

2

Interviewing

Interviews are a form of *qualitative* research in which you ask questions with the goal of eliciting as much rich, detailed information as possible from your participants. It is important to note that sometimes people refer to conducting face-to-face surveys as “interviewing” because it’s done in person. This is a misnomer, however, as it bears little resemblance to interviewing. Face-to-face survey “interviewing” is really nothing more than reading a survey aloud to participants and recording their answers for them. **Interviewing** (sometimes called *qualitative interviewing* for clarity), however, involves asking questions about complex topics that cannot be reduced to a predetermined set of multiple-choice answers. Interviewing is aimed at eliciting lengthy responses and explanations that include extensive detail. Additionally, in interviews, the vast majority of the talking is done by the *participant*, not the researcher, because it is impossible to get into someone else’s head and understand what they are thinking if you are doing most of the talking! The opposite is true of face-to-face surveys, in which the interviewer does most of the talking. By the term *interviews*, then, I always mean qualitative interviews.

Qualitative research in general is somewhat less likely to be used in applied ways than is quantitative research, but it can be a helpful tool. When interviewing is used for applied research, it is most typically used for **evaluation research**, whose purpose is to evaluate a program or policy. Interviewing is particularly appropriate when the program or policy being evaluated has clearly failed to have the desired effects, or when there has suddenly been a drastic or unexpected change in the program’s outcomes and you want to gain a deep and thorough understanding of why this is so. Interviewing is also used to conduct **needs assessments**—investigations of what services or programs a particular client base most needs. By conducting interviews about clients’ experiences, you can find out which needs are not being met for your clients and what remedies might best improve their situations. For example, if the students on academic probation whom you are interviewing talk more about battling depression and anxiety than about difficulty learning the material, then perhaps it’s more important for the university to expand its

REAL PEOPLE, REAL RESEARCH



Laura Gale

Laura works as a service facilitator for a county in Wisconsin to provide youth who have diagnosed mental illness with voluntary community and mental health services. Her first interview usually takes place with the youth and their family

in their home. She works hard in this interview to build rapport with the new clients so that they will honestly discuss the challenges they face and will trust her in the delivery of services. Her focus in the first interview is on understanding the family's needs and the issues that are causing them to seek support at this time, and on figuring out whether there are any urgent issues needing referral to a crisis agency. She also tries to gain an understanding of the family's strengths and challenges to best figure out how to help them confront the issues they are facing. Laura uses the information from the first interview to ask more targeted questions in a second interview. These questions are designed to elicit from the youth (of whatever age) in their own words the behaviors they want to change. During the interview, Laura works with the youth to turn these desired changes into goals, and together they

determine how they will know when the youth has achieved their goals. From there, Laura and her team focus on interventions and providing a wrap-around team to support the youth and their family in achieving their goals.



Feven Seyoum

Feven Seyoum graduated with a BA in sociology and soon thereafter began working as a case manager for an international care program in the state of Washington. She works with children, mainly between the ages of 7 and 12, who have been detained by border patrol when crossing into the country alone without docu-

mentation. When the children are transferred to her program (within 72 hours after detainment), Feven conducts semi-structured interviews with them (usually in Spanish) about their voyage, the conditions in their home country, and their family in the United States. Of particular importance is creating good rapport with the children, who may have had a terrifying journey and are often afraid to get family members in trouble with Immigration. She takes notes during the interviews and enters them into a computer system that stores them as part of the case notes. Once family members are located, she also interviews them about their ability to care for the child.

counseling services or outreach, rather than its tutoring program. Interviewing is also sometimes used in conjunction with survey research: the interviews are used to help understand the complexities behind the most important, unexpected, or disquieting findings from the quantitative analysis. Additionally, interview research is sometimes used to put a "face" to survey findings, so that the audience is reminded that the statistics are not just abstract numbers but are based on real people.

There are two predominant types of interviews: semi-structured and loosely structured. In **semi-structured interviews**, you develop a list of questions in advance that you will ask of all the participants. You may not word the question exactly the

same way for each participant, but the questions will basically be the same for all the interviews, although not necessarily in the same order. You will augment these questions during the interview with many other spontaneous follow-up questions that elicit more information about the participant's responses (see Box 2.1). New interviewers often choose this form of interviewing because they feel more comfortable having predetermined questions in front of them. It is also the form of interviewing that researchers who primarily engage in or were trained in quantitative research prefer because it allows them to collect generally the same information from all the participants, making it more standardized and therefore—to the quantitative mind—more useful.

Although semi-structured interviewing is a legitimate form of qualitative research, experienced interviewers with a background in qualitative research are more likely to prefer **loosely structured interviews**. In a loosely structured interview, you do not develop a list of interview questions in advance. Rather, you begin the interview by introducing the general topic and asking a starting question. Most all of your other questions will then develop directly from what the participant says (see Box 2.2). It often sounds frightening to the novice researcher to go into an interview without a list of questions on which to rely. Yet remember, it's what you do in regular conversation all the time: You listen, and then you ask a question based on what the other person has told you. Thus, it feels much more “natural” than a semi-structured interview. Unlike natural conversations, however, in loosely structured interviews you usually have a list of general topics that you want to cover in the interview; therefore, you will occasionally introduce new topics from the list into the conversation. At the end of the interview, you may also consult your list to make sure that all the topics were covered in some way, whether the participant spontaneously discussed the topic or you introduced it. If so, you simply end the interview; if not, you may introduce the remaining topics. Many qualitative researchers prefer this form of interviewing because it is based more on what is important to the participant than what the researcher guesses is important, and this can help the researcher better see the world through the participant's eyes. Because that is the goal of this research method, many qualitative researchers view loosely structured interviews as more effective.

For applied research, the loosely structured interview is more beneficial than the semi-structured interview because it best helps you reach the goals of deeply understanding the participants' perspectives. If students are failing despite the new tutoring and mentoring that your afterschool program has put into place, and you want to understand why, you will more completely understand if you let the participants lead you to what is important. Their failing grades may have little or nothing to do with what goes on in the classroom or in the afterschool program and, instead, may be related to domestic violence, cultural norms and expectations, lack of proper nutrition, or something else you never even considered. But if you assumed that the failing grades were necessarily a by-product of something going on in the classroom, and you conducted a semi-structured interview focused on this premise, you would entirely

BOX 2.1**QUESTIONS IN A SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW**

What follows is an excerpt from a student's interview with a professional working in the juvenile justice system. I have omitted the participant's responses, but notice that the questions here tend not to depend upon the participant's answers. In other words, the questions are generally determined in advance, though they may not be worded in the same way or in the same order for each participant, and some follow-up questions are necessary.

| | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Interviewer: Over your career working with juveniles, what have been some of the biggest challenges, specifically working within the system? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. And then what were some of the challenges you faced working with the juveniles' parents? I don't know how much you do of that. | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: What different types of emotions have you experienced with your job? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: Did you ever find yourself getting callous and numb to what you saw? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: What aspects of the system do you think are failing to reduce recidivism? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: Do you have any specific cases that stuck with you where it was really like, "I guess all the odds were against the kid, and they just failed horribly"? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: Do you have any other vivid examples? | Follow-up question |
| Interviewer: I know you already mentioned some of the successes with the system. Do you have any others? | Follow-up question |
| Interviewer: Focusing now on substance abuse, do you think we are succeeding in treating substance abuse? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: Can you tell me about the problems that you encounter with some adolescent substance abuse? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: How do you personally establish a bond with the kids in your caseload? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: The issue of gangs hasn't really come up yet, but I'd be interested to hear a little bit more about your experiences with it. | Predetermined question put in context |
| Interviewer: What differences do you see between the kids that are associated with gangs and the kids that aren't? Like . . . do you think there are differences between the two? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: So what are your feelings on trying to sentence juveniles as adults? | Predetermined question |

BOX 2.2**QUESTIONS IN A LOOSELY STRUCTURED INTERVIEW**

What follows is an excerpt from a student's interview with a middle-aged Chicana woman about the cultural messages she received about sexuality. I have omitted the participant's responses. Contrasting these questions with those of the semi-structured interview in Box 2.1, without even knowing what the participant has said, we can see that the vast majority of the interviewer's questions were not predetermined but stem directly from the participant's responses.

| | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Interviewer: Can you describe to me the earliest memory you have where your family began to openly discuss the topic of sex with you? | Predetermined question |
| Interviewer: So while they gave you specific books to look at, they didn't really engage you in a conversation or try [participant interrupts] . . . | Question from listening |
| Interviewer: Okay, so it may have happened? | Clarifying question |
| Interviewer: You mentioned that you're the youngest of four. Do you think that being the youngest, they did things differently to kind of let you know what was OK and not OK for a girl to do in terms of her sexuality? | Predetermined question put in context |
| Interviewer: How did that make you feel? | Question from listening |
| Interviewer: Well, yeah, that's what I was going to say. It sounded like a celebration of becoming a woman and it sounds like you felt very special, that it meant a lot for you. | Affirmation of what participant said |
| Interviewer: And the way that your mother handled it, you know the celebration and making it very, very comfortable for you, do you think that sort of reflected what other families were doing? Or do you think she was a little different? | Question from listening |
| Interviewer: OK, and how much do you think that's been an influence on how you feel about sex today? | Question from listening |
| Interviewer: Can you describe what you're feeling? Because it sounds pretty intense when the conversation comes up. | Question from listening |
| Interviewer: And how strongly do you think that reflects the way you were brought up, in that they didn't openly discuss it with you? | Question from listening |

miss the important information you were seeking. Because in applied research decisions are made based on the data you gather, it is of utmost importance that the data truly reflect the totality of the participants' perspectives and experiences, not just your presuppositions about what is important.

Methodology



Reminder: A **methodology** is the entire philosophy about how and why you conduct research.

Qualitative interviewing is most commonly grounded in **interpretivist methodology**. The interpretivists aim, first and foremost, to understand, as deeply and fully as possible, the world through someone else's eyes—to know what it feels like to walk in their shoes, and to see and understand the world as they do. You can begin to accomplish this goal by allowing your participants to try to explain to you in as much depth and detail as possible what they have experienced and how they have thought and felt about it. It is nearly impossible, however, to do so through the use of the “scientific method,” which is cold, detached, and highly structured. If you want your participants to open up and share their innermost thoughts and feelings with you, you have to create a warm and genuine relationship with them, one based on trust. They have to feel that you will not judge them for what they reveal and that you will try hard to understand things from their perspective, even if you do not share their experiences. Everything about interviewing research, from finding participants to analyzing the data, is grounded in this logic and these fundamental goals. To this end, interviewers usually approach the interview as a collaborative effort. The researcher and the participant work together to produce the information: the researcher by asking the relevant and important questions and the participant by providing honest responses to them. This teamwork approach to research leads interpretivists to usually refer to the people who take part in their research as **research participants** rather than as “respondents” or “subjects,” neither of which connote the trust, genuineness, or collaborative aspects of the interview relationship.

You may have heard that research should always be objective or unbiased. Interpretivists have a different perspective on this. They maintain that *all* research is biased in some way: Even the topics that the most scientific of researchers deem worthy of investigating come out of a sort of bias. In this context, **bias** is any characteristic, experience, knowledge, or attitude that might affect the research you do. For interpretivists, trying to eliminate all bias from their research is a waste of time because bias is impossible to avoid. Instead, interpretivists believe that you should be up front about your biases and disclose them in your report. For example, if you are a white female researcher investigating the unique issues that face Asian American women as they pursue college degrees, you might reveal this information in your research report because being white and female will have affected how you interpret the data they have provided you. Bias, according to interpretivists, is unavoidable. Objectivity, on the other hand, means something entirely different. To an interpretivist, to be **objective** is to put your own views and experiences aside and to accurately report the views and experiences of the people you are studying, even if you don't like their views. It is to be open to anything the participant shares and to remain nonjudgmental about it.

When interpretivist methodology is used, it will, like all methodologies, affect every aspect of the research process. Because among the central aims of interpretivists is understanding the world as others experience it, they ask research questions that seek this sort of understanding. They choose samples in a way that will help them understand very well the experiences of a few people in certain contexts but that don't aim to generalize that understanding to other people. They don't worry about bias in sampling or data collection but always try to remain objective (by their definition). They focus all their efforts in data collection in getting as much in-depth, rich data as they can, rather than on getting the same information from every respondent. Additionally, even if two interpretivist researchers analyze the same data, they will come up with different analyses because each will focus on different aspects of the data; in other words, analysis is not cut and dried but allows many interpretations to be made (although each of those will be strongly supported by the data). Finally, interpretivists will judge the quality of research on its depth, honesty, and the richness of the data rather than on how scientifically the research was conducted. In short, every aspect of the research project will be affected by the methodology used because the philosophy you use (methodology) about how to do your research will affect everything about how you actually do it.

Theory

Interpretivist methodology originally came out of symbolic interactionism, and hence much interview research has been grounded in symbolic interactionist theory. Today, researchers working from many theoretical perspectives, including social constructionism, feminist theory, conflict theory, critical theory, and discourse analysis (which comes from the work of Foucault), use interviews in their work. Rarely are these researchers trying to test their theories because interpretivist methodology is not based on testing hypotheses but on understanding different perspectives and worldviews. Hence, researchers often use a given theory to guide them in choosing their research question, designing their research, collecting their data, and interpreting it. For example, if the topic were online dating, a symbolic interactionist might focus on how people lie, exaggerate, omit, and minimize to create a specific self-presentation for potential matches; a feminist theorist might look at the ways in which women overtly and subtly pressure potential male matches to produce specific forms of masculinity; a conflict theorist might investigate competition in the erotic marketplace; and critical theorists may look at the ways in which dating app users use hookups, dating, and romance to fill the nagging void in themselves created by the alienation inherent in the capitalist system. Each of these researchers will also use the chosen theory as a lens through which to view the data and interpret the results. A symbolic interactionist, for example, might be particularly tuned into presentations of self and how meaning gets negotiated in interaction. A feminist theorist, on the other hand, may pay more attention to the use of gendered language, to

subtle issues of power, and to how gender is performed by the respondents both in their lives and in the interview context itself.

Other researchers may start without the guiding lens of a theoretical perspective but have the goal of building theory from their data. If a researcher is looking to increase our understanding of intersecting identities, for example, they may interview people about different experiences in their lives and attempt to understand how the intersections of their identities came into play during these experiences. Based on the data that is elicited during the interviews, the researcher may try to expand our theoretical understanding of intersectionality by looking for patterns in the ways in which intersecting identities are experienced, managed, hidden, and/or used in interaction. Loosely structured interview research lends itself particularly well to building theory because it allows participants maximum freedom to talk about what's most important in their own experiences, thus enabling the researcher to identify patterns during analysis that accurately represent the participants' experiences, rather than the researcher's ideas about those experiences. Additionally, the various procedures and steps taken in the analysis of interview research is well-suited to building theory.

Research Questions

Interviewing is the best method for understanding meaning, lived experience, and complex emotions and perspectives. It is also particularly good for developing detailed descriptions and for understanding decision-making processes. It almost always has individuals as the unit of analysis, and this should be reflected in your research question. Examples of research questions that are appropriately answered through the use of interviews are provided in Box 2.3.



Tip: Notice that research questions for interviews very often start with the phrases *In what ways* and *How do*. Be careful about starting with the word *What*, as those questions are more likely to be answerable with just a few words.

Interviews are *not* appropriate for studying demographic or social trends, attitudes, opinions about issues, or concepts that are best measured with numbers or amounts, such as likelihood of voting a particular way, level of self-esteem, or frequency of sexual intercourse.

It is important to note that it is also very difficult to study cause and effect using interviews because the participant's *perceptions* of the cause (or effect) of a particular behavior may not *actually be* the real cause (or effect). For example, we are likely to attribute our success or failure in school to the amount of studying we do, to our personal motivation, or to our level of skill or intelligence. Statistical tests, however, have long revealed that our race and social class are perhaps more important determinants in our success or failure than are any of these other factors (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, 2002; Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Thus, we don't always accurately assess cause and effect, even in our own lives. Nonetheless, sometimes as researchers we want to understand how people *interpret* the causes of their own behavior or that of other people because it helps us understand their subsequent decisions. For example, your friend may have left her boyfriend because he is an alcoholic, but if *he* thinks

BOX 2.3**RESEARCH QUESTIONS APPROPRIATE FOR QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS**

| Research Question | Appropriate for Interviews Because It Examines . . . |
|--|--|
| How do college students decide whether to experiment with drugs? | decision-making processes |
| How do people cope with suicidal thoughts? | lived experience |
| How do young feminists understand gender roles in their romantic heterosexual relationships? | meaning |
| How do middle school teachers describe the changes in their classroom experiences since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act? | detailed description |
| What do recovering alcoholics perceive as the causes of their addiction? | perceived causes |
| In what ways do siblings of people with cancer perceive family dynamics to have changed after the cancer diagnosis? | perceptions, complex emotions |
| How do patients at the Central State Free Health Clinic perceive barriers they face to being healthy? | perceptions |
| How do butch lesbians come to conceptualize their identities? | process |
| In what ways do students perceive their learning experiences in college to have changed after participating in Northern State University's <i>A's for Everyone</i> tutoring program? | perceptions, perceived effects, evaluation research |
| How do male college students perceive power to manifest within their sexual relationships? | complex issues |
| How do mothers on welfare explain their own need for assistance as compared to that of other mothers on welfare? | perceived causes |

it's because she didn't love him enough, he is unlikely to seek help for his drinking problem. His assessment of the cause of the breakup may be inaccurate; however, his perception of it still has real consequences. Research questions investigating participants' perceptions of cause and effect must be carefully worded to clarify that the research investigates the participants' *perceptions* or *understandings* of causes or effects, *not the actual* causes or effects.

Finally, interview research is not appropriate for comparing groups of people. Comparisons are actually cause-and-effect type questions—if you are comparing men's experiences to women's experiences of a particular phenomenon, for example, what you are really trying to do is look at the causal effect of gender, and interview research is not an appropriate method for studying causal relationships. Additionally, the sample sizes are too small in interview research and the types of phenomena



Reminder: The **unit of analysis** is the “who” or “what” you’re collecting data about. Units of analysis should always be stated in the plural in research questions because you will never study just one person for interview research.

too complex to be able to isolate specific differences or to attribute their causes. Instead, in interview research we look for the *commonalities* in experiences among participants, even if those participants seem very different from one another. This enables us to look for patterns in the commonly experienced aspects of a phenomenon, which enriches our understanding of its complexity.

I have included examples of common mistakes in writing research questions for interviews in Box 2.4. Use them to double-check the questions you write.

BOX 2.4

AVOID THESE COMMON ERRORS IN WRITING RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW RESEARCH

| Research Question | Explanation of Error |
|--|---|
| How do managers view their employees' productivity? | Productivity is measured quantitatively, so it isn't appropriate for interview research. |
| What do college freshmen men think about college women who've had abortions? | This is a question about attitudes or opinions about someone else, which is not appropriate for interview research. Research questions should focus on the participant's <i>own</i> experiences. |
| How do high school teens describe how fellow classmates are bullied? | This asks people to describe other people's experiences. Interviewing is meant to allow people to explain their <i>own</i> experiences, not experiences of others. |
| How do college seniors describe their living arrangements? | Participants will not be able to talk for at least one hour about this topic. Research questions appropriate for interviewing should be investigating something with enough depth that a participant can talk for at least one hour about it. |
| How have students' study habits changed after receiving free tutoring help? | This is a cause and effect question, which cannot be answered through interviewing. We could only ask about their <i>perceptions</i> of the changes. |
| What do companies notice about employee workplace morale? | In interviewing research, the unit of analysis is the individual. “Companies” needs to be changed to an individual as the unit of analysis, such as employees or managers. |
| What strategies are used to get back together with an ex? | The unit of analysis is missing: Who is using these strategies? |
| How does a person living abroad for the first time explain their process of adapting to the new culture? | The question is written in the singular (“a person”). You will never interview only one person in a research project, so research questions should always be written in the plural. |

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Write two research questions about poverty that are appropriate for interviewing research. One of your questions should be appropriate for basic research and one for applied research. Make sure both follow these criteria:

- They are answerable and feasible.
- They aren't answerable with a yes/no answer or just a few words.
- They cover all aspects of the topic you want to investigate without using sub-parts or multiple questions.
- They say exactly what you mean and don't need explanation.
- They are grammatically correct and end in a question mark.

Now write an explanation of why each of these research questions is appropriate for interviewing.

Literature Review

The process of reviewing the literature for interviews is done in the same way, and for all the same reasons, as when using other research methods. Even though you are conducting qualitative research, in your review it is important to include both qualitative and quantitative research. You should use this research to help you develop and refine your research question. If you will be using a loosely structured format, you will also use the literature to help you generate a list of possible topics to be covered in the interviews. If you will be using a semi-structured format, you will use the literature to help you develop your list of interview questions. These can be inspired by the findings of other researchers, by questions asked by other qualitative researchers (you may borrow good questions that they used during the interview, for example), and by your critiques of the existing research. You may also find research that has produced results the researchers were unable to explain because the method they were using was not able to do so. For example, let's say you are interested in how doctors make decisions about how to treat patients based on nonmedical information, such as appearance, apparent intelligence, social class, race, gender, and so on. In your review of the literature, there is a study that finds that doctors are less likely to prescribe pain-relieving narcotics to black patients than to white patients (Associated Press, 2008). The authors imply that this is so because of stereotypes that black patients are more likely to be drug users. This, however, is just a guess because the researchers used existing statistics (the hospitals' records) as their method. This enabled them to see racial differences that doctors may have been unlikely to admit to, or even realize, but it doesn't help them know what the doctors were actually thinking when they made the prescription decisions. After reading the article, you might decide to ask the doctors in your sample what factors they take into consideration when prescribing pain medication; specific negative experiences they have had with unknowingly prescribing pain medication when it would have been better not to; how they think race might affect their own

prescription decisions; and whether they think the racial disparity occurs at their hospital, and why. In addition to helping you generate topics and interview questions, the literature review should be used to help you generate a list of codes that you will use in your analysis (see the Data Analysis section later in this chapter).

Ethics

The steps that interview researchers must take to protect their participants are quite extensive. First and foremost, you must get full written informed consent from the participant. To do this, you provide the participant with an **informed consent statement** that details the research process and all of the steps taken to protect the participant's identity. This statement is fairly formulaic, with standardized phrases and structure; it is definitely not a place to exercise your creativity. Usually informed consent for interview research includes the following:

- Start with a short, one- or two-sentence description of the research topic as well as the general areas that will be covered in the interview.
- Provide a description of who may participate in the research, including all of the qualifications for participation (for example, "single mothers over the age of 18 who have never been married").
- State who is conducting the research and describe how the research will be used (for publication, for presentation to an employer, etc.).
- Provide an estimate of the amount of time the interview will take and the number of interview sessions to which the interviewee is agreeing.
- If the interview will be audio or video recorded, this must be stated in the informed consent statement.
 - Additionally, the participant must be advised that they have the right to have the recording device turned off at any point during the interview and that you will only recommence recording with the participant's permission.
 - You must state who, other than yourself, will see or have access to the recordings (such as an advisor, research assistant, or paid transcriptionist) or read the completed transcripts.
 - You must also disclose what you will do with the recordings and transcripts after the completion of your research. (Usually, though not always, the recordings are destroyed.)
- Assure the participant that the research will be completely **confidential**, which means that no one other than you will know their identity. Steps taken to protect the participant's identity include the following:
 - replacing the participant's name with a **pseudonym** (fake name) in the transcripts and in labelling recordings

- deleting identifying information (such as hometown, name of high school, name of place of employment, etc.) from the transcripts
 - if the recordings are kept or backed up on a physical device, such as on a thumb drive, keeping them in a locked room or cabinet
 - password-protecting the electronic recording and transcript files
 - keeping no record that links the participant's name with their pseudonym
- State that participation in this research is completely voluntary and that the participant may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty or repercussion. This means that if the participant wants to withdraw their information even after the interview has been analyzed, you must not include it in the final analysis or report.
 - Advise the participant of their right not to answer any questions they do not wish to answer.
 - State that the participant has a right to ask additional questions about the research and that these questions will be answered.
 - Fully disclose any potential risks of participating in the research. With interview research, there usually is little to no risk, but sometimes participants may be warned that they may feel some emotional discomfort if the interview is likely to include questions about emotional or traumatic events, such as a death in the family, a battle with anorexia, or an act of violence that they have experienced.
 - Disclose any immediate benefits to the participants for their participation in the research. Again, in interview research, there usually are none, but occasionally a researcher may provide a small monetary token for participation or conduct a raffle in which one of the participants in the sample wins a prize.
 - Provide your contact information.
 - Provide the contact information for the chair of the governing Institutional Review Board (IRB). The participant needs to be advised that they may contact this person if they feel that any of their rights as a research participant have been violated.
 - Finally, the informed consent statement should have a statement indicating that the participant has read the entire document, that all their questions about the research have been answered, and that they have given their consent to participate in the research. This should be followed by a place for the signature and the date. In all but rare cases, the participant should sign their real name, not the pseudonym, on the informed consent statement.

You should keep the signed consent form in a private and secure location. Additionally, you should give an unsigned copy of the document to the participant so that they not only have a record of their rights, but also the contact information for yourself and the chair of the IRB, should they have further questions. Box 2.5 is a sample of an informed consent statement. Of course, it goes without saying that you must not only inform the participant of all of these steps taken to protect them from harm, but also carry through with them. Not doing so is not merely unethical; it also runs the risk of sanctions from the IRB or supporting organization, or a lawsuit from one of the participants.

BOX 2.5

SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR INTERVIEWING

You are invited to participate in a study on the classroom experiences of African American men at Big River State University. The purpose of this study is to understand the ways in which African American men perceive their race to affect their experiences as students. You are eligible to participate if you identify as an African American male, are at least 18 years of age, and have been enrolled as a full- or part-time student at BRSU for at least one entire semester. This research is being conducted by Dr. Rita Book, a professor in the Department of Sociology at BRSU. The results of this research will be used for campus and professional presentation, as well as for publication.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will take part in one face-to-face interview lasting between 2 and 3 hours. Approximately 20 participants in all will be interviewed. These interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. I will turn off the recorder at any time if you ask me to do so, and I will not resume recording without your permission.

Your participation in this research is entirely confidential. Your name will not appear on any of the recordings, files, or transcripts. You will choose a fake name, which will be used on the recordings, transcripts, and final report. Any identifying information will be changed or deleted. The only people who will hear your recordings will

be myself and a paid transcriber. Transcripts and digital recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer, and they will be destroyed at the end of the research project.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to ask questions about this study and to have your questions answered. There are no anticipated risks or benefits to you from your participation in this research. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to participate in this study, you have the right to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact me, Dr. Book, at (987) 555-1234, or via e-mail at rbook@brsu.edu. If you feel your rights as a research participant have been violated, you should contact the chair of the Human Subjects in Research Committee at BRSU, Dr. Strict, at (987) 555-5678.

I have read the above and have had all my questions about participation in this study answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

Signature _____

Date _____

Special Considerations

If a participant is under the age of 18, you must receive informed consent from their parents. Depending on the child's age, you may also be required to get their consent to participate. If you are going to conduct research with minors through an organization (such as their school), you will also need to get permission from the head of the organization (in this case, the principal and the school board).

Regardless of the participant's age, if you ask questions that are likely to yield any information about illegal behavior, you must use extra caution and employ additional steps to protect them, including full disclosure in the informed consent statement about how that information will be used and what the possible consequences are to the participant for providing you with that information. In rare cases, the recordings, notes, and transcripts of researchers have been subpoenaed in legal cases when the judge had reason to believe that the researcher had information relevant to the case (Rosich, 2005). The bottom line is that the participant should never suffer any harm or negative repercussions from their participation in your research.

Sometimes it becomes clear during the course of an interview that a participant needs some sort of help with issues in their life. For example, a participant may admit to having a physically abusive partner or to struggling with an addiction that is out of control. These cases are ethically tricky, as you are a researcher, not a trained therapist, and therefore should refrain from acting as such. Nonetheless, it is generally appropriate to offer the person resources that may be able to provide them help, such as information about the local domestic violence shelter or addiction treatment programs. The ethics are more vague, however, about how far to involve yourself in getting the participant help. If they don't have transportation to the shelter, for example, should you offer to drive them? Should you call them to check in on how they are doing or whether they received the help you recommended? The answers to these questions are unclear, and it is up to you, the researcher, to decide what you think is the most ethical response while maintaining both personal and professional boundaries. When in doubt, I recommend consulting with colleagues or researchers you respect, while of course being careful to maintain your participants' confidentiality.

Other Ethical Issues

In addition to protecting the participant from harm, other ethical considerations can arise in interview research. For example, you may find yourself interviewing people you do not like, either because you don't find their personalities agreeable or because they have engaged in behavior of which you disapprove or that you consider immoral. Scully and Marolla (1985), for example, interviewed convicted rapists in prison about their motivations for raping women. Pryor (1996) interviewed men who had a history of molesting children. These researchers were appalled by the participants' behavior, but for their interviews to be successful, they had to maintain a nonjudgmental and respectful demeanor, regardless of how abhorrent they found the behaviors they were asking about. Some people may consider it unethical *not* to raise objections in these kinds of situations, but a researcher's focus is on the ethical

treatment of the participant, which takes priority. After all, not only is the participant sharing with you their perspective on the world, but if your goal is to understand the world through their eyes in order to better understand their actions, then you have to be willing to accept that they see things differently than you do. To pass judgment or to treat the participant disrespectfully is not only an ethical issue; it will also jeopardize the quality of your data. Would *you*, after all, continue to reveal your true thoughts to a person you felt was judging you for your beliefs? Michael Kimmel (2017), himself Jewish, interviewed neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and other white supremacists for his book *Angry White Men*. He did not hide his Jewishness from his participants, and he often told them before the interview that he would not agree with them, but neither would he try to convince them. Instead, he listened respectfully, as he told them he would:

In this book, I try to look into the hearts and minds of the American men with whom I most disagree politically. I try to understand where their anger comes from and where they think it's going. I do so not with contempt or pity, but with empathy and compassion. (p. 11)

As an interviewer, this is the way in which you must treat all of your participants.

A related issue is your portrayal of the participant in your analysis. Some researchers feel that portraying participants in unflattering or even disparaging ways is unethical. Although you may have learned many things about your participant during the course of the interviews that you find unsavory or even distressing, the participant would likely not have agreed to take part in the research if they had known that it would be used to make them (or people like them) look bad. Additionally, unflattering portrayals can negatively affect the people you have studied or groups like them. If your actual participants read the study, it may hurt their feelings or affect their sense of self-esteem. At the very least, it will likely lower others' opinions of the population you are studying, which can have both intangible and concrete effects on that group. More important, once you present your results, you have no control over how others will use that information, so a mildly negative portrayal of your participants could get blown into something much more severe. All of that being said, it is at the same time considered unethical to withhold important findings from your research simply because it may be unflattering to your participants. Like many ethical dilemmas, there is no easy solution to this problem, but generally interview researchers try to be honest with their findings, while also avoiding negatively portraying their participants. Sometimes you can do this by focusing not on the behaviors or characteristics that make you uncomfortable, but on the situations, contexts, reactions, or other forces beyond their control that play a role in these behaviors, or by balancing the negatives with other positives that you have learned through the interview as well. Other times you can successfully and ethically negotiate this simply by writing your analysis in a way that shows your respondents as human (and thus as feeling, thinking, and vulnerable), rather than as simple stereotypes or caricatures. Kimmel (2017), for example, talks in his book about the ways in which the anger felt by his white supremacist

participants was justified, although misdirected, in his view. He specifically states that many of them are not “bad men” but “true believers in the American Dream,” and that though he finds their discourse dangerous and hate filled, he also balances that by validating their underlying disappointment, anger, fear, and disillusionment brought on by an economic shift that has taken away what they had been promised.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

If you were carrying out research based on one of your research questions about poverty, what are all the things you would need to do to protect your participants? Remember to apply the principles of ethics to each particular case, so that if you are interviewing adolescents, for example, you will do some things differently than if you are interviewing adults.

Sampling

Because interviews are usually based on interpretivist methodology, your goal as an interviewer is to understand the perspectives of your participants as fully and deeply as possible. In order to do so, you need to use a sampling strategy that will provide you with participants who are willing to share detailed and thorough information with you about what might be fairly private issues. Additionally, this method of research is time intensive, so you need participants who are willing to spend the time to give you the information you need and will not just try to get through it as quickly as possible. For these reasons, it is inappropriate to try to randomly choose people to participate in your research. Instead, you need to target people who are interested in, and maybe even excited about, your research. Interview researchers therefore generally use **nonprobability sampling**, which means that not everyone in the population shares the same chance of being chosen to participate in the research. This will certainly bias your research—those who are interested in or excited about your research are people who may have had particular types of experiences regarding your topic or who want their perspective to be heard. Although such bias can be a serious problem in quantitative research, it is *not* considered problematic in interpretivist research because with interviews you will avoid **generalizing** your findings beyond your sample to a larger population. That is, you must *avoid* making any claims about anyone outside of your sample. For example, even though you found that the teachers in your study expressed great frustration with having to design their curricula to the standardized tests their students take, you cannot then conclude that this frustration is typical or even that any teachers outside your study share it. The limitation of this, of course,



Reminder: Sampling is how you go about choosing the people who will participate in your research.

is that the information you learn is confined to a very small group of people. The benefit is that by not trying to generalize, your sample can be biased without having any negative effects on your study because you are not claiming that these participants are in any way representative of other people in the population. Even if you draw a very unusual sample of highly disgruntled teachers, you will understand the experiences, frustrations, and perspectives of those disgruntled teachers very well. It does not mean that you can say anything about any other teachers, but you have the opportunity to learn a lot about why those particular teachers in your sample are so terribly unhappy. To the interpretivist researcher, *this* is in fact the goal of research. It is not to try to learn something that applies to everyone in some sort of unbiased, scientific way.

The logic, therefore, that underlies interview sampling is based neither on representativeness nor on randomness, as it is for most quantitative research. Instead, it is based on selecting the people who can *best* help you answer your research question (see Box 2.6). *Best* always includes the requirement that the participant is interested in the project and is willing to spend the necessary time with you on it. The more interested and willing the participant is, the better the data you are likely to get, so these characteristics are of utmost importance. A majority of interview research, therefore, uses the strategy of calling for volunteers by posting fliers, placing ads in local newspapers, putting announcements on websites like Craigslist or on a website with substantive content related to your project, sending out e-mails to related distribution lists, or making announcements to relevant groups and organizations. This is called **convenience sampling** because you are not strategically selecting the individuals in your sample but instead are alerting people of the opportunity to participate and allowing them to choose you, which is ostensibly a more convenient and expedient way of sampling. (Most interview researchers have, however, learned that convenience sampling is actually not very convenient—finding enough volunteers who fit the minimum requirements for participation can require a lot of time and work, as well as a willingness to be creative in advertising for participants.)

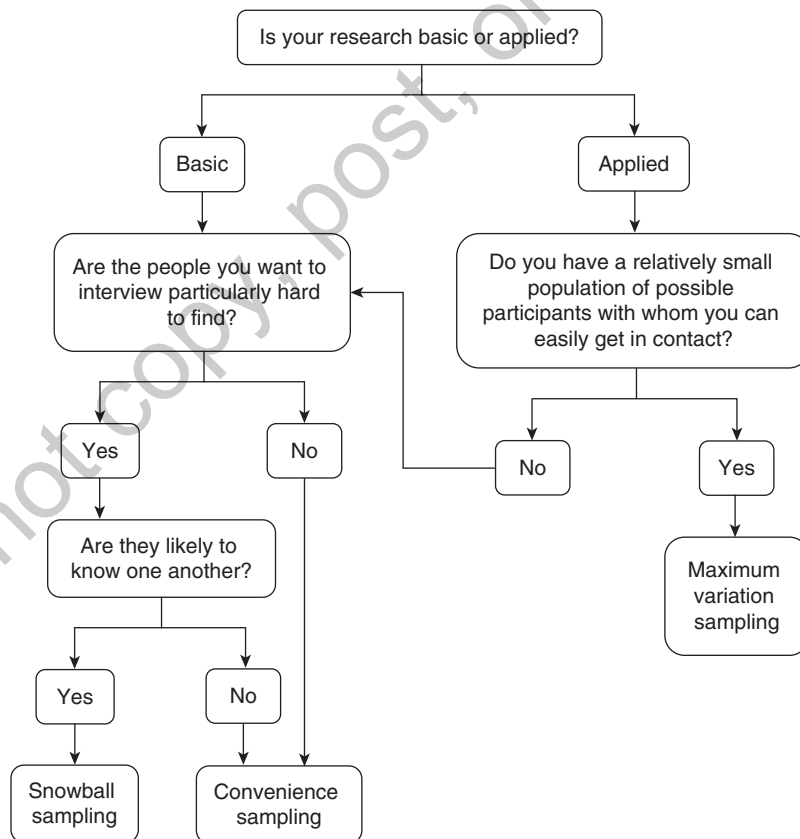
Snowball sampling is the other most common sampling method for interview research. **Snowball sampling** involves recruiting people who participate in the research and who then recruit other people to participate in the research as well (and who, in turn, might recruit more participants for you). This method is particularly suitable when the groups of people you want to participate are difficult to find or identify, are likely to know others like themselves, and are unlikely to participate in official organizations through which you might contact them.

Sometimes it is important to your research question to be selective in your sampling, in which case you would choose a different, usually somewhat more difficult, sampling method. This is known as **purposive sampling** because the participants are *purposely* chosen for a particular reason. For applied interview research, especially evaluation research, it is very important to avoid interviewing only those people who will tell you what you want to hear. For this reason, in applied research you should use purposive sampling, rather than convenience sampling, whenever possible. Although there are more than a dozen different purposive sampling methods, most don't get used very often; by far the most common is **maximum variation sampling**, in which you try to recruit a sample with as much diversity of experience and opinion as possible. Although

interview research is never representative, seeking maximum diversity in your sample ensures that you take into account the wide variety of experiences likely to be found among this population when making decisions that may have serious consequences to their lives. It is important to note, however, that this is a special case for applied research only (especially evaluation research or needs assessment). Basic research rarely requires purposive sampling such as maximum variation sampling. Additionally, it is much harder in basic research to employ purposive sampling than in applied research because in applied research most often the population is very limited, already known to staff within the organization for which you are conducting the research, and thus easy to identify and locate. It is much harder to find such diversity when the population is wide open, unknown, and difficult to locate. Thus the overwhelming majority of sampling for basic interview research uses convenience sampling.

BOX 2.6

DECISION PATH FOR QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW SAMPLING



Note: While this is the typical path for decision making, there may be unusual circumstances that require different decisions.

Gatekeepers

Sometimes, in order to gain access to the people in a population to let them know about your study, you need to use a **gatekeeper**. This is a person who is in a position to grant you the access you need to some group of people. It may be the owner of a website related to your research, the head of an organization that deals with issues pertaining to your research, or an influential member of the group to which you need access. Gatekeepers are not always the most obvious people—often an executive assistant, for example, may be a more important gatekeeper than the CEO of an organization. Appropriate gatekeepers can greatly reduce the amount of time and energy needed to find all the participants for your sample. It can increase, however, the ethical issues you may face, as well as the number of steps you must take to protect the rights of your participants. For example, gatekeepers cannot give you contact information for people they think might be willing to participate in your research unless they have permission from those people to do so. Instead, the gatekeeper must either get the permission of the individual to give you the contact information, or the gatekeeper must give the information about the study to the potential participants and allow them to contact you on their own if interested. Additionally, when all is said and done, you cannot reveal to any gatekeeper which individuals have actually participated (or agreed to participate) in your study; nor can the gatekeeper offer incentives to participate that would require you to reveal the names of the participants, such as a teacher offering extra credit for students who do an interview with you, or a boss offering comp time for participation. In fact, if the gatekeeper has a position of power over the possible participants, then they *must* make it clear that any person's decision to participate or not in your research will have no bearing on their status, either positive or negative, at the organization, and that the decision to participate is completely voluntary. As the researcher, it is your responsibility to make sure that all persons recruited through that gatekeeper understand this before consenting to participate.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

If you were sampling for your two interview research questions on poverty, which sampling method would you choose for each? Why?

Sample Size

Because interviewing is aimed at understanding the participants' experiences and perspectives in great depth and detail, and also because you will not try to generalize your findings, the sample size for interviewing is usually relatively small. The exact size depends on how large the research team conducting the interviews will be and on how long the interviews run. A lone researcher interviewing participants for approximately 1 hour each will use a larger sample size than the researcher whose interviews

take several sessions each for a total of 5, 10, or even 15 hours. Also, the larger the number of interviewers working on the project, the larger the sample size will likely be. Given these tremendous variations, there is no “right” sample size. Typically, interview research uses sample sizes of 15 to 30 participants, though as many as 50 may participate if the researcher schedules shorter interviews by multiple interviewers. Sample size doesn’t frequently exceed 50 for this research method. Similarly, sample sizes smaller than 15 are somewhat rare in published sociological research, unless the researcher is taking a **case study** approach, meaning the researcher concentrates very heavily on only a handful (sometimes as few as three or four) participants but interviews them for many hours (sometimes 100 or more) over the course of months or even years. Case studies, however, are much more common in psychology than in sociology, where they are rare.

Before you can apply for IRB approval, you must decide exactly who is eligible to participate in your project (such as single mothers over the age of 18 who have never been married), your sampling strategy, and your approximate sample size. This information is part of the IRB application. After receiving IRB approval, you may then begin the process of recruiting your sample. Note that it is forbidden to begin recruitment *prior to* receiving approval from your IRB.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Again thinking about your two research questions on poverty, how large of a sample would you use for each? Why?

Preparing for Data Collection

In interview research, preparation for data collection can begin while you are awaiting approval from the IRB (sometimes even before) and often continues into the early stages of participant recruitment. Preparing for interviews primarily involves practicing interviews on the topic, securing the necessary equipment, and making logistical arrangements.

If you have never conducted interviews before, you should spend several weeks working on developing your interviewing skills. Ask friends, family, and acquaintances if you may practice interviewing them. It doesn’t have to be on your research topic—just get some practice asking questions, listening, and eliciting as much detail as possible. Many new interviewers are surprised at how much skill it actually takes to conduct a good interview, and these skills are only developed through practice. You may also be surprised to find that the less you know about an individual personally, the easier it is to interview them, so don’t be afraid to ask people you don’t know or barely know, such as the friends of friends or the neighbor you say hello to but don’t really know. After all, you won’t know your actual research participants either, and it

is good to practice interviewing strangers. As you begin to feel more comfortable with the process, you may ask your practice interviewees to role-play different difficult interviewing scenarios, such as being terse in their answers, getting angry or crying, or straying far from the topic in their answers. Practice dealing with these situations. Although they are not the norm in interviews, they do occasionally come up, and feeling confident that you can deal with them will make you much less nervous going into your real interviews. You should also practice the moments that new interviewers often find somewhat awkward: explaining the informed consent statement, transitioning from informed consent to beginning the interview, and ending the interview. All researchers, even experienced interviewers, should practice at least one or two interviews on their topic with people who fit the same criteria as the people in the sample. These are called **pilot interviews** and will not be counted in the actual sample or used in the final analysis. The purpose of these pilot interviews is to make sure that the topics you intend to cover in the interview are appropriate and relevant and that your questions are answerable. Additionally, they will help to improve the quality of your data by alerting you to possible difficulties or problems before they have a chance to compromise the data you are collecting.

I also recommend that interview researchers reverse roles during a practice interview. Ask someone to interview you on the same topics and use some of the same or similar questions that you might use in collecting your data. The interview will be less smooth, of course, because your “interviewer” will not know which ideas to pursue with follow-up questions or which details to elicit, nor will they likely have excellent interviewing skills. Nonetheless, if you write down a list of interview questions and then have someone ask you the questions and try answering them yourself, you will learn a lot that will improve the quality of the data you gather. If you are very different than your participants will be, you may need to revise the topics or questions for this kind of practice interview. For example, if you are interviewing teen mothers about how they cope with stigma, and yet you have not been a teen mother and perhaps haven't even been pregnant, you can instead answer similar questions about some other characteristic or behavior that has caused you to be stigmatized. Although not ideal, it still affords you the opportunity to better understand how your participants will feel being interviewed. You should use this exercise to reflect on why some questions were easier to answer than others; how vulnerable you felt answering the most sensitive questions, and how that affected your responses; and what the interviewer did that put you at ease, or helped you to provide more detailed information. This experience can then be used to improve the interviews you conduct.

In addition to practicing interviewing, you will need to secure the necessary equipment. Most interviewers record their interviews, which is highly recommended. You will therefore need charged batteries and a reliable recorder that can produce high-quality recordings. If you use a digital recorder, you will probably use a computer program that facilitates the transcription of digital recording. It is never a good idea to record the interview on your cell phone—it is too easy for it to get accidentally erased, and it doesn't provide enough protection for confidentiality. For transcription, you may want to purchase a foot pedal that connects to your computer. Newer versions are adapted

from older pre-digital recording transcription machines, but they greatly increase the control you have over playback, allowing you to easily pause or rewind while continuing to type, thus decreasing transcription time. In addition, if you will be using a computer program to help you manage your data, you should obtain and learn to use the software.

Logistical arrangements primarily focus on finding a comfortable, private, safe place to conduct the interviews. You can interview participants in their own homes, but be aware that if there are other people present in the home at the time of the interview, or if there are interruptions from children, pets, phone calls, or other general distractions, it will negatively affect the quality of your data. In some circumstances, you may be able to interview the participant in your own home, but again, the presence of other people or distractions will reduce the quality of your data. In addition, safety can be an issue. Some participants, especially women, may not feel safe going to a stranger's home; likewise, there may be cases in which researchers feel anxious having strangers coming to their home or knowing where they live. Neutral locations always work well but are particularly advisable for evaluation research as long as they are away from the actual organization, as they may encourage more honest answers. If you are choosing such a location, it needs to be a quiet, comfortable, and private place that is readily accessible to the participants and that, preferably, can be reserved in advance. Some community centers, city buildings, public libraries, university campuses, or places of worship have appropriate rooms that can be used, although sometimes they charge a fee. Another logistical issue to handle is arranging your schedule, as much as possible, so that you will be available to conduct interviews at times that are convenient for your participants. You should also make sure that interested potential participants can contact you via phone and that any message they leave will not be heard by others, which would compromise their confidentiality. Also, you should prepare a drawer in a locking file cabinet or other secured place to store transcripts and completed consent forms.

Data Collection

Once you have received approval from the IRB, have completed preparations for your interviews, and have scheduled an interview time with your first participant, you are ready to begin collecting your data. For both types of interviews (loosely or semi-structured), the primary determinant in the quality of your data will be how well you establish rapport with each of your participants. **Rapport** (pronounced ra-POR) is the relationship of trust, cooperation, mutual respect, and sense of ease you have with one another. Any interview in which you fail to establish at least a decent amount of rapport with the participant will be arduous and of poor quality. Because rapport is so vital to producing good research, you will take a number of steps to establish rapport with each participant.

Establishing Rapport

1. In early communication with the participants about the research, be polite, pleasant, and enthusiastic about the project.

- You should also take great care to make sure that they fit the criteria you set for participation, that they understand what the research is generally about, that they know how long you expect the interview to take, and that their decision to participate is entirely voluntary and they do not feel in any way pressured to participate.
 - No matter how desperate you are for participants, you do not want to interview someone who has consented out of a sense of obligation, guilt, or pressure. Not only is this ethically questionable, it likely won't be a pleasant experience for either one of you, and the data that it yields will most certainly be of poor quality.
2. Dress appropriately for the interview.
 - What you wear depends on whom you are interviewing—you should dress differently to interview the CEO of a Fortune 500 company than you would to interview a college student, a prison inmate, or a mother living in subsidized housing.
 - Although you need not dress in exactly the same way as your participant, you should, nonetheless, make sure that your appearance is neither intimidating nor likely to undermine your credibility.
 3. When you and the participant first arrive at the meeting place, engage in easy, casual conversation.
 - It doesn't have to be lengthy or personal, but even asking whether the participant had any trouble finding the place or talking about the weather can help to break the ice and make both of you feel more comfortable when the interview actually begins.
 4. After the interview has begun, give the participant your full and concentrated attention.
 - Show your interest in the participant's answers by asking follow-up questions and by demonstrating attentive listening.
 - Give both verbal cues and nonverbal cues that let them know that you are listening and want them to continue.
 5. Express genuine empathy.
 - If they are relaying an experience that made them angry, you might say, for example, "How frustrating for you!" If they discuss a difficult time in their life, you could respond, "I can only imagine how hard that must have been."
 - Your responses should feel genuine, not forced, and your facial expressions should match your responses. That is, if you say something to express empathy but have a bored look on your face, it will seem fake and likely damage, rather than encourage, rapport.

6. If you personally disagree with the participant's interpretations or perspectives, or if they are describing behaviors that you find troublesome (or even horrifying), you should take care not to convey this to them.
 - Both verbal and nonverbal cues should be nonjudgmental on your part.
 - Remember, your goal is to understand what they think or what they have experienced, not to condemn or change them.
7. Believe what the participant says, and convey this to them through your verbal and nonverbal cues.
 - Rarely do participants lie outright. The more rapport you establish, and the more they feel they can trust you with information without being judged, the less likely this will occur.
 - If you try to trick your participant or trip them up in what you think is a lie, you will most certainly destroy the trust necessary for the interview to continue.
 - Relatedly, never badger a participant. Sometimes we are so wedded to what we believe must be true, we have a hard time accepting an answer that doesn't match up with our expectations.
 - For example, one of my students conducted a research project on how people decided to convert to Catholicism amid all the allegations of sexual abuse and the Church's position on controversial issues. The student became interested in the topic because she herself was considering becoming a Catholic. During one interview, she asked a participant about the doubts he had about converting. The participant said very plainly that he had no doubts. Because she had her own doubts, however, and because other participants had expressed doubts in previous interviews, the researcher did not believe her participant. She continued to ask the question several times, at which point it became badgering, and the participant got frustrated.
 - A better way of handling this situation would be to try to rephrase the question once, but no more. Then switch to finding out more about the person's answer. For example, you might say, "That's really interesting. Some of the other people I have interviewed have expressed quite a few doubts. Why do you think your experience has been so different from theirs?" This not only provides you with more information on the issue, but also preserves the trust and respect you have built with the participant.
8. Become comfortable with silence.
 - Some participants need to think about your question before they answer, rather than just rattling something off the tops of their heads. Don't assume that just because there are a few seconds of silence the participant doesn't want to answer the question or is unable to.

- Sometimes if you remain silent after a participant answers a question, that silence will encourage them to add more information to their response. My students are regularly amazed at how well this strategy works.

If you are conducting evaluation research, you will need to pay special attention to fostering as much rapport with the participants as possible in order to get honest answers. Although honesty is important to the validity of any interviewing research, in evaluation research the respondents are perhaps more likely to feel that you, the interviewer, have an agenda or want to hear particular answers. For this reason, it is sometimes best for an outsider (someone not related in any way to the program being evaluated) to conduct the interviews, so that participants feel the researcher is objective. If you cannot have an outsider do it, then you must convince your participants with your verbal and nonverbal cues that you truly are interested what they have to say and not just in validating the program. You must make sure they understand that you are willing to listen to all their experiences with the program, no matter how negative or positive.

Additional Steps to Improve Data Quality

For all interviewing research, besides establishing rapport, you will need to do a number of additional things to ensure the quality of your data:

1. Audio record the interview!
 - It is very difficult to take accurate and complete notes during an interview without slowing the participant down while you are trying to keep up, which can compromise the quality of your data (if they are busy repeating things for you to write down, or are waiting for you to catch up, they will say less).
 - Additionally, for most people it is difficult to listen intently, write down everything the participant says, and still come up with spontaneous questions that elicit rich information. Recording allows you to concentrate on what's most important—listening to your participant.
 - Finally, the accuracy of your data will be much greater if you record the interview because in doing so you will capture exactly what the participant said and how they said it.
 - Even so, participants in applied research may be particularly hesitant to have their interviews recorded, especially if they do not trust the confidentiality of the interviews, or if they believe there is a possibility of being sanctioned for negative evaluations. Although recording significantly increases the quality of your data and analysis, if either of these seems to be a concern to the participant, it is better to put the respondent at ease and not record than to have them watch every word they say because you have insisted on recording them.

- Make sure that you test your equipment with the participant before beginning. It is a huge waste of your time and theirs if you conduct a 2-hour interview, only to realize that your recorder didn't capture any of it. If your recorder does fail, use the jotted-notes technique described below during the interview.
2. If you cannot record the interview, do not try to write down everything that the participant says—you will never succeed, and you will miss much of the important information that the participant gives you. Instead, take quick, jotted notes, only writing down words and phrases that will trigger in your mind more complete details of the interview later.
 - Keep the note-taking as unobtrusive as possible, and avoid slowing the respondent down or asking them to repeat themselves.
 - Learn shorthand or develop your own style of shorthand so that you can write quickly yet still read your notes later.
 - Immediately after the interview, write down, as fully as possible, everything you remember the participant having said, as closely to verbatim as your memory allows. Use your jotted notes to trigger your memory.
 3. Questions should be **wide open**, meaning they should not be answerable with yes/no responses or with a couple of words or a short phrase.
 - Your goal in interviewing is always to elicit as much detailed information as possible. Avoid questions that sound like a multiple-choice response on a survey. For example, “How have your perspectives on this issue changed since that first meeting?” will elicit better data than “Now, do you agree with him more or less than you did before?”
 - Yes/no questions should only be used to check your understanding, or for clarification purposes (“So, do you mean that you think it was unfair of her to do that?”).
 4. In order to elicit as much rich detail as possible (called **thick description**), ask questions about specific instances and examples instead of asking for generalizations.
 - For example, “Can you walk me through your morning today, step by step, from the time you woke up until you left the house?” will likely yield a more in-depth answer than “What do you do to get ready in the morning?”
 - Box 2.7 shows several examples of the types of questions that elicit details about specific examples.
 - Novice interviewers often fear that getting many details about one particular experience won't give them the information they need, and so they try to go for generalizations—what usually or typically happens instead of what occurred in one particular instance. In fact, the opposite is true because generalizations don't allow for the level of detail that really provides insight and that allows you to conduct a strong analysis.

5. Never start an interview with questions requesting demographic information.
 - Interviews are not an appropriate method for collecting large amounts of demographic data, but sometimes you want to ask a few such questions, such as the participant's age or occupation.
 - Do not, however, begin an interview with these questions. The first questions you ask will set the tone for the interview and will signal to the participant what kind and how much information you want them to supply. If you begin an interview with demographic questions, you signal to the participant that all their answers should be short and unreflective.
 - Instead, your first question should ask for a lot of detail in order to set the proper tone for the interview.
 - Be patient about demographic information—often this information will be mentioned in the course of the interview without your even needing to request it. If not, wait until the end of the interview to ask these questions.
6. Try to avoid putting words in the participant's mouth.
 - Instead of asking, "Did that make you feel relieved, or was it kind of scary?" ask, "How did that make you feel?"
 - This will help to ensure that you are getting a direct view through the participant's own eyes, rather than their reactions to your assumptions.
7. Try to be clear about whether you are asking about their behavior, thoughts, or feelings (Weiss, 1994).
 - You can ask about all three, but not all at once.
 - You might begin, for example, with "How did you break the news to her?" (behavior), and then follow that with "What were you thinking while you were trying to broach the subject?" (thoughts). You might finally ask, "How did you feel after you told her?" (feelings). This will provide you with more detailed information and help the participant to stay focused.
8. End the interview by asking two questions: "Is there anything else you would like to add?" and "Is there anything I didn't ask about that I should have?"
 - This gives the participant the opportunity to clarify or stress the importance of previous statements, to revise a statement that they have been reconsidering during the rest of the interview, or to bring up issues that you hadn't considered but that they feel are important to your topic.
 - Sometimes these questions can produce another 30 minutes or more of useful data.

BOX 2.7**KEY WORDS ELICITING INFORMATION ABOUT SPECIFIC EXAMPLES**

- How did you tell him for *the first time* that you love him?
- Tell me a little bit about *the last argument* you two had.
- Can you describe for me a *particularly memorable* evening you two shared together?
- What was *the best* present he ever gave you?
- Can you remember *a time when things* in your relationship *were particularly stressful*?
- Perhaps you could recount for me the conversation you had *last night*.
- Can you give me a *recent example* of how you two have come to a compromise on that issue?

9. Immediately after you leave the interview, take a few minutes to write down what you think were the most important issues and themes that arose during the interview, anything that struck you as surprising or unexpected, and new questions or topics that you would like to add to future interviews. This is helpful both for analysis and for improving your subsequent interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

If you are conducting semi-structured interviews, in addition to the above you will want to follow these guidelines as well:

1. Memorize your questions, and only occasionally glance at a cheat sheet. This will make the interviewee feel more comfortable.
2. Word the questions in a relaxed, casual way, so that they sound more natural. Avoid asking formally worded questions that sound stiff and may be off-putting.
3. Remember that this is not a survey—you do not need to ask each question with exactly the same wording to each participant; in fact, to do so can make the question seem awkward and clumsy.
 - When possible, link the question to what the participant has just said. This can make the participant feel like their answers are useful and interesting to you. It also allows for smoother transitions and a more natural flow to the interview.
4. Avoid asking questions that they have already addressed just because you haven't formally asked the question yet.
 - "You may have already answered this one, but . . ." usually yields little new information and causes awkwardness because the participant may not know how much to repeat of what they have already told you.

- Instead, ask specific questions that prompt the participant to elaborate on particular points they have already made in order to fill out the information you are looking for on that topic.
 - For example, instead of asking, “You may have already answered this, but how was it to go back and forth between your mom and dad’s house?” ask, “You’ve already brought up how the rules differed between your mom’s house and your dad’s house, and you said your mom was much stricter. I’m curious about how it felt, then, to go back to your mom’s on Sunday evenings after spending the weekend with your dad, who you said pretty much let you do anything.”
5. Be flexible about the order in which you ask your questions, so that they seem to flow more naturally from the participant’s answers, thus allowing you to avoid awkward transitions.

Loosely Structured Interviews

Here are some guidelines for best practice if you are conducting loosely structured interviews:

1. Go into the interview knowing what topics you want to cover, but remember to let the participant’s experiences and responses direct the interview.
 - *Eighty percent or more of your questions should flow directly from what the respondent is saying.*
 - In responding to questions, participants drop **markers**: passing references to information that they think might be relevant.
 - By mentioning the information, the participant is signaling to you that they have this information and that they are willing to tell you more about it, if you are interested.
 - A main task for all interviewers, but especially for those conducting loosely structured interviews, is to identify markers and decide which to let drop and which to ask more about (you can never follow up on every marker).
 - It is as if the participant is giving you a driving tour of a city, pointing out various landmarks and points of interest, and then says to you, “Let me know if you want to stop and get out to look at any of these places.” In the loosely structured interview, the participant is the tour guide of their experiences, giving you markers to consider, and it is up to you to say, “I think I’d like to spend some time here, at this one.”
 - Refer again to Box 2.2 to see a list of questions that a student researcher asked during an interview about the messages she received from her family about sexuality. I omitted the participant’s answers to these questions to highlight how you can tell just from her questions that she is picking up on markers, so that her questions flow directly from what the participant had just told her.

BOX 2.8**INTERVIEWING DO'S AND DON'TS****START WELL**

- Keep early communication pleasant, polite, and enthusiastic
- Make sure they are consenting
- Warm up with chit-chat
- Dress appropriately

**PAY ATTENTION**

- Give your full attention
- Use verbal and nonverbal cues to convey your interest
- Follow up on markers

**SHOW EMPATHY**

- When participants express emotion, show that you understand
- Validate their feelings

**BE SPECIFIC**

- Ask for specific instances
- Ask for details
- Specify whether you are asking about behaviors, thoughts, or feelings

**BE QUIET**

- Get comfortable with silence
- Give them time to think about their answers
- Let the participant do 80–90% or more of the talking

**DON'T ASSUME**

- Don't assume you know what they think or feel
- Don't put words in their mouth
- Instead, ask for clarification or more information

**DON'T BADGER**

- Don't push your participants to say what you want to hear
- Instead, ask them why they see things differently

**DON'T JUDGE**

- Your role is to listen and try to understand, not judge
- Your face and nonverbals remain neutral if you don't like what you hear

**DON'T JUMP THE GUN**

- Don't start with demographic questions—let them come up or save them until the end
- Don't end your interview before asking whether they have more to say

**DON'T STRESS**

- Don't think about your next question while they are talking—just listen
- Don't keep looking at your list of topics/questions
- Don't try to take copious notes while they talk—record instead

2. Listen fully to the participant rather than thinking about what your next question is going to be.
 - If you focus on your next question, not only will it distract you, causing you to miss potentially important markers, but the participant will often be able to sense your lack of attention and will begin to provide shorter and shorter answers; this, of course, will reduce the quality of your data.
 - *You don't need to think of new questions; if you just listen, you will find markers that will give you your next question.*
3. Keep a list of general topics to cover, but put it out of sight.
 - When you don't have any new markers on which you want to follow up, and no burning questions come to mind, pull out the list, saying, "Let me see what we haven't covered yet"; or, if it's toward the end of the interview, state "Let me see if I've missed anything."
 - Using this technique helps keep you from feeling like you have to think of a next question instead of really listening; it also helps you focus on what is important to the participant, rather than on the topics you presuppose to be important.
 - In addition, it eases the transition for a significant change in topics, making the process less awkward.

Box 2.8 provides a summary of the do's and don'ts of interviewing research.

Data Analysis

Transcription

Unlike with most quantitative research, qualitative analysis happens *concurrently with* data collection. Ideally, as soon as you finish your first interview, you should transcribe it and begin analysis on it, even while you conduct more interviews. The first step is to **transcribe** the interview, which means to type out, word for word, what was said during the interview. Transcription is a very time-consuming and tedious process, although the amount of time required varies greatly, depending on the transcriptionist's typing ability and the quality of the recording. It takes a reasonably good typist about 2 to 3 hours to transcribe 1 hour of interview, provided the recording is of high quality. It can take the same typist 6 to 8 hours to transcribe 1 hour of recording with poor sound quality. This happens when the microphone was too far away to clearly pick up the voices, when the speakers dropped the volume of their voices while speaking (as they often do when discussing more private or emotional matters), or when there was a lot of background noise. Transcription is time-consuming enough that it must be taken into account when making decisions about the feasibility of an interview project and when choosing a sample size. Some researchers have the resources to hire paid transcriptionists to do this step for them, while others prefer to do the transcription themselves. Some researchers argue that they learn much more

about the interview by transcribing it themselves (including what they can improve upon in their interviewing skills) because their attention is focused differently than during the actual interview. Transcribing your own recordings may also make the transcriptions more accurate because you have the benefit of memory to help when something is inaudible on the recording.

Although you may hope to skip the transcription process by using voice recognition software, at the time of this writing, most of the technology is not quite advanced enough to do this well in an interview situation. Two or three programs that are newly on the market claim that they convert interview recordings directly into text transcripts, but most reviews say that they just aren't very accurate, and they require so many corrections that they save little time. Sound conditions during interviews are very different than when one person speaks directly to a voice recognition program like we are used to doing on our phones: In interview situations, recordings vary in quality, there may be background noise, speakers often drop their voices to low levels, there are large volumes of talk, you and the participant may have very different accents or inflections, and dialog always has some overlap in speaking. These conditions make speech recognition much more difficult for interviews than the short commands generally communicated by one person to Siri or Alexa. If you do try to use voice recognition software, you will need to listen to the recording as you correct the errors, which can sometimes occur every few words, and you will need to indicate who is speaking at each speech turn. You will also need to indicate such things as pauses, laughter, and instances when both people talk at once. Additionally, you should be careful about using any speech-recognition software that requires you to upload the interviews to a cloud: this may be considered a breach of confidentiality by your IRB (or may make you more vulnerable to a breach of confidentiality). Meanwhile, qualitative interviewers everywhere eagerly await the day that speech-recognition technology is advanced enough to produce an accurate transcript with few errors, significantly decreasing both the time and cost of interview research.

Steps in Data Analysis

The process of qualitative analysis is an **inductive** one, which means that rather than testing existing theories and hunches to see whether the data support or contradict them, you instead start from the data and, as you analyze it, you develop hunches and theories. In other words, the theories and hunches *come out of* the data that you have gathered, rather than the other way around. This is one of the reasons that interview research is particularly good for helping to develop new theories.

The analysis process usually begins with **coding**. Coding is the process of identifying important themes in what the participant said or in how it was said. **Codes** are usually one to four words long and are shorthand for abstract concepts or themes that characterize pieces of the data. To code, the researcher identifies a section of the transcript (sometimes a phrase, a sentence, or a whole paragraph) and writes the code name next to it. For example, next to the description of a spouse's extramarital affair, you might put *betrayal*, *dishonesty*, *infidelity*, and/or *breaking wedding vows*. It is common to have several codes for any section of a transcript. There are no right or wrong codes,

and different researchers can come up with different codes for the same interview, though they should all be guided by the research question. There are several different



Tip: *A priori* (pronounced: ay pry OR ee) is a Latin term that means “conceived beforehand.” So *a priori* codes are codes that you develop *prior* to starting your analysis. Indeed, most *a priori* codes are developed near the beginning of the research process, while reviewing the literature.

types of codes. **A priori codes** are codes that you brainstorm before you begin analysis—and perhaps even before you conduct your first interview. They are the themes and issues that you expect to arise, given your knowledge of the topic. *A priori* codes are often inspired by the literature review. **Open codes** are codes that you develop while reading through the transcript. They are the themes and issues you see emerging in the data. Most of the time these open codes are **analyst-constructed codes**—that is, you have come up with them yourself.

Sometimes, however, open codes are **indigenous codes**, which means they are concepts that the participants themselves use. For example, if you are interviewing people about femininity and several of your participants distinguish between “girly-girls” and women who are, in their words, “normal girls,” you might adopt both as indigenous codes. All these types of codes are used to mark up the entire transcript, identifying each section with the desired codes. A list of codes is kept, and each code should be given a definition, so that you remain consistent in your coding over time. With each new transcript, you will add new codes. Again, to maintain consistency, you must keep a record of these so that if you create a new code while reading transcript #5, you can go back to transcripts #1 through #4 to look to see if the code should be applied, now that you know to look for it. The process of coding each transcript (using all the types of codes, including *a priori* codes) and assigning definitions to each code is sometimes called **open coding** to distinguish it from subsequent steps of analysis that also include “coding” in their names.

The second stage of analysis is usually to make sense out of all this coding. Sometimes called **axial coding**, it involves using the codes to look for patterns. Lofland and Lofland (1995) describe several common patterns that researchers look for, including frequencies, magnitudes, types, processes, and structures. To aid our discussion of these patterns, let’s suppose you are researching feminist identities. Although **frequencies** might sound quantitative, it just means looking for the themes or patterns that were most frequently found in the data. What were some of the most common experiences or perspectives that people had related to their feminist identities? Looking for **magnitudes**, on the other hand, recognizes that sometimes something really big or important only happens occasionally, or to only a few individuals in your sample. Even though it wasn’t among the most common patterns, it nonetheless had a huge impact when it did happen and therefore is important information. Having a parent who refuses to conform to gender stereotypes may not be a common phenomenon, but it may have a huge impact on the development of a feminist identity. Sometimes researchers look at whether some of the concepts or experiences they are studying fall into different **types**. This means that not all the participants had the same experiences with the phenomena, but some of the experiences were similar to one another and could be grouped accordingly. For example, you may discover that your participants described experiences of discrimination at work that could be grouped into

four different types of discrimination, or there were three different ways in which your participants interpreted the meaning of “being feminist.” Looking for **processes** means searching for a series of steps or stages that are common for all or many of the participants in their journeys from point A to point B, such as the stages each went through from knowing little or nothing about feminism to self-identifying as feminists. Finally, to analyze the **structure** of a phenomenon you’re studying means to break it down and identify its essential parts. Note that this is different than types: Although the participants may have described several different types of discrimination they have experienced, every act of discrimination has specific components that make it count or qualify as discrimination. In analyzing for structure, you try to identify those components. Axial coding usually begins when all, or most, of your interviews have been completed. Sometimes researchers look for all these types of patterns; more often, they search for those patterns most closely suggested by their research question and their data. In applied research, you are probably more likely to focus on patterns of frequency and magnitude (and perhaps process, depending on your research question) than on structure or type. These patterns are summarized in Box 2.9.

The patterns that you identify during axial coding become your hunches about what is going on in the data. The final, but absolutely essential, step of analysis is sometimes called **selective coding**. It involves testing to see whether your hunches are, indeed, backed up by the data. In this step, you comb through the transcripts again to find everything in them that supports your patterns. This helps to verify that there is, indeed, a good amount of evidence for your hunch. Next, you comb again through the data to look for any and all negative cases. **Negative cases** consist of evidence that contradicts, does not support, or is an exception to the pattern. This step is *vital*—it is what makes qualitative analysis systematic and keeps it from being “just opinion.” In other words, by searching for and identifying all the negative cases, you are searching for all the evidence that would suggest your hunch is incorrect. If you find more than

BOX 2.9

AXIAL CODING: FIVE TYPES OF PATTERNS

Frequency

- The frequency with which an experience is shared across participants

Magnitude

- An experience that may not happen often or to many participants, but has a huge impact when it does

Type

- Different variations of an experience may sort into categories or kinds

Process

- The steps or stages of an experience

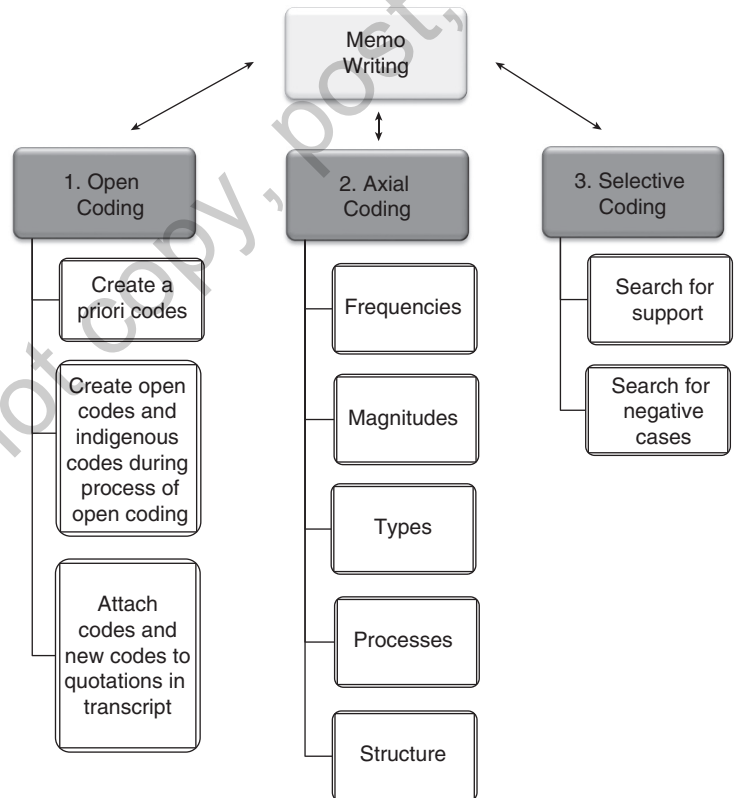
Structure

- The components or parts that make up an experience

a few negative cases, then you either have to decide that you were mistaken and focus on other patterns, or you must revise your description of the pattern so that it applies to the negative cases as well—which then turns them into supporting evidence. If this happens, you will then need to repeat the entire process of selective coding until you have few or no negative cases and a preponderance of evidence supporting your pattern.

Throughout all the stages of analysis, you will also write **memos**, which are notes to yourself about ideas that you have, new questions or hunches that arise, new leads that you would like to pursue later, or issues that you find puzzling. Memos can also be written to document where you are in the analysis process, which is especially important if it will be even a few days before you resume analyzing. It’s amazing how many great ideas you forget and how much work you end up needlessly repeating if you don’t write memos. Box 2.10 summarizes the different stages of qualitative data analysis, including memo writing.

BOX 2.10
DIAGRAM OF STEPS IN QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS



It is important to point out that there are several different types of qualitative analysis that are appropriate for interviewing. I have described one of the most common, but there are others. Narrative analysis and discourse analysis, for example, focus less on *what* is said than on *how* it is said. Life-course analysis and life-history analysis focus more attention on the sequencing of events and the impact of the particular historical moment on these events. The various types of analyses tend to differ primarily on what they are looking for, but there can also be some differences in how the analyses are carried out. In all these cases, however, you search for patterns and must also check yourself to make sure that there is ample evidence of the patterns that you identify.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Try coming up with a list of 10 a priori codes that you could use in analyzing your interviews for one of your research questions on poverty.

Timing of Data Analysis

I have already mentioned that qualitative data analysis should happen concurrently with data collection. This is for two main reasons. First, in interpretivist research, the aim is to understand the phenomena you are studying as fully as possible. As you analyze the data, new questions may arise, and you might want to know new or different information. Thus, your analysis should inform your subsequent interviews. During the course of the data collection, the interviews should continually change to reflect the new issues, ideas, and themes that you need to understand. Second, interpretivist methodology posits that the people you are studying know and understand more about their world and their experiences than you, the researcher, ever can, so interpretivists often enlist their participants to help with the analysis during the interview process. For example, you think you are beginning to see a pattern in the data. In your next interview, you might say, “I’ve already conducted several interviews, and it seems to me that people tend to use three different strategies for dealing with that situation: avoidance, confrontation, and distancing. What strategy do you use? Have you ever used any strategies besides these three? Can you think of any examples when you’ve seen someone else using a different strategy?” Alternatively, you might seek the participant’s interpretation of the data by asking, for example, “Several people I’ve interviewed have told me that they have had difficulty making friends in this community. Why do you think this is?” Both of these tactics allow you to elicit new and relevant data and also to check whether your hunches hold up or the participants can give you new insights.

Using Software in Data Analysis

Traditionally, qualitative data analysis was done by hand—researchers coded by writing directly on the transcripts, sorting the data into piles based on the codes assigned, and then sifting through those piles again and again to conduct the axial

and selective coding. Today, most qualitative researchers use a software program to help them organize the data and to make each step of the analysis easier. Although these software packages are typically referred to as “qualitative analysis programs,” they don’t in fact analyze the data for you. Much like word-processing programs, which don’t write your papers for you, they simply make the mechanics of the process simpler. There are several well-known packages that have been on the market for years, continually improving as the technology advances, including ATLAS.ti, NVivo, and MAXQDA. There are also several newer, cloud-based programs, though these need to be used with caution—when you store data on a cloud, you do not have total control over it, and potentially confidentiality could be breached. For this reason, downloadable software packages remain more popular among professional researchers than cloud-based applications, but some cloud-based sites are now offering extra firewalls and enhanced security. Although each program operates a little differently, they all aim to simplify the process of coding and to allow you to more easily sift through the data. For example, with just a couple clicks of the mouse you can view everything you coded in all your interviews as, say, *dishonesty*, so that you can then look to see whether there are patterns that you can identify, such as different types of dishonesty. Most of the software also allows you to make diagrams to depict the relationships between codes (which is especially helpful for those who are visual thinkers) and to write memos and cross-reference them with particular codes or sections of the transcripts. Some of the software also enables you to code images and audio files, as well as text.

Conceptualizing and Operationalizing



Reminder: Conceptualization is the process of developing precise definitions for the abstract concepts you are studying, and **operationalization** is the process of deciding how to capture the information in order to measure those concepts.

In interview research, the processes of conceptualizing and operationalizing do not exist as separate stages and occur throughout the research process (a) before data collection, (b) during data collection, and (c) during analysis.

Before data collection, you may conceptualize while working on your literature review by writing definitions of concepts you want to ask about

in your interviews. Then, you operationalize these concepts by deciding how you are going to elicit the information you want about them from your participants. For loosely structured interviews, this happens when you decide on the list of interview topics; for semi-structured interviews, it happens when you decide on the questions you will ask.

During the actual interviews, conceptualization sometimes becomes an explicit part of the interview itself: It is not unusual to ask a participant what a concept or term means to them. For example, during your interviews with African Americans about the supports and challenges they face to their intersecting identities within the black community, you may ask them to define what they mean when they use the term “black community.” In this case, you are using the participants’ definitions in order to better understand, and ask questions about, their experiences, as well as to inform the way you yourself conceptualize the term in your research. Similarly,

operationalizing also happens during the interview process when you decide which markers to follow up on and which to let go of. In doing so, you are deciding how best to elicit the information you need.

Finally, during data analysis, the entire process of open coding involves moving back and forth between conceptualizing and operationalizing. When you create new codes, you write definitions of them (which is to conceptualize them) so that you can maintain consistency in your coding. You then operationalize by deciding which codes to apply to which sections of the transcript. This is considered operationalizing because in attaching codes you are deciding which statements in the interview are providing information about particular concepts (codes); it can be thought of as measuring the concepts.

Thus, conceptualization and operationalization are integrated throughout the research process in interview research and do not constitute separate stages of the process. Note that because data collection and analysis are usually done concurrently, that also means that the conceptualizing and operationalizing you do during analysis can affect the operationalizing you do during subsequent interviews. In other words, as you develop and define your codes and use them in analysis, they will likely start to affect which markers you follow up on during the interviews. This is a strength, as it can help you elicit increasingly detailed and precise information that can help you identify patterns in the data.

Evaluating the Quality of Data and Analysis

We have already discussed many steps that need to be taken at each stage of the research process to ensure the high quality of your data and your analysis. In interview research, the quality of data and analysis is evaluated on their **validity**. The more the data accurately represent the experiences and perspectives of the participant, the more valid they are. It is important to note that interviewers realize that no report or description that a participant gives can ever be 100% complete—it is simply impossible to capture every aspect of an experience in words and convey it to another person. Nonetheless, the aim is for data that are as valid as possible. One sign of **data validity** is detailed answers with concrete examples. Additionally, the transcripts of good interviews show that the amount of time the interviewer spent talking is minimal and that most questions posed were followed by long and detailed answers from the participants. This is because in order to fully and accurately understand another person's perspective or experience, you have to have as much detailed information about it as possible. Obviously, rapport plays a role here because participants will be willing to give you more information when you have established good rapport with them.

To ensure the validity of applied research, the participants must be made to trust that there are no rewards or penalties for anything they say. In other words, for data to be valid, they must be absolutely confident that nothing they say will be used against them in any way or earn them any favors or positive regard in relation to the program or policy. Additionally, because the participants will be informed of the uses of the data, they will understand that what they say may have an effect on decisions that are made and, therefore, on their own lives or the lives of others. This can be a real incentive to participate in the research, but it can also tempt some participants to

hide, misrepresent, or overemphasize certain aspects of their experiences in order to influence the decisions in a particular way. Although you can never completely eliminate this possibility, good interviewing skills can help to minimize it.

The validity of the analysis for interviews is based primarily on how well it represents the data. In other words, a **valid analysis** is one that identifies patterns that are well supported in the data. This is why selective coding is so crucial—it helps to ensure the validity of your analysis. The validity of the analysis is also based on how accurately you depict the ways in which the participants experience or view the phenomena. That is not to say that the analyst can't ever make interpretations that differ from those of the participants. For example, in interviews with men who have been in unhealthy relationships, several participants may express that the main reason they didn't leave those relationships was that they knew their partner really loved them, and they thought their partner could change. As an analyst, you may come to the conclusion that these men exhibit signs of codependency, though none of the men indicated that they thought of or recognized this as a possibility. It is legitimate for you to draw that conclusion—provided, of course, that there is good evidence that supports it and that there are few or no negative cases. You must, however, differentiate for the audience of your research between what the participants said and what you, the outsider, believe is going on. To confuse the two or neglect to draw the distinction is to compromise the validity of your analysis.

Qualitative research is too often unfairly evaluated as deficient simply because the critic has judged it based on the criteria by which we judge quantitative research. This is not only unjust; it shows a fundamental lack of understanding of the logic, goals, and strengths of interpretivist research. Qualitative research should never be found deficient based on its lack of generalizability, its unrepresentative sample, or its departure from the scientific method. Remember, interpretivist research neither claims nor aims to be generalizable or representative, and it would be virtually impossible to gather good interview data using cool, detached, bias-free, highly structured scientific procedures. Additionally, qualitative research does not set out to predict behavior or to determine cause-and-effect relationships. It also is **not replicable**; that is, if someone else conducted the same research, even with the same participants, they would produce neither the same data nor the same analysis as you did. This is because participants tell different aspects of their stories in different ways to different people. Think about someone asking you on a Monday morning, "So, how was your weekend?" Your response would probably differ depending on who was doing the asking, how well you know them, and what their relationship is to you, as well as the location, time, and context in which they are asking. You may give three different answers to your boss, your best friend, and your grandmother. That is not to say that you would lie to any of them; rather, you would give more or less detail about particular experiences and would choose to include or exclude information based on who asked the question. The same is true with interviewing research: Participants will give different information to different interviewers, based on the amount of rapport they have, the skill of the interviewer, the level of detail requested, and the particular markers on which the interviewer decides to follow up. Therefore, interview research should not be judged negatively for its lack of replicability. Instead, it is essential to evaluate interview research based on its own merits and on how well it reaches its goals of understanding as thoroughly as possible the experiences and perspectives of the research participants.

Interview research *should* be judged on the following:

- The degree to which the interviewer accurately and vividly conveys the participants' meanings, understandings, and experiences
- The degree of rapport with the participants that the interviewer can demonstrate
- The degree to which the data support the patterns identified by the researcher
- Evidence of a search for negative cases and a discussion of those negative cases and what they mean for the patterns identified
- A clear distinction between the researcher's analysis and the participants' perceptions if the analyst sees patterns the participants don't see
- The degree to which the researcher recognizes the limits of the research and stays within those limits (for example, doesn't try to generalize findings to a larger population)

Presenting the Results

Whether you are presenting your results in writing or orally, interview analyses are generally presented in the same way. Start with an introduction that includes the theoretical perspective you are using (if any). After briefly discussing your research question, the methods you used to collect your data, some information about your sample, and the basic procedures you used to analyze the data, you begin to discuss the patterns you found in your analysis. For each pattern (or each main point you wish to make), you should explain that pattern and then provide at least one, and sometimes up to several, quotations from the participants' interviews that both exemplify and support your point. The quotations should be verbatim (or nearly), though the grammar or punctuation may be cleaned up so that it is easier for your audience to follow (because natural speech is often confusing and awkward when written down). Each quotation should be identified with the pseudonym of the participant who said it, and you will be more likely to convince your audience of the validity of your analysis if you use quotations from as many different people in your sample as possible, rather than drawing many quotations from just a few participants. In addition, you should discuss any negative cases you found for each pattern. This will further help give your audience confidence in the validity of your analysis. You should end your presentation with a discussion of the implications of the research. This includes theoretical implications (Does viewing this topic through this theoretical lens shed new light on the topic? Does it suggest that the theory is missing an important aspect of the participants' experiences that it should take into account? Where does your data suggest the theory needs more clarity or depth?). It also includes implications for future research (What new issues does your analysis suggests need further research? What's the next group or population that should be studied? What other methods could be used to build upon your newfound results regarding this phenomenon?). Additionally, the implications should make it clear what this research means for real people's lives (What types of social action might be suggested by your research?

How would this action affect your participants?). If the research is applied, you should make clear recommendations about what decisions or solutions you determine the data best supports.

Summary Points

- Qualitative interviews are the best method for investigating the complexity of social life and for truly understanding others' experience as they perceive it.
- Interviewing is based not on the principles of the scientific method, but on techniques for fostering rapport with the participant in order to yield rich data that are high on validity.
- Although the results are not generalizable, the interviewer will understand the experiences of a small group of people extremely well.
- Interviews allow the participant to direct the researcher toward important areas of relevance that the researcher may have never considered had a more structured research method been used.
- Conducting high-quality interviews is a skill that requires time and practice.
- Analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection, and it is made systematic by the search for evidence and negative cases.

Key Terms

- | | | |
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