The E-Interview Research Framework

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> *We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.*
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> —Marcel Proust (1871–1922)

After you study Chapter 1, you will be able to do the following:

- Understand interrelated elements of e-interview research
- Use the E-Interview Research Framework to analyze a research design and plan

Interview Research: A Window Into the Lived Experience

Each individual experiences life in a unique way. Each finds significance in life events by interpreting and reinterpreting meaning through lenses of memory and identity, culture, and prior experiences. Researchers who want to understand the complexities of human drama often choose interviews as an entrée into another's inner reflections and thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and responses to the external world. Interview research is distinctive in its reliance on direct, usually immediate, interaction between the researcher and participant.

Successful qualitative researchers draw on the best of human qualities when conducting interviews: They demonstrate empathy and respect, and they inspire trust. Interview researchers use thoughtful questioning, sensitive probing, and reflective listening. When individuals respond and share their stories, observant researchers make note of nonverbal signals and listen to verbal expressions. Implications of physical setting and the interviewer's

demeanor are carefully considered to develop the rapport and comfort necessary to collect robust data. The potential fullness of this active exchange has traditionally motivated researchers to choose face-to-face conversations when collecting data for qualitative and mixed-methods research.

Must individuals sit in the same room to have a meaningful dialogue or perform thorough observation? In many areas of life and work, activities that people previously assumed would require physical proximity are now conducted via electronic communications. Scholarly activities are included in this trend. Contemporary researchers expect to use computers when writing about research design, analyzing data, and creating reports of their findings. Researchers routinely use the Internet to study the existing literature in their fields through online journals and databases. Scholars expect to discuss their ongoing work with far-flung colleagues through e-mail lists, **blogs**, social media, and interactive websites. Scholarly meetings are held online, with presentations and discussions carried out on web conferencing platforms. Increasingly, researchers are using the Internet to collect data as well.

ONLINE INTERVIEW RESEARCH

Online interviews are a viable alternative because researchers can choose from varied communication options and easily talk directly with participants anywhere, at any time. For the purpose of this book, **online interviews,** or *e-interviews,* refer to interviews conducted using **computer-mediated communication** (CMC). Such interviews are used for primary **Internet-mediated research**. That is, they are used to gather original data via the Internet with the intention of subjecting these data to analysis to provide new evidence in relation to a specific research question (Hewson, 2010).

Emerging **information and communications technologies (ICTs)** offer diverse ways to conduct research interviews, observe participants, and/or obtain related documents. Scholarly online interviews are further defined as *any* dialogue or observation carried out for the purpose of data collection. An online interview may be a verbal or written, carefully planned or casual interchange. In other words, even a short text message exchange or quick chat via a **social media** site is treated as an interview with a participant if data are collected. Importantly, if the communication is recorded, noted, or saved for research purposes, it must be conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines. This means verifiable research participants must provide informed consent before participating in any interview. (See Chapter 8 for more about ethical issues.)

ONLINE INTERVIEWS AND MULTIMETHOD RESEARCH

Interviews, observations, and documents may be used as single types of data or combined in multimethod or multimodal research. Online, the

Table 1.1	Collecting Qualitative Data Online
Online interviews	Interviews carried out with computer-mediated communication (CMC) to collect data. CMC may occur using computers, cell phones, or mobile devices. Locative technologies, such as global positioning systems (GPS) or geographic information systems (GIS) can complement such interviews when mapping to place is relevant. Online interviews may entail communication with one or more participants using text chat or messaging, multichannel web conferencing spaces, video conferencing, or interactions in virtual worlds or games.
Online observations	External or participant observation of online dialogues, behaviors, interactions, events, or activities conducted for the purpose of data collection.
Online document analysis	Posts, digital records, and/or artifacts from websites, blogs, social media sites, and/or e-mail lists gathered for the purpose of data collection. Online "documents" can take the form of drawings, graphics or other images, photographs or media, or written or audio data.

choice is less clear-cut; it may not be possible to fully separate these types of data when collection occurs over the Internet. Data are not neatly differentiated, because CMC may mesh written chat or comments, recorded or live video, images or photographs, or links to other online materials. Depending on the research purpose and design, online interviews may include some observations from the interviewees and/or some review of participants' user-posted material from the participant. Online interview research, then, is to some degree inherently multimethod. This being the case, the researcher is "challenged to find multimodal ways to expand our methodological toolbox" (Beneito-Montagut, 2011, p. 717). As a result, while interviews are central to *Qualitative Online Interviews*, other types of data collection are included throughout the book to allow for a multifaceted examination of the research problem.

A Conceptual Framework for E-Interview Research

What kind of online interviews, observations, and/or documents fulfill the purpose and design of a study? This simple question belies the complexity of online research design. While e-researchers need to address concerns common to any study, we additionally must inquire about the influences of the technology on the research design, conduct, and, ultimately, the study's conclusions. However, since online interview research is an emergent

method, a widely accepted set of design specifications or criteria does not currently exist. Where to begin? What questions should be asked? The E-Interview Research Framework offers a conceptual system of key questions about interrelated facets of online interview research. When introduced in *Cases in Online Interview Research* (Salmons, 2012), the central focus was on data collection with online interviews; however, the updated E-Interview Research Framework encompasses related primary (i.e., questionnaires, observations) and secondary (i.e., posts, sites, documents, images, or media) online data collection (see Figure 1.1).

The E-Interview Research Framework is displayed as a circular system because examining design decisions in isolation is inadequate. In many

Figure 1.1   The E-Interview Research Framework for Understanding E-Interview Research
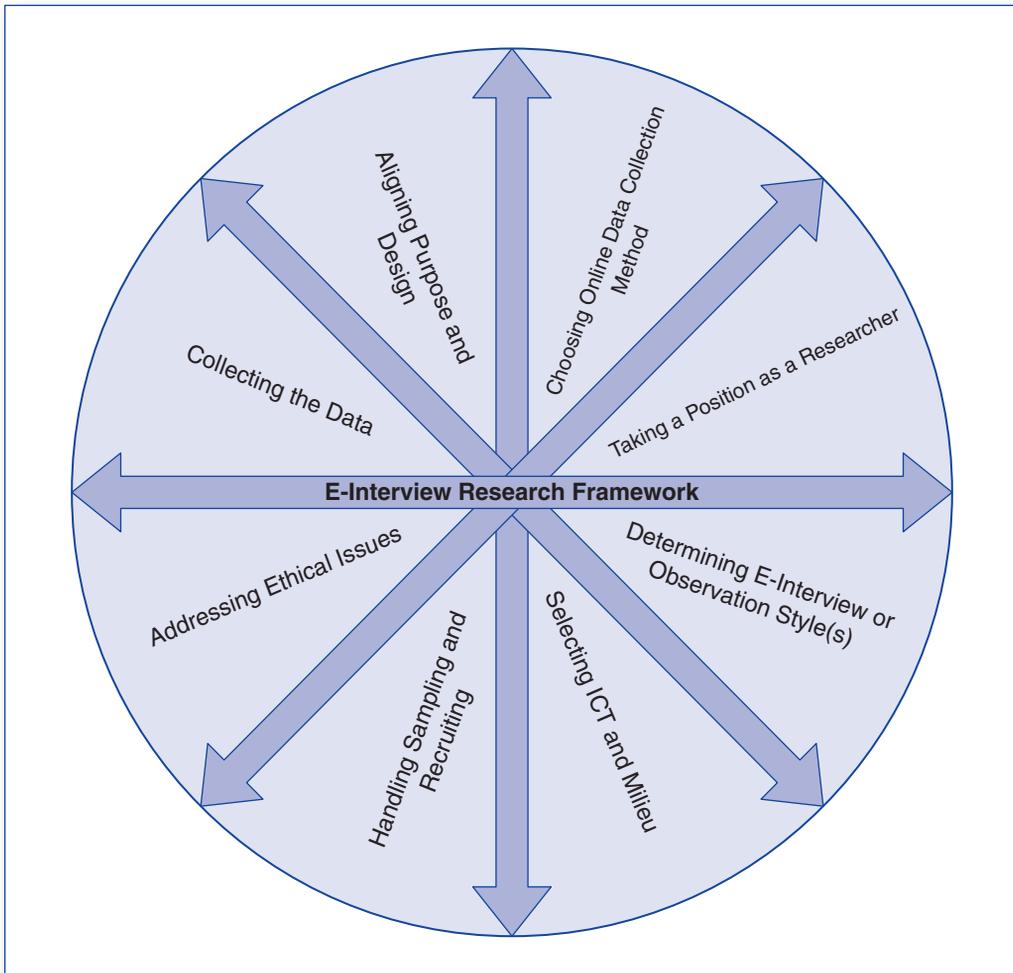
Source: Vision2Lead Inc (2009–2015).

areas of qualitative research design, there are no hard-and-fast rules and "it depends . . ." is a common answer to how and why questions. This "it depends . . ." nature is, if anything, more pronounced in e-interview research design, where technology choices are interrelated with data type, method of collection, and ethical considerations. Hence, a holistic approach is needed, as presented in this E-Interview Research Framework.

The E-Interview Research Framework comprises eight interrelated categories, each with a set of questions and models. This framework can be used whether one is designing original research, analyzing a study proposed or conducted by another researcher, or reviewing a published study. Treatment of these categories begins with *aligning purpose and design*. While this may indeed be the first step, the E-Interview Research Framework suggests that once the other categories have been examined, it may be necessary to circle back to the beginning and make sure all pieces of the design fit. This Chapter 1 overview introduces the categories of the E-Interview Research Framework; each will be thoroughly explored in one or more chapters of the book.

ALIGNING PURPOSE AND DESIGN

Key Questions

- Are theories and epistemologies, methodologies, and methods appropriate for the study and clearly aligned?
- How will qualitative data collected online relate to theories? Does the researcher want to explore, prove, or generate theory?

Any study is strengthened by coherent discussion of research purpose, theories, methodologies, and methods. By exploring elements of the research design, we can understand how the intended use of online data collection methods aligns with the overall purpose and theoretical framework of the study. Importantly, we can learn whether the researcher intends to explore or test extant theories or generate new theory. We can also ascertain whether the researcher is working within, across, or outside of disciplinary approaches.

When designing a study based on online data collection, greater attention to alignment among key elements is needed. The rationale for the electronic methods needs to be comprehensive and precise. Some design questions and relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.2. When a study is mapped in this way, it should be clear that the theories and epistemologies are appropriate to the methodology, and that online methods fit the methodology. Learn more about aligning purpose and design in Chapter 2.

Figure 1.2	Design for Clarity and Coherence
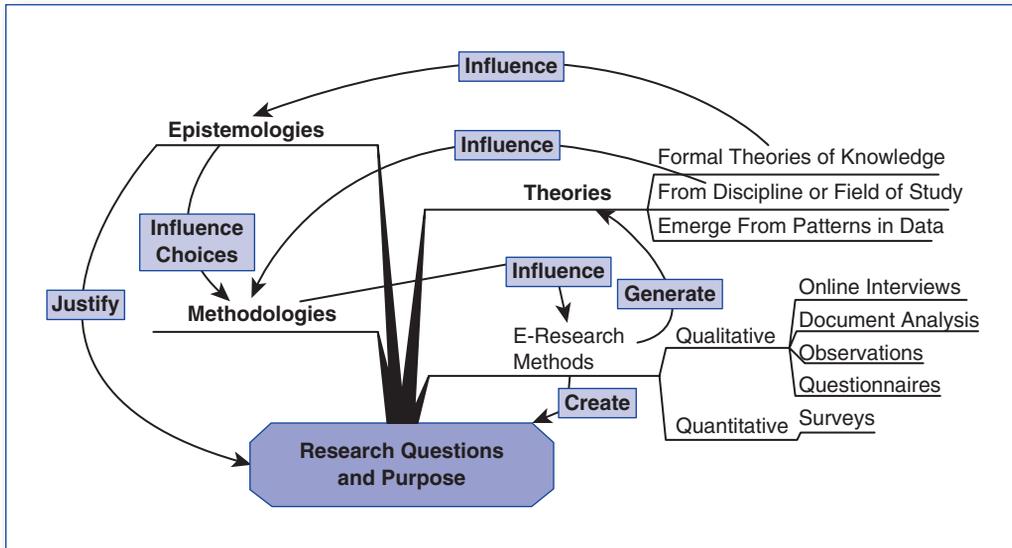
Source: Vision2Lead, Inc (2009–2014).

Components of Research Design

Four interrelated elements of research design—epistemology, theory, methodology, and method—are defined for our purposes as follows:

- **Epistemology** refers to the study of the nature of knowledge, or the study of how knowledge is justified.

- **Theory** refers to an explanation that is internally consistent, supportive of other theories, and gives new insights. An important characteristic of theory is that it is predictive.

- **Methodology** refers to the study of, and justification for, the methods used to conduct the research (Loseke, 2013). Methodologies emerge from academic disciplines in the social and physical sciences, and although considerable cross-disciplinary exchange occurs, choices generally place the study in a disciplinary context.

- **Method** refers to the practical steps used to conduct the study, including sampling, collecting, and analyzing data.

CHOOSING ONLINE DATA COLLECTION METHOD FOR THE STUDY

Key Questions

- Does the researcher offer a compelling rationale for using online interviews and any related observations or documents to achieve the research purpose?
- Is the rationale aligned with methodologies, the research problem, the purpose, and questions?
- Does the researcher explain whether online interviews are chosen to investigate real-world phenomena or online phenomena?

With a clear picture of the overarching contours of the study, next we look at why online interviews and related observations or documents are appropriate for the study. What is the researcher's motivation for conducting the interviews online rather than in person or over the telephone? Does the researcher describe data collection strategy in a way that others—even those with little background in online research—will understand? What compelling rationale supports the online data collection strategy?

Some researchers want to study behaviors or phenomena that take place online by exploring them in the kind of setting where they occur. Patterns of technology use, modes of participation in online communities, or human–computer interaction can best be studied by using ICTs to conduct the interview. In such circumstances, the technology itself may be a part of the phenomenon under investigation.

CMC also allows researchers to explore behaviors, life experiences, or phenomena unrelated to the Internet. The researcher may decide to conduct interviews online because it is a convenient way to meet participants or because participants are geographically dispersed. Online interviews may be selected over telephone interviews because researchers want to see the participant or collect visual data. In such studies, technology is a means to communicate but is not part of the phenomenon under investigation.

As we will see in Chapter 3, each of these choices has implications for the other areas of the research design, including the choice of communications technology and research setting, use of visual methods, and position of the researcher in relation to the study.

TAKING A POSITION AS A RESEARCHER

> ### Key Questions
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> - Does the researcher clearly delineate an insider or outsider position? Does the researcher explain implications related to that position, including any conflicts of interest or risks of **researcher bias**?
> - Is the researcher looking at **emic** issues, revealed by actors in the case (Stake, 1995)? Or is the researcher positioned as an outsider who brings questions in from outside the case, looking at **etic** issues (Stake, 1995)?
> - Can the researcher's role be described as miner, traveler (Kvale, 2007; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), or gardener (Salmons, 2010)?

At this point, we should understand the overall purpose and design of the research and the researcher's motivation for conducting the study online. Now we are ready to explore whether the researcher's motivations are based on the researcher's personal connection to the phenomenon or participants being investigated, or whether the researcher is motivated by scholarly interests or a gap identified in the literature. Online, where people tend to be connected formally and informally to social and professional networks, researchers may have various degrees of relationship to the phenomenon or participants. The distinction between *insider* and *outsider* is not unique to online interview research. The researcher may look at *emic* issues revealed by actors in the case or at *etic* issues drawn from outside the case (Stake, 1995). In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument of data collection; so being forthright about any potential biases or conflicts of interest lends credibility to the study.

Another way to describe the standpoint of the researcher is through the metaphorical stances of the miner, traveler (Kvale, 2007; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), and gardener (Salmons, 2010). According to these metaphors, the researcher who digs out facts and feelings from research subjects is characterized as a *miner*. The *traveler* journeys with the participant. Most common interview practices lie between these two extremes. The metaphor of the *gardener* suggests that the interviewer uses questions to plant a seed and then cultivates the growth of ideas and shared perceptions through extended dialogue with participants.

By understanding the purpose, motivations, and other considerations involved in choosing to collect data online, we can better grasp how the methods and approaches align with other elements of the research design. By understanding the etic or emic stance of the researcher and the intention to travel, garden, or excavate data, we can learn more about the way the researcher relates to the phenomenon and potentially to the research participants.

Learn more about choosing online interviews and taking a position as a researcher in Chapter 3.

Key Questions

- Does the researcher plan to use *structured, semistructured, unstructured*, or a combination of styles for the interview(s)?
- How does the researcher align ICT functions, features, and/or limitations with the selected e-interview style(s)?
- What observations or posted materials will complement the interviews?

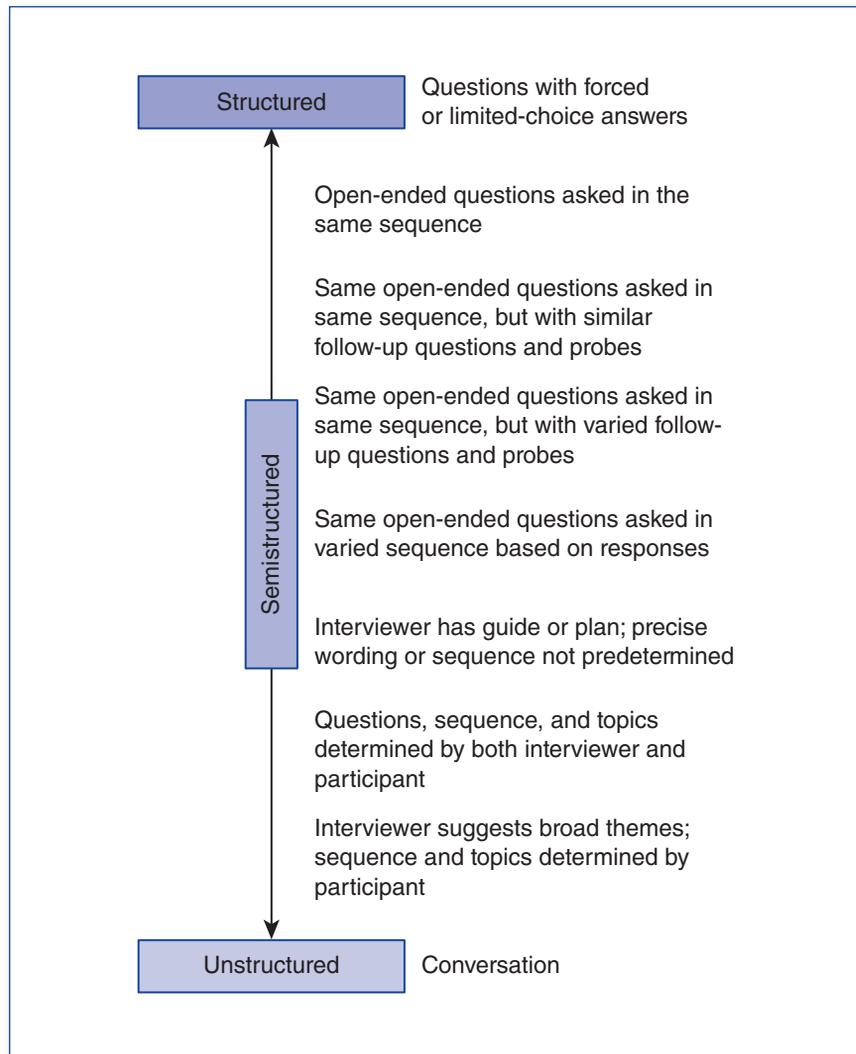## DETERMINING E-INTERVIEW OR OBSERVATION STYLE(S)

Any interview researcher must decide whether a structured, unstructured, or semistructured interview best achieves the purpose of the study. By understanding the level(s) of structure the researcher intends to use, we can learn more about preinterview preparation. Some types of CMC are more natural and allow for spontaneity, while others require more forethought or setup prior to an interview. This means an e-interview researcher must also consider alignment of interview structure and questioning style with choice of technology used to communicate with participants, data type, and online research setting (see Figure 1.3).

Structured interviews usually consist of the same questions posed in the same sequence to all participants. They may include closed-ended or limited-response questions or open-ended questions designed to elicit short narrative answers. Interview respondents do not have the option to redirect questions or elaborate on responses. To prepare for structured interviews, the researcher determines the exact wording of all questions in advance. Because the role of the interviewer is meant to be as neutral as possible, the researcher may recruit and train others to implement the interview.

Semistructured interviews balance the preplanned questions of a structured approach with the spontaneity and flexibility of the unstructured interview. The researcher prepares questions and/or discussion topics in advance and generates follow-up questions during the interview.

Unstructured interviews are used to collect data through what is essentially a conversation between the researcher and participant.

Figure 1.3   Level of Interview Structure (Salmons, 2010)

Structured — Questions with forced or limited-choice answers

Open-ended questions asked in the same sequence

Same open-ended questions asked in same sequence, but with similar follow-up questions and probes

Semistructured

Same open-ended questions asked in same sequence, but with varied follow-up questions and probes

Same open-ended questions asked in varied sequence based on responses

Interviewer has guide or plan; precise wording or sequence not predetermined

Questions, sequence, and topics determined by both interviewer and participant

Interviewer suggests broad themes; sequence and topics determined by participant

Unstructured — Conversation

Source: Vision2Lead, Inc (2009–2014).

Structured interviews can be conducted with almost any ICT since answers may be yes/no or simple statements. Semistructured and unstructured interviews, however, require more careful thought because in some kinds of ICTs, pausing to craft and type questions may disrupt the flow of the interview. Learn more about choosing online interview styles and levels of structure in Chapter 4.

SELECTING ICT AND MILIEU

> ### Key Questions
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> - Will the interview use text-based, audio, and/or visual communication options?
> - Will the interaction take place synchronously, asynchronously, or with a mix of time-response communication options?
> - Will the interview setting be in a public or private online milieu?
> - Is the choice of ICT aligned with research purpose, interview style, and access/preference of the research participants?

Researchers may choose a particular interview technology and setting for a variety of reasons, including the researcher's preferences or expectations for access and ease of use by participants. Some researchers are looking for specific communications features in the ICT. The desire for observation as a part of the interviews, or in addition to interviews, also influences the choice of research setting. Timing and degree of immediacy possible between question and response are additional considerations.

For the purpose of this book, brand names are generally avoided, and ICTs are described by the features that facilitate communication. The main types are text-based communication in writing; video conference with ability to see communication partners; and web conferencing meeting spaces that allow for text, video conference, and visual interactions with **shared applications**, documents, and/or **whiteboards**. Immersive virtual environments, including **virtual worlds** or games, allow for text, verbal, and visual exchange. These features are available in singular or combined ways through various social media, web, software, and proprietary applications. Learn more about the process for choosing data collection technologies and research settings in Chapter 5.

Using Visual Research in Online Interviews and Observations

The choice of ICT may also involve decisions about whether and how to use visual methods for interviews and/or observations. Increasingly, communication technologies enable the researcher and participant to see each other and to view, share, or create images. How will such data enable the researcher to achieve the study's purpose? Learn more about design options and implications for visual methods in online data collection in Chapter 6.

HANDLING SAMPLING AND RECRUITING

Key Questions

- What sampling approaches are appropriate given the purpose of the study and e-interview approach?
- How will the researcher assess whether the target population has access to the interview technology and the capability and willingness to use it as research participants?
- How can the researcher locate credible research participants? How will the researcher verify the identity and age (or other relevant criteria) of research participants recruited online?

Qualitative researchers often use what is broadly defined as purposive or purposeful sampling when selecting participants, meaning the **sample** is intentionally selected according to the purpose of the study. Additional criteria may be needed to identify appropriate participants with abilities and availability necessary for the online interview. Online recruitment requires additional steps to ensure credibility. Learn more about sampling and recruiting in Chapter 7.

ADDRESSING ETHICAL ISSUES

Key Questions

- Has the researcher taken appropriate steps to protect human subjects and, where appropriate, their avatars or online representations?
- Has the researcher obtained proper informed consent?
- Does the researcher have permission to access and use posts, documents, profiles, or images?

Ethical issues abound in any interview research. In the case of online interview research, there are some particular factors to address. For example, the consent that participants sign should include agreements for use of any user-generated content, images, or artifacts the interviewer wants to include as data. Care must be taken to avoid circumstances where the participant unwittingly reveals more than he or she intended to share as data for the study. Learn more about the complexities of e-research ethics in Chapter 8, and in the "Ethics Tips" sprinkled throughout the book.

COLLECTING THE DATA

> ### Key Questions
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> - Is the researcher experienced with all features of the selected technology? Has the researcher conducted practice interviews?
> - Does the researcher have a plan for conducting the interview with either prepared questions or an interview guide?
> - Does the researcher have a plan for the four interview stages: opening, questioning and guiding, closing, and following up?
> - Does the researcher have a contingency plan in case there are technical difficulties?

Once designs and plans are complete, the researcher must be able to carry out the interview, with all the messy realities intrinsic to any communication. Does the researcher have the preparation, skills, and abilities needed to conduct the interview and any related observations? Can the researcher bring together purpose and process when faced with the individual research participant or group of participants? What will the researcher do if the interview does not proceed as planned or if there are technical problems? These are some of the questions researchers need to address to actualize the interview and answer the research questions. Learn more about preparing for the interview in Chapter 9, and learn more about collecting data in Chapter 10.

Closing Thoughts

The E-Interview Research Framework can be used as a tool for planning and designing, as well as dissecting and analyzing, research that utilizes online qualitative data collection methods. The chapters of this book examine each respective part of the framework in depth. Taken together, the chapters offer the theoretical and methodological context needed to develop a coherent design and compelling rationale for the study. Practical suggestions and examples are offered to help the researcher carry out the study. Chapter 11 synthesizes key ideas into a discussion of e-interview research quality, and Chapter 12 discusses trends and influences on qualitative e-research. The content of the book is extended with material posted on the companion website.