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Interviews as Experiments: Using Audience Effects to Examine Social Relationships

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To explore the ability of audience effects to shed light on social dynamics, the authors contrasted responses given in individual and joint interviews. Interviews were conducted among the English-speaking residents of Utila, one of Honduras's Bay Islands. Interviewees were older adults with at least one living adult child and younger adults with at least one living parent. Interviews were conducted with individuals alone and with pairs consisting of older adults and their adult children. The topic of the interviews was parenting, but the authors' particular interest was in a question regarding obligations children have to their elderly parents. Responses to that question and to a control question were coded for length, interviewer behavior, vocalics, and forcefulness of communicative style. Audience effects were found in children's responses to the question about obligations to elderly parents: Children interviewed with parents responded more forcefully to that question than children interviewed alone. Responses to the control question showed no audience effect. Involvement in the island's remittance economy was also associated with a more forceful communicative style, but this effect was not contingent on the audience present or the question asked. Audience effects may be a useful and important new tool for ethnographic research.

Keywords: interview methods; audience effects; old age security; Utila; Bay Islands; Honduras

It is common knowledge that different audiences can elicit different behavior and statements from the same people. Outside anthropology, audience effects have received considerable attention (e.g., Taietz 1962; Allan

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1980; Silver and Abramson 1986; Reuband 1992; Aquilino 1993; Arksey 1996; Smith 1997; Zipp and Toth 2002; Seale et al. 2008). Perhaps because it is so much more difficult in anthropological field settings than in laboratory and survey research to control the audiences present at interviews, anthropologists have seldom approached audience effects in a systematic way.

A simple way to explore audience effects that may be feasible in many anthropological field settings is to compare individual and joint interviews. The literature on joint interviews was recently reviewed in this journal by Seale et al. (2008; see also Arksey 1996). Although some authors focus on problems caused by audiences (e.g., Boeije 2004), others make creative use of the contrast between individual and joint interviews. For example, Seale et al. contrasted individual and joint interviews on health-related topics, finding that gender differences in responses were lower in joint interviews. Allan (1980) favors joint interviews with spouses because they may generate more data than individual interviews with the same people, including information about relationship dynamics. This project explored the feasibility of using audience effects to study relationship dynamics in ethnographic field settings by contrasting individual interviews with joint interviews with parent-child pairs on the topic of parent-child obligations.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

To facilitate the transcription and coding of interviews, we selected Utila, one of Honduras's predominantly English-speaking Bay Islands, as our field site. Utila is the third largest of the Bay Islands, after Roatán and Guanaja. Utila's current population of roughly two thousand people is derived mainly from settlers of British and African descent who began arriving from the Cayman Islands and elsewhere in the Caribbean during the 1830s (Rose 1904; Doran 1954; Davidson 1974; Lord 1975; Warantz 1983; Curran 2002). The Bay Islands have been under Honduran control since 1859, but most Bay Islanders still have linguistic, cultural, and social ties to the English-speaking world. Although a small-scale tourist industry, focused mainly on inexpensive scuba diving, has developed in recent years (Cronk and Steadman 2002; Curran 2002; see also Stonich 1999), since the middle of the twentieth century, many Utilians have depended primarily on remittances sent home by men working in the merchant marine and oil industries around the world (Lord 1975; Curran 2002).

A typical pattern has been for Utilian men between the ages of 18 and 55 years to spend as many as 10 or 11 months each year off the island. It is

less common, though not unknown, for Utilian women to leave the island for work and send remittances home. Because Utilians are generally well paid for the work they do elsewhere, Utilian culture and social life have come to be dominated by strong ethics of individualism, consumerism, and competitive acquisitiveness (Lord 1975; Curran 2002). This pattern of individualistic competition has in turn contributed to a flexibility with regard to social roles that opens the door to their continued negotiation. Such flexibility and continued renegotiation of social roles are typical of societies in the Caribbean (Carnegie 1982; Barrow 1986). On Utila, the lucrative but demanding remittance economy has the potential to exacerbate these patterns by creating new sources of conflict and by attenuating social ties during men's long absences from home. This makes the Caribbean in general and Utila in particular excellent settings in which to explore the use of audience effects in the study of how social role obligations are discussed and negotiated.

PARENT-CHILD OBLIGATIONS

A common expectation around the world is that children will support and care for their elderly parents (Cain 1982; Nugent 1985; Cronk 1990). Such an expectation has been noted on Utila, where children are considered "a veritable source of retirement security" (Lord 1975:152). This leads to a broad prediction that statements regarding economic obligations between parents and children will differ according to the audience present. More specifically, we predicted that both parents and children will be more forceful in how they express the norm that children have an obligation to support their elderly parents when the other party is present than when he or she is not. We also predicted that because involvement in the remittance economy creates both a source of wealth and a possible source of tension in such relationships, those involved in the remittance economy will also be more forceful in their expression of the norm than those not involved in the remittance economy, but only when the other party is present.

METHODS

To explore the effects of different audiences on the content and style of responses, we contrasted individual and joint semistructured interviews (Bernard 2002). Our interviewees were English-speaking adult Utilians in two categories: older adults with at least one living adult child and younger

adults with at least one living parent (henceforth referred to as "children," though the youngest was 19 years old). All interviewees spoke English as their first language, and each was interviewed only once. Our interviewers were men who were 35 years old (Cronk) and 62 years old (Irons) when the fieldwork was conducted.

Because our hypotheses concerned audience effects and because the interviewers themselves are inevitably part of the audience present at any interview, we also systematically varied the interviewers to control for possible confounding effects. To control for the possibility that any difference between children's responses during the two types of interviews was the result not of their parents' presence but merely the presence of any older person, all interviews with children alone were conducted by Irons. To control for the possibility that any difference between parents' responses during the two types of interviews was the result not of their children's presence but merely the presence of any younger person, all interviews with parents alone were conducted by Cronk. Finally, all interviews with parent-child pairs were conducted jointly by Cronk and Irons, who alternated as lead interviewer.

Interviewees were recruited with a combination of door-to-door solicitation, public advertisements, and snowball sampling. They were then randomly assigned to an interview type (individual or joint). A total of eighty individuals were interviewed: forty-four individually and thirty-six in joint parent-child interviews. In the individual interviews, we interviewed eleven men and eleven women in the parent category, but because the remittance economy made it difficult to find younger adult men to interview, in the child category, we interviewed ten men and twelve women. The shortage of younger men caused by the remittance economy also had an impact on the composition of the eighteen joint interviews we conducted. Two involved mother-son pairs, seven involved mother-daughter pairs, five involved father-son pairs, and four involved father-daughter pairs.

The semistructured interviews were guided by a series of thirteen questions (see the Appendix). The exact wording of the questions was worked out with Utilian consultants in a series of practice interviews at the beginning of the fieldwork season. The practice interviews are not included in this study. The interviews were about the topic of parenting on Utila in a very broad sense, and the question about children's obligations to their parents did not appear until the end. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions are as detailed as possible, including disfluencies (e.g., "um," "uh") and interjections (e.g., "uh-huh," "mm-hmm"). A trained coder, who had not transcribed the interviews herself and who was not informed about the nature of this study,

then read the transcripts and listened to the recordings in order to provide data for the question of interest to our hypotheses (question 13: "When children are on their own, what should they do for their parents?") and an unrelated control question (question 11: "Do you think boys and girls should be raised differently?") on these variables:

1. *Advocacy of support for parents:* Responses to question 13 were coded for whether they included a statement in favor of the idea that when children are on their own, they should support their parents and for any statements regarding the forms that such support should take (e.g., money, housing, health care).
2. *Vocalics:* Responses to both questions were coded for vocal qualities found to be associated with persuasive speech: tone, fluency, volume, and tempo (Pearce and Brommel 1972).
3. *Length:* Length was coded as a simple word count of each interviewee's responses to questions 11 and 13.
4. *Interviewer behavior:* Because interviewers can inadvertently lengthen responses through their own behaviors (e.g., "mm-hmm" and other encouraging interjections), our coder tallied the number of such interjections made by the interviewers while interviewees were responding to questions 11 and 13.
5. *Forcefulness of communicative style:* After consultation with experts in the study of interpersonal communication and with the literature in that field (Miller and Hewgill 1964; Mehrabian and Williams 1969; Mehrabian 1972; Pearce and Brommel 1972; Rogers and Jones 1975; Miller et al. 1976; Rogers and Farace 1976; Rogers-Millar and Millar 1979; Patterson 1983; Bettinghaus and Cody 1987; Burgoon, Buller, and Woodall 1996; Burgoon, Johnson, and Koch 1998), we designed a coding system to capture elements of speech behavior that have been found to be associated with forcefulness, domineeringness, and persuasiveness. Responses to questions 11 and 13 were coded on a 5-point scale for the extent to which they employed speech behaviors found to be associated with attempts to dominate, control, and persuade. Such behaviors include interrupting and talking over the speech of others, denigrating or criticizing others or their behavior or beliefs, bragging about oneself, and arguing with or negatively challenging another person present at the interview. Statements that were minimally forceful (e.g., simple statements of assent or agreement) were given a code of 1. Statements that used a variety of techniques associated with verbal domination were given a code of 5. Other statements were given codes of 2, 3, and 4 according to their place in this range. To ensure that the coder used consistent criteria throughout the time it took to code all of the interviews, she also recoded eight randomly selected interviews. A comparison of original codes and recodes shows that her coding was highly consistent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .957$). To ensure that this code was independent of the code for vocalics, the coder based it on the written transcripts and completed it for all interviews before listening to the recordings to code for vocalics.
6. *Involvement in the remittance economy:* Following the semistructured interviews, we asked a series of short questions about basic demography and economics, including a question about whether interviewees had remitted

funds earned off the island. If they had remitted such funds, we asked them to estimate the percentages of their incomes that they had sent home. For analysis we coded this variable dichotomously (0 = no funds remitted, 1 = some funds remitted) because those who did remit usually sent home large portions of what they earned.

7. *Gender:* The gender of all interviewees was recorded and, for analysis, coded dichotomously (0 = male, 1 = female).
8. *Kin type:* Whether the interviewee was in the parent or child category was coded dichotomously (0 = parent, 1 = child).
9. *Interview type:* The type of interview was coded dichotomously (0 = individual interview, 1 = joint interview).

RESULTS

The interviews reveal a remarkable consistency among Utilians regarding their feelings about children's obligation to help their elderly parents. Seventy-four of eighty interviewees stated that children should provide some support to their elderly parents (the remaining six were in joint interviews and gave no audible responses to the question). Parents and children responded similarly, regardless of interview type (individual or joint). Although individual responses varied slightly regarding the exact types of support expected, there was no discernable pattern to this variation. The following passages, though somewhat longer and more detailed than most responses, include typical statements about obligations (disfluencies and interjections have been removed):

> When they are on their own, let's say, and they're, they're, goes out and they're, they're working in the oil fields—that's what they call "on their own." Or they're working on the ships, they're making good money . . . they're expected to provide for their parents the way she has provided for them. She has no social security. She has no other income. I'm living here, I see that she doesn't want for anything. I feed her, I make sure she has food in her refrigerator—she's stocked up. The other children that's abroad—they three times a year, or four times a year, they send her a check for her birthday, for Christmas, for Easter, and so on. Whenever there's an opportunity to send down, they send her packaged gifts and so on. That's her security. And that's the way we were taught. (Man, age 65, in a joint interview with his mother, age 88)

> I think they should remember their parents, especially if their parents are not financially able. Sometimes children go out there and really go beyond their parents' expectations; children earn a lot of money. I think they should remember their parents—especially financially—if they're able to, and see that their parents are cared for. I've seen some come back home and build their parents a nice home, if they're able to. I think within a person's need they

should remember their parents. I would say that this island has been blessed with that most people's children remember their parents. Others don't, you know. Some say their parents didn't do anything for them, so why should we do anything for them. I've heard that before. (Woman, age 47, in a joint interview with her mother, age 76)

The numerical codes for vocalics, response length, and forcefulness of communicative style were analyzed using SPSS versions 14.0 and 16.0. When treated as a dependent variable, neither vocalics nor response length yielded statistically significant results. The codes for communicative style, however, did show one of our predicted audience effects. Sixty-seven responses to the question about children's obligations to their elderly parents received moderate codes of 2, 3, or 4. For example, the first and second excerpts above were given codes of 2 and 3, respectively. The difference was that the second speaker included a mild criticism of people who do not help their elderly parents. Only three speakers received a score of 5, all for a combination of talking over the other interviewee and criticizing people who do not help their elderly parents.

To test the hypothesis that children use a more forceful communicative style when responding to the test question when one of their parents is present, we used our style codes as the dependent variable in a series of multivariate regression models (Table 1). Because speaking longer inevitably increases the likelihood that one will do something that will lead to a high score on the dependent variable, the length of each interviewee's response to the relevant question is included as a control variable in all of the models. Not surprisingly, length of response is a significant predictor of the use of a forceful style in all of the models.

Models 1, 2, and 3 examine the effects of kin type, audience, the interaction between kin type and audience, and interviewer behavior. These models show that neither kin type nor audience alone has a statistically significant impact on response style, but the interaction between them does. In short, children in joint interviews use a more forceful style of communication when responding to the test question than do children in individual interviews. Figure 1 illustrates this effect by showing style scores predicted by model 3, which controls for response length and interviewer behavior, for parents and children interviewed alone and together on both the test and control questions. Although the responses of children interviewed alone are only slightly more forceful to the test question than to the control question, children interviewed together with one of their parents use a markedly more forceful communicative style when responding to the test question than when responding to the control question. Among parents interviewed alone,

TABLE 1A

Regression Coefficients for Ordinary Least Squares Multiple Regression Models, Test Question

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Constant	2.134***	2.248***	2.476***	1.934***	2.059***	2.059***	2.187***	2.237***
Response length	.005 (.503)***	.006 (.626)***	.005 (.612)***	.004 (.481)***	.005 (.601)***	.005 (.601)***	.005 (.568)***	.005 (.592)***
Kin type (0 = parent, 1 = child)	−.071 (−.039)	−.055 (−.030)	−.405 (−.221)	.085 (.046)				−.332 (−.181)
Audience (0 = individual interview, 1 = joint interview)	.121 (.065)	.121 (.065)	−.282 (−.152)		.085 (.046)	.085 (.046)	.102 (.055)	−.399 (−.214)
Interviewer behavior		−.043 (−.274)*	−.049 (−.311)**		−.043 (−.273)*	−.043 (−.273)*	−.039 (−.250)*	−.050 (−.319)***
Kin type × audience (1 = children in joint interviews)			.825 (.353)*					.984 (.421)***
Involvement in remittance economy				.420 (.230)*	.417 (.228)*	.417 (.228)	.386 (.211)	.511 (.279)***
Involvement in remittance economy × audience						−.001 (.000)	−.021 (−.009)	
Gender							−.187 (−.102)	
Adjusted R^2	.233	.286	.325	.285	.338	.328	.328	.390

NOTE: The dependent variable is forcefulness of communicative style. Standardized regression coefficients are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

TABLE 1B

Regression Coefficients for Ordinary Least Squares Multiple Regression Models, Control Question

Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Constant	2.582***	2.610***	2.714***	2.054***	2.068***	2.077***	2.097***	2.459***
Response length	.002 (.297)*	.003 (.361)*	.003 (.338)*	.003 (.400)***	.004 (.460)**	.004 (.459)**	.004 (.457)**	.003 (.374)*
Kin type (0 = parent, 1 = child)	−.461 (−.230)	−.475 (−.237)*	−.669 (−.334)*					−.574 (−.286)
Audience (0 = individual interview, 1 = joint interview)	−.138 (−.068)	−.120 (−.059)	−.332 (−.164)	−.136 (−.067)	−.119 (−.059)	−.137 (−.067)	−.138 (−.068)	−.383 (−.189)
Interviewer behavior		−.015 (−.097)	−.012 (−.083)		−.013 (−.088)	−.013 (−.089)	−.013 (−.089)	−.013 (−.088)
Kin type × audience (1 = children in joint interviews)			.445 (.174)					.530 (.207)
Involvement in remittance economy				.449 (.224)*	.457 (.228)*	.442 (.221)	.435 (.217)	.387 (.193)
Involvement in remittance economy × audience						.035 (.014)	.038 (.016)	
Gender							−.030 (−.015)	
Adjusted R^2	.167	.161	.161	.174	.166	.154	.142	.184

NOTE: The dependent variable is forcefulness of communicative style. Standardized regression coefficients are in parentheses.

*$p < .05.$ **$p < .01.$ ***$p < .001.$

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FIGURE 1
Forcefulness Scores on the Test Question, as Predicted by Ordinary Least Squares Model 3, at Mean Levels of Response Length and Interviewer Behavior
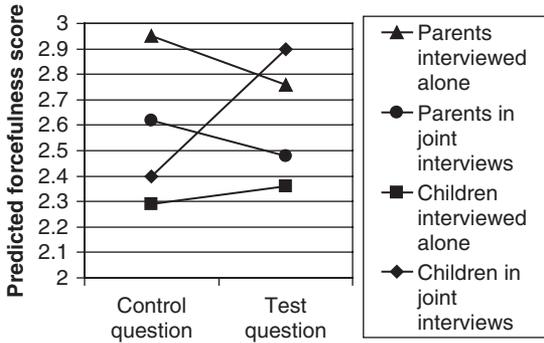
responses to both the test and control question are more forceful than responses given when interviewed with one of their children present. However, these differences reflect a statistically significant audience effect among parents only in response to the test question (see Table 1).

Models 4, 5, 6, and 7 examine the impact of involvement of the remittance economy on interviewees' responses. Model 4 looks at involvement in the remittance economy alone. Model 5 adds a variable for the interaction between involvement in the remittance economy and audience. Model 6 adds gender, which is a possible confound for involvement in the remittance economies, because so many more Utilian men than women have worked off the island. Although involvement in the remittance economy by itself has a positive association with the use of a more forceful communicative style, its interaction with the audience present does not. Model 8 includes all of the variables previously shown to have statistically significant effects: response length, interviewer behavior, the interaction between kin type and audience, and involvement in the remittance economy. It is interesting to note that the effect of interviewer behavior on the dependent variable is the opposite of what one might expect: Interviewers' greater use of encouraging interjections is associated with lower scores on the dependent variable. Perhaps this is because the interjections reflect the interviewers' unconscious attempts to elicit longer responses from the more taciturn interviewees.

The test question models all explain more of the variance in the dependent variable than do any of the control question models. Other than the

relationship between response length and communicative style, the only sta-
tistically significant findings on the control question are in models 2 and 3,
where being a child has a negative effect, regardless of interview type, on
forcefulness of communicative style, and in models 4 and 5, where people
involved in the remittance economy appear to use a more forceful style.
Models 2 and 3 show that the audience effect on children's communicative
style in responses to the test question is not merely the result of them being
more forceful in their responses to all questions. Figure 1 also clarifies the
situation. Although in three of our four cases (test question vs. control ques-
tion; interviewed alone vs. interviewed together) children's predicted scores
on the forcefulness variable are lower than those of parents, when the test
question is asked children become the most forceful speakers in the room.

DISCUSSION

We predicted that both parents and children would be more forceful in
how they express the norm that children have an obligation to support their
elderly parents when the other party is present than when he or she is not.
This prediction was supported for children, who use a more forceful com-
municative style in response to the test question when interviewed with a
parent present than when interviewed alone. Parents, in contrast, use a *less*
forceful communicative style when responding to the test question when they
are interviewed with one of their children present than when they are inter-
viewed alone. Perhaps this difference arises because, particularly in a place
where there is unanimity regarding children's obligation to support their
elderly parents, the obligation to make a convincing display regarding one's
commitment to provide such support rests with the child, not the parent. We did
not find support for our prediction that involvement in the remittance econ-
omy would lead to more forceful expressions of this norm when the other
party is present. Rather, we found that both parents and children who had
been involved in the remittance economy gave more forceful responses to the
test question in both types of interview. An effect of remittance economy
involvement is also seen in some of the models for the control question,
though no such effect appears in the most complete model (model 8).

An anonymous reviewer suggested that the mix of genders and genera-
tions in our study might also generate some interesting patterns, such as a
tendency for younger adults to be more vocal about supporting their elderly
mothers than their fathers. To explore this idea, we compared children's mean
response lengths and scores for communicative style in joint interviews with
mothers and fathers. None of the differences was statistically significant. In

the most interesting case (communicative style scores on the test question), the direction of the relationship was actually the opposite of that suggested by the reviewer, with children using a more forceful style in response to the test question in the presence of their fathers than in the presence of their mothers, though the effect was not statistically significant.

An alternative explanation for these findings might be that they are driven by the size of the audience present at the interview rather than its composition. Given that the findings among parents and children are in opposite directions, this seems unlikely. Although it is easy to see why audience composition might affect children and parents differently, the simple size of the audience is likely to have had similar effects on both types of people. In addition, if audience size alone were driving the effects we see, then we would expect to see them on the control as well as the test question. Given our findings on rhetorical style, it is somewhat surprising that we did not find any effects on vocalics. Perhaps the subject matter of the interview and the small size of the audience were not enough to incite interviewees to become very demonstrative.

This study was designed not only to test hypotheses but also to explore the use of audience effects in field settings, and it succeeded in that sense, as well. Simply by contrasting individual and joint interviews, ethnographic fieldworkers can shed light on local social dynamics. This method may be easier to use in some field settings than in others. Utila was chosen for this project mainly because Utilians' use of English made it easy to transcribe and code interviews and because its remittance economy seemed likely to strain relationships and generate conflicts about resource distributions. Another characteristic of the island that helped the project was the residential pattern, which consists mainly of nuclear families in their own homes. This made it easy to exclude nonparticipants from the interviews and thus to ensure control over the audience present. Utilians are also familiar enough with the idea of research to understand quickly why we did not want others to be present during the interviews. However, even on Utila, we were unable to control for some variables (e.g., interviewer gender) that might influence responses, and we know from our work at other field sites that even the limited level of control we achieved on Utila is not always possible. However, at most anthropological field sites, it may be possible to make use of audience effects simply by keeping track of bystanders as they come and go from the interview setting.

This study also relates to broader concerns about the nature of ethnographic data in general and data obtained through interviews in particular (e.g., Briggs 1986; Mishler 1986). Although this concern came to the fore in the 1980s together with broader postmodern or textualist critiques of ethnography (e.g.,

Marcus and Cushman 1982), in the 1990s, some cultural anthropologists with a more scientific bent also explored its relevance to their projects (e.g., Aunger 1994, 1995; Cronk 1995, 1998, 1999). Aunger (1994) argued in favor of a "reflexive analytical approach" in which variation in data collection protocols, multivariate analyses, and elicitation effects are combined to reveal variations in data obtained through interviews that might shed light on their reliability and on social reality. Cronk (1998, 1999) argued that scientific cultural anthropologists must pay close attention to "ethnographic text formation processes" for the same reason that archaeologists must pay close attention to site formation processes: They need a good understanding of how their data came to exist. This study is in the same spirit as that earlier work. Rather than taking the processes of interviewing and creating ethnographic texts for granted, it sees them as inherently problematic. But instead of being overwhelmed by those problems, it makes constructive and creative use of one of them to shed light on social dynamics in a specific setting. In doing so, it adds one more item to the ethnographer's toolkit: the systematic elicitation and analysis of audience effects.

APPENDIX

Questions Used to Guide the Semistructured Interviews
1. How old are Utilians when they become parents?
2. How old do you think they should be?
3. How many children do Utilians have?
4. How many do you think they should have?
5. What sorts of worries and concerns do parents have for their children on Utila?
6. What sorts of hopes and dreams do parents have for their children on Utila?
7. How do you handle misbehavior?
8. What do you think that mothers ought to do for their children?
9. What do you think that fathers ought to do for their children?
10. How does the time men spend away from Utila affect being a father?
11. Do you think boys and girls should be raised differently?
12. When should children be on their own?
13. When children are on their own, what should they do for their parents?

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