to talk about, I would have to read those transcripts. If I want to write a chapter or a section or an article on a particular topic, I've got another folder where I have all those topics together and content-analyze them that way. But I've found that that's what a lot of people do, but some people really have never thought of having two copies of the transcript, one of which you cut up and the other of which you keep intact.

Peter Blanck: From what I hear, what you're saying, in your scheme, is that the clinical observation skills are very similar to clinical interviewing skills in terms of looking around so...

Arthur Turner: Yeah, I think so.

Peter Blanck: Maybe you want to talk about whether there are any differences, but generally it sounds like, in your way of thinking, you have to have the same two basic skills and....?

Arthur Turner: Yeah, I think that's right. I do think that some people absorb information more effectively through their ears, and some people absorb information more effectively through their eyes. And I think I absorb information more effectively through my ears than through my eyes because I often notice that if I'm going with a colleague they will see something that I haven't seen but I will have heard some things that they have not heard. So, I think I'm probably a better listener than I am an observer. And I think there are huge ranges of ability on both those fronts. I think that it's useful to have a colleague who complements you in that respect. And if you have a colleague, it's very important to spend time together talking about it at the end of the day - your different impressions and checking those out with each other.

Peter Blanck: In doing subsequent interviews, you say you learn from those are influenced by your earlier interviews. When do you, is it a gut feeling when you're done that you've got what you wanted? How do you...?

Arthur Turner: There does get to be a sort of point of diminishing returns where except "being scientific" in quotes or something - there really isn't that much point in having any more because you are hearing things that you've already heard before. So, I think that depends upon whether what you're doing is writing a case or getting an understanding for a consulting project or getting some kind of a general feel because of a general article that you want to write that doesn't need any kind of hard data in it on the one hand versus planning to publish a piece of research where people are going to ask embarrassing questions about how many people you talked to and stuff. I think there is a time where you're just going through the motions for the sake of scientific respectability but not actually learning very much more.

Peter Blanck: I think that's all the major questions I want to cover. Are there any other points that you feel you'd like to get across? The skills and style I thought were important, style in the sense of your note-taking as opposed to tape recording. The skills, the two skills you mentioned, your characteristics and the characteristics of the participant, how you develop trust and how you make the contacts, what you're looking for, your goal and motives and expectations, and how your behaviors influence each other, and then we talked about the coding and translation...

Arthur Turner: Well, I'd like to say a little bit more about trust.

Peter Blanck: Sure.

Arthur Turner: I think trust is not only - I think that this is a process out of which both parties need to be getting some value in order for it to be worthwhile, so what are the values which the person that you are interviewing are getting? Because unless the person you were interviewing is getting some value from this contact, there isn't any particular reason to think that they're going to be cooperating with you or being very open even because they're simply going through the motions. Somebody has told them that they should be interviewed, and they're just kind of doing that, OK. So, building trust is a matter of establishing a relationship which will be valuable to the other person as well as to you. I think it's important to be open about the fact that you're going to get something out of it, but I think it's also important to try to do it in such a way that the other person is getting something - what is he getting out of it? He's getting the experience of being understood, and that's a valuable experience which most of us don't have as much as we would like to. He's getting the experience of thinking a little bit more retrospectively about his life or work or reaction to the job or feelings about subordinates or bosses - if the interview is being skillfully conducted, this person is talking out loud about some important things that they often don't talk out loud about and I think that even if - so, I think you're always doing more than simply gathering data for your own purposes - also, if you are skillful, giving that other person a rewarding experience of feeling that the feelings that they're having that are bothersome are understandable kinds of feelings to have and that the confusions that they have or it's understandable to be confused about that and the things they feel good about, it's understandable to feel good about. That feeling of being understood I think is the key - and feeling appreciated, and respected, and listened to by an outsider, and I think that from the very beginning of the interview, those values become more apparent during the process. I think that's one of the reasons why, towards the end of the interview, when I maybe close my notebook or something, this person may now feel like bringing up a topic that I had not expected them to bring up or is sharing with me a feeling that they hadn't often shared with other people.

Peter Blanck: It does sound like a therapist role but....

Arthur Turner: So, I think it is partly.

Peter Blanck: I wonder how you keep up your stamina after doing so many interviews? You really have to, because if what you're saying is the case, then you're just going

through the motions after many interviews, and it doesn't provide this rewarding experience for the participants well.

Arthur Turner: Right - do you mean how I keep up?

Peter Blanck: Yeah - is each new interview a rewarding experience for you? If you don't feel up to it that day, you just don't do it?

Arthur Turner: I don't know. Well, no, I guess, to be frank, if you have four or five interviews in a day - and goodness I wouldn't ever want to have more than that - some of them are going to be relatively superficial.

Peter Blanck: Why do you say you wouldn't have more than four or five?

Arthur Turner: Well, because of what you're saying. I think it is emotionally draining thing to do this kind of interviewing well. I think it's terribly important to have time in between where you can go over your notes and hopefully dictate the interview - but at least go over your notes and write some other things down. And I think it's hard to absorb more than one interview every couple of hours. The kind of listening that I'm talking about is tiring. Probably one reason that people don't listen to us very much is that it gets very tiring to really listen to somebody; so, that's the main reason I would not want to have more than four or five. But I think that - I just think that the validity of one interview compared to another can be very different depending upon the nature of the trust and the nature of the climate and the chemistry between the two persons, so that in some sense to kind of add up the results of an interview study, quantify them as though what each person told you was equally valid is nonsense. You get much more valid information from some people than you do from others and I don't know that people recognize that or even worry as much as perhaps they should about that when they come time to put it all together and say what their results are. I mean I think you have some interviews which really you should just wash out - I mean this person never trusted me, I didn't like him and they didn't like me, and so I've made a lot of notes, but really we should throw them away. I don't know that I'd do that, but I think I really should and we should probably give others five times the attention, because what was going on was really more genuine. I haven't seen anybody admit to doing that.

Peter Blanck: Throwing away interviews?

Arthur Turner: Yes, or saying - I mean it's a very presumptuous thing: you, the investigator, are saying that what Joe said on this topic is worth three times what Bill said because I had a better relationship with Joe than I did with Bill. It'd be sort of embarrassing to admit that, but I think it's true.

Peter Blanck: Well, is there anything else that you would have wanted?

Arthur Turner: I don't think so.

Peter Blanck:  I don’t want to take up too much of your time.

Arthur Turner:  This has been fun.

Peter Blanck:  I appreciate it.