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In-Depth Interviewing

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Abstract This chapter explores in-depth interviewing, a widely used method in qualitative research aimed at building a depth of understanding, rather than factual or abstract information. We give a brief account of structured interviews, but these have more in common with surveys and questionnaires than in-depth interviewing. Semi-structured interviews are interviews that follow a set of questions, allowing some flexibility in how questions are asked, and provide the researcher with the opportunity to ask clarifying and follow-up questions. Unstructured interviews are more flexible and open-ended. As such, they can be quite unpredictable and varied and are well suited to exploratory research and other research interested in meaning and experiences. There is a range of ethical considerations when using this method, including confidentiality establishing clear and reasonable expectations and offering appropriate reciprocity to research participants, and the potential of this method to cause harm, to both researcher and participants. In-depth interviewing is a powerful but demanding method for urban research; it is resource intensive and requires a lot of skills on the part of the researcher to design effective and ethical protocols and to generate meaning from complex, often messy, data.

1 Introduction

Urban research has traditionally privileged a technocratic approach to understanding urban life based on quantitative data and the aggregation of responses. By contrast, interviews are more interested in getting to the heart of personal experiences and privileging participant expertise and have become one of the most ubiquitous methods in qualitative research [1]. Broadly, the research aims of in-depth, qualitative inter- viewing are to describe, understand, evaluate, analyse, and reflect [2] and the ques- tions asked are designed to "elicit information that is 'factual', descriptive, thoughtful or emotional" [3, p. 107]. As a result, interviews do not tend to be used where the research goal is to test or prove a particular hypothesis or relationship, and, due to their emphasis on context, the goal of interviewing is not usually to produce knowl- edge that is generalisable. In-depth interviewing allows researchers to explore in detail people's subjective experiences, biography, and assumptions. Because of the value they place on experiential forms of knowledge, in-depth interviews are well suited to postpositivist and constructivist research, including (but not limited to) work informed by critical theory, and work taking a grounded theory approach [4, 5].

This chapter introduces different kinds of qualitative interviewing, outlining for each the kinds of questions they are best placed to answer, challenges, and ethical considerations, alongside useful tips and techniques. Throughout the chapter, empir- ical examples are provided to illustrate key points. We begin with a brief overview of structured interviews, noting that they are sometimes excluded from the category of qualitative or in-depth interviews as they bear more resemblance to surveys than other types of interviewing [6]. We devote more time to semi-structured and unstruc- tured interviews, before moving on to their variants including online interviewing and group/multiparticipant interviews. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of

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some overarching issues and concerns related to in-depth interviewing.

2 Structured Interviews

Structured interviews are a staple in positivist research due to the tendency to focus on consistency in data collection and measurement, and "objectivity" in analysis. A structured interview uses an interview schedule with standardised questions, which are primarily close-ended, and participants typically choose between the same set of alternatives, which is why they are sometimes referred to as a "personally administered questionnaire" [7, p. 142]. Because structured interviews are so similar to surveys [8], it is not uncommon for them to be designed using the methodological assumptions and design principles of questionnaires rather than those of in-depth interviews. Researchers might choose a structured interview over a survey or self-complete questionnaire as they tend to have a higher response rate [7].

Unlike other qualitative interview approaches, there is no flexibility in the order that questions are asked, the way that they are worded, and there is no scope for adding new or follow-up questions. The level of participant–interviewer engagement is, therefore, low and there is typically no or little clarification of questions by the interviewer to reduce bias or variables [7]. They can be undertaken over the phone (e.g. political polls) or face-to-face, as in street intercept surveys, and by a team of interviewers (see box below for an example showing how this might be used in an urban planning context). These characteristics allow for a large sample size in a short period of time, and the application of a range of quantitative data analysis techniques. Although structured interviews are mainly geared towards producing quantitative data, they can also elicit qualitative data by using open-ended questions, but if you have a lot of open-ended questions, another interview technique might be more appropriate.

Determining public values of urban forests using street intercept surveys
Camilo Ordóñez with Peter Duinker, John Sinclair, Tom Beckley and Jaclyn Diduck [9] conducted street intercept surveys to determine what the public considers important or values about urban forests in Canada. Participants were recruited from the local streets of Fredericton (New Brunswick), Halifax (Nova Scotia), and Winnipeg (Manitoba). Four survey sites were chosen in each city based on a combination of high pedestrian traffic and the presence of treed spaces. Although the researchers adopted a non-selective recruitment of respondents, interviewers were instructed to achieve a target of at least 100 participants at each location. The survey contained a mix of demographic questions, Likert-scale questions on a 1–5 scale and questions requiring verbatim responses. A total of 1077 people participated in the survey, which took 3–5 min to complete. The researchers coded the verbatim responses so that they could conduct statistical analysis on the qualitative data alongside the quantitative data they had collected.

3 In-Depth Interviews

There are some key differences between semi-structured and unstructured interviews, but they are both "in-depth" interviews and have more in common with each other than they do structured interviews. We discuss some of these overarching commonalities first, before discussing each method in more detail.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are used in qualitative, exploratory research, research interested in lived experiences, local knowledges, the relationships between context and experience and/or actions, the creation of meaning for deepening our understanding of complex and/or poorly understood phenomena, and in research adopting an interpretive or critical approach to analysis. These methods are interested in understanding someone's experiences on their own terms, getting a sense of the context of a person's experiences, understanding their world and worldview, and how that might shape knowledge and meaning [1, 6, 8].

Knowledge is thought to emerge from encounter, and these encounters are relational, contextual, placed, embodied, and affective [10]. Knowledge comes from allowing oneself to be affected by the people, places, and/or relations being studied—to take up a position of wonder [11] and be moved. As such, people conducting in-depth interviews tend to believe that knowledge is not "discovered" by a researcher; rather it is co-produced, a collaboration between participants, researcher, and other aspects of their encounter [12, 13].

Foregrounding emotion, bodies, and relationships may run counter to how we often think about research. Often we associate "doing research" with adopting a position of neutrality or objectivity, and taking a dispassionate approach. This is not always appropriate, and in fact, for the sorts of questions we might use unstructured interviews for, often it is not. Instead of seeking to escape or transcend our position, we instead critically reflect on our positionality, along with the positionality of our interview participant, and consider how they might interact and shape the research encounter, which is itself "rich with emotions and emotional dynamics" [10, p. 236]. Both types of interviews are typically, but not exclusively, conducted one-on-one and face-to-face, although there are exceptions on both counts (which we discuss later in this chapter). Both types ask mostly open-ended questions, with the intention of prompting a detailed and rich response. As responses tend to be longer and much less predictable than in structured interviews, in-depth interviewers will almost always ask, or perhaps require as a condition of participation, that the interview be audio-recorded. If the researcher relies on note-taking, not only will they miss content (particularly exact wording), it can be more difficult to maintain the conversational connection these types of interviews tend to aim for. Audio-recording for listening back, note taking, and/or full transcription, is standard practice for this kind of interview, though it is worth noting that some participants or potential participants may be deterred by this.

Unlike quantitative approaches that aim to choose a random or representative sample in order to create objective and replicate data, with in-depth qualitative interviews, the aim is not to be representative but rather to understand how individual participants experience, perceive, or make meaning of the phenomenon under investigation [3, 14]. As a result, there are very few rules to dictate sample size for interview-based research. It depends on the research question [15], diversity of the participant pool and the resources and capacity of both researcher and participants. There are instances where a very small number of interviews are sufficient, particularly for elite [16] or elusive, hidden or hard to reach populations [17, 18] or in autoethnographic self-interviewing, which recognises that we, ourselves, can be legitimate knowledge subjects [19]. It is, however, more common for in-depth interviews to include between 5 and 25 participants [20].

"Saturation" is often used to justify sample sizes in interview-based research (see box below). Monique Hennink, Bonnie Kaiser and Vincent Marconi [21, p. 591] argue that both code saturation (where the range of thematic issues are able to be identified) and meaning saturation (where a "richly textured understanding of issues" is developed) are important. Examining the transcripts of 25 in-depth interviews, they found that while code saturation was reached at nine interviews, the analysis of between 16 and 24 interviews was required to achieve meaning saturation. They suggest that "code saturation may indicate when researchers have 'heard it all', but meaning saturation is needed to 'understand it all'" [21, p. 591]. The openness of in-depth interviews may mean that it is difficult to know at the outset what your sample should be.

Some qualitative researchers internalise a kind of 'quantenvy', based on the misconception that more interviews are always better, or the inappropriate expectation that qualitative studies should mirror the large sample sizes common in quantitative research. This is perhaps especially the case in fields that use a variety of methods—like urban studies and planning—and/or where quantitative methods are preferred or privileged. In such contexts, the onus is often on the in-depth interviewer to justify their approach and demonstrate why it is most suitable for the research aims, and they might still be asked to justify their approach by the terms of quantitative research, like generalisability, validity, and reliability, that may be of limited relevance.

Importantly, *more data* are not always better when it comes to in-depth interviews. The richness of these data can overwhelm a researcher. Indeed, even with a modest participant pool, it is likely that there will be fertile seams of data that you would not have the time, capacity, or space to explore in your research. Further, as in-depth interviews are taxing for the researcher, pushing oneself to do too many can result in exhaustion, compromising your research. A burned-out researcher is likely to find it harder to stay focused, listen, empathise, and be a conscientious interlocutor.

Both semi-structured and unstructured interviews demand highly developed listening skills. Listening is a skill that is rarely actively taught, and yet it is one of the most important skills for an interviewer [1]. Despite the conversational dynamic, it is also important that the interviewer does not rush to fill a silence. A great interviewer is not only an attentive listener, they can create and hold space for their participant—a space that encourages deep reflection, contemplation, and honesty—and that may mean sitting in thoughtful silence.

Engaged listening—and being able to demonstrate that listening to the speaker/s—takes practice, and even when we are skilled at it, it can be tiring, painful, and distressing (see Sect. 3.5.3). It should always be affecting; listening requires an openness on the part of the listener, not just the speaker. The listening of the in-depth interview is not only attending to the words the participant is saying, but:

> "it also involves being attentive to non-verbal cues of listening and how we feel in our bodies and places of enquiry (Bissell, 2010). These non-verbal and embodied cues involve close cognisance of our emotions – distress, trauma, and sadness. Understanding feelings, emotions, and embodied atmospheres pertains to our role, as researchers, to listen in our respective field settings" [22, p. 19].

Here, Ratnam [22] reminds us also to listen to ourselves—knowledge emerges from the interview as an *encounter*, so we must attend to our own responses as well as that of the participant, as well as being mindful of the interpersonal and structural dynamics that sit between us.

"Saturation" in research with a hard-to-reach participant pool Sutherland [23] employs saturation to guide her research with a hard-to-reach population—hobby farmers in a particular parish in Scotland, UK. Sutherland was interested in the land management practices of small, non-commercial land holders, a group that can be quite difficult to reach and involve in social research. Saturation was used to determine how large her sample would need to be in order to be valid, and this was supported by a parish mapping approach. With the help of participants, a map of the parish was filled out identifying owners and tenants, which in turn was then used to guide the interview process. The "completion" of the map marked data saturation.

3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Longhurst [3, p. 103] describes semi-structured interviews as "talking with people but in ways that are self-conscious, orderly and partially structured". This structure is provided through the use of an interview schedule or guide, which can contain a mix of prepared questions and themes for discussion. Semi-structured interviews are among the most common qualitative data collection techniques because they can accommodate a wide range of philosophical traditions. However, what binds those who chose semi-structured interviews is a commitment to surrendering some level of control to the participant in allowing them some latitude to guide the way that interview questions are approached and answered. Thus although the interviewer has a list of predetermined questions or themes, the order in which they are asked may follow the flow of the conversation, allowing participants to explore issues they feel are important and in an order that makes sense to them. In response, the semi-structured interviewer may ask some follow-up questions, which will not have been on the original interview schedule. As a result, there will be variability between interviews based on the participant's interests, experiences, and views [14].

It is important that semi-structured interviews do not ask close-ended or leading questions [24]. Having said this, it can be useful to commence the interview with questions that are more factual than abstract to ease the participant in, then once rapport has been established it becomes possible to ask more sensitive, difficult, or intimate questions [14]. Gill Valentine [14] suggests that starting questions with the phrase "tell me about…" can be an effective way of encouraging discussion as it is less inquisitorial and also reminds participants that you are interested in what they have to share. To get the most out of semi-structured interviews do not neglect the importance of sensitive probing, a question that is asked to follow-up and explore the issues raised during the interview. Probing provides the opportunity for the participant to provide additional information and reflections. Sometimes the issues that will need further probing can be anticipated in advance and potential probing questions listed underneath your main questions to remind you to probe further, particularly in your first few interview encounters [24].

It is important to anticipate there will be some differences not only between interviews but also between interviews conducted by different interviewers, as a result of the lower level of structure and greater degree of flexibility that chararacterises semi-structured interviews. Interpersonal dynamics also come more into play in this form of interviewing, which the interviewer needs to reflect carefully on, as these can influence results (see box below). In order to ensure that you cover all of the themes or key questions in your interview, it can be helpful to tick these from a list as you conduct the interview. We also keep brief notes as we conduct the interview to remind us of points we would like to follow-up without interrupting the flow of the interview. Because this means that there will be a lot of information that you will need to monitor, when scheduling your semi-structured interviews be mindful of how many you try to fit into a day. Although it is not always possible we try to limit to no more than three semi-structured interviews a day.

Understanding working women's transportation needs and experiences in Mexico City through semi-structured interviews

Lucia Mejia-Dorantes' [25] exploratory study used in-depth semi-structured interviews to elicit information from women working or living around a focal point in Mexico City. The aim of the research was to better understand the transport and mobility characteristics of medium to low-income working women in a metropolitan area and to understand the main factors that influence their travel patterns, how the different services are perceived and evaluated, and their daily travel constraints.

The researcher conducted 22 interviews with women who were selected through opportunity sampling and snowball recruitment. The interviews were audio-recorded. Participants were asked questions about the different transport systems in the Metropolitan area, how they used them and the changes they have perceived and other problems related to public and private transport. A short survey was also filled-in during the interview to gather demographic information.

Reflecting on the data collection process, Meija-Dorantes argues that participants were likely to share personal experiences with her because she was a local woman who had the time and willingness to hear their point of view about their problems and experiences and needs.

3.2 Unstructured Interviews

Research employing unstructured interviews may come from a range of philosophical traditions but are generally affiliated with constructivist and interpretive research, as they are designed to "elicit people's social realities" [8, p. 239]. There are other papers that explore in more depth the philosophical alignments of different interview techniques (see 2; 1], but here we will consider two key assumptions about knowledge unstructured interviews reflect. First, the selection of this interview approach suggests a strong belief that context, positionality, and relationships are central to understanding the phenomena being studied, and that knowledge about those phenomena *cannot be abstracted* from the context in which it was produced, or from the people who hold and create that knowledge. In simple terms: positionality matters, people matter. Second, unstructured interviews reflect the belief that people can be experts on their own experiences, that non-academics create knowledge and engage in analysis, and that we can learn from how people draw meaning from their experiences. In short, the identity and positionality of both researcher and participant *matters* in unstructured interviews, and the knowledge produced will vary based on who did the interview [26]; this is not something to be avoided or minimised, but something to be reflected on and drawn into the analysis.

Unstructured interviews offer greater scope for depth than other types of interview techniques; they also tend to be the most time-consuming way to conduct interviews, and data analysis is more complex. With structured or semi-structured interviews, there are threads of commonality across interviews, and it can be relatively straightforward to compare and contrast responses, and so derive insights. The variation in unstructured interviews can make it difficult to see them as a dataset.

In unstructured interviews, the researcher may have a loose list of prompts, or topics they would like to explore with the participant, or goals for the interview, but the format is loose, open-ended, and flexible [2]. These interviews tend to be more conversational, and more of a dialogue or social encounter between researcher and participant [27], and the questions the interviewer asks will be guided primarily by the participant's responses [8]. The participant has more autonomy and greater ability to shape, direct, and possibly even lead the interview than in other forms of interviewing, and in some cases, it may be more fair to think of participants as co-creators—they are shaping the interview, and indeed the research, at least as much as the interviewer.

Unstructured interviews can be conducted in a number of different ways. Avoid scheduling unstructured interviews back-to-back; the length of the interview itself is unpredictable, and, depending on the subject matter covered, you might find you need more time to process and reflect before you are ready for another go. Because of this, unstructured interviews might not be an appropriate technique if you have a very constrained or limited time for fieldwork, unless you only need a very few.

When organising the interview, you can adopt the standard "appointment" approach, where you arrange a time and place to meet with your participant. More organic approaches may be appropriate too—as long as your ethical protocols are followed, you might find that unstructured interviews work well while engaged in a shared activity; e.g. interviewing activists at a blockade, interviewing volunteers as you undertake dune revegetation, shadowing someone at their workplace and interviewing them at quiet times during the day, or conducting your interview as the participant takes you on a walk around their neighbourhood (or another place relevant to your study). Unstructured interviews are often conducted as part of a broader methodology that includes ethnographic and/or participant or participatory observation [8], so this more organic, blended approach may be a better fit.

Unstructured interviews may require a "warm up" period—a time spent with small talk, the researcher and participant getting comfortable with each other, before the formal interview commences [28]. This might be a chat immediately preceding the interview, or it might be one or more separate meetings/conversations before the interview is even scheduled. In some cases, especially where the participant pool has a heightened need for privacy, you might need quite a long period of relationship building before your interviews can occur. The degree of preamble will depend on the context of the research, the sensitivity of the topic, the guardedness or wariness of participants, whether or not the researcher is already known to participants, and more. Trust and depth may also be aided by interviewing the same participant repeatedly over the course of the project. Relationship building supports the intimacy and vulnerability of unstructured interview encounters (see box below)—and of all kinds of data collection, unstructured interviews are perhaps the most intimate, and may demand or produce the greatest vulnerability.

Because they are more open-ended, it is possible that the interview will go to unanticipated places; while that is a large part of why we might use this method, you may not have prepared for the information you receive. For instance: a participant might share their participation in illegal activity—how would you navigate that? You might inadvertently touch on a traumatic experience, and the participant could become very distressed. You might be the first attentive listener the participant has spoken to in a while, and they might open up about a personal issue that is not particularly relevant to the research. The participant might get carried away and then later regret the things they said. These things may happen in semi-structured interviews too, they are just more likely in the more unstructured forms of interviewing because the interviewer has relinquished more control.

It can also be difficult to navigate boundaries as you adopt a more conversational and less formal approach. Depending on the topic and/or the participant, you may find it appropriate to share a bit more about yourself, or openly reject a detached or "neutral" stance. And yet you do not want to take up too much space, or centre yourself in the process. How you draw and maintain boundaries with research participants will depend on your research topic, who they are, who you are, if you had a prior relationship, how long the research relationship is, and more. A great unstructured interview can feel like a profound connection—"ghosting" a participant afterwards might leave them feeling exploited, or silly. You may want to check in with participants after the interview and have follow-up chats. You could also offer participants additional opportunities to be involved in the research process, whether that is in reviewing their transcript, contributing to data analysis, and providing them with copies of your work. Navigating these relationships responsibly is not always easy, and it is important for the researcher to be able to access advice, process, and debrief with someone who is *not* a participant.

Analysing unstructured interview data is complex and time-consuming, and may require the researcher to take an iterative approach and revisit the data several times. It is quite likely that the interviews might seem all quite different from one another at first, and it can be difficult to find "the story". Thematic analysis is perhaps the most common approach to analysis, and this might include a mix of inductive, deductive, and axial coding. It tends to be at this point where weaknesses or gaps in the research aims and/or theoretical framing causes trouble, and you might find you have little to hang on to or guide you through a complex and contradictory mass of data. It may take several rounds of immersing yourself in the data, then taking a step back to try and discern the broader patterns and themes, perhaps returning to your aims, theory, and the literature, before you find the story/stories your data tell.

Understanding unconcern about climate change using unstructured interviews

Lucas and Davison [29] used in-depth, unstructured interviews to better understand attitudes of unconcern about climate change in Australia. Rather than assuming all those unconcerned about climate change are victims of propaganda or bias, the aim of this project was to explore the social relationships of unconcern, and to look at unconcern with an empathetic gaze in the context of other concerns, values, lived experience and material realities. Lucas interviewed seven participants eight times in a 6-month period. Returning to participants over and over allowed her to build trust and an understanding of their social worlds before even broaching the topic of climate change (which she did not bring up until the fifth interview with each participant). This commitment to building trust, demonstrating respect, and taking participants' lives and concerns seriously, allowed the researchers to identify a diverse set of dynamics and contextual factors shaping unconcern about climate change, with important implications for climate change communication and policy.

3.3 Other In-Depth Interview Formats

In addition to the broad categories of in-depth interviews described above, there are a number of variants. Due to space limits, we will confine ourselves to two—using digital technology for interviews and group interviewing.

3.3.1 In-Depth Email Interviewing and Other Digital Approaches

Although face-to-face remains the generally preferred medium for interviews and even considered by some as the "'gold standard' of qualitative research" [30, p. 613], there are other options that may, in some cases, be appropriate or even preferable. Non-face-to-face interviews—e.g. by telephone, video call, and email—can broaden the participant pool by including people across distance and timezones and by being more accessible to people who might otherwise face difficulties participating face-to-face, e.g. due to caring responsibilities, disability, illness, shift work [31]. They can also be more accessible for the researcher for the same reasons and can help researchers navigate political or health-based travel bans. Further, they reduce the economic and environmental costs of travel, which is an important consideration. However, as with all data collection methods, their use must be justified on both practical and methodological grounds and attention must be paid to the way that the technologies may shape or alter the interview encounter [30].

Audio-only interviews (via telephone) have been used successfully for a long time, and now video calling tools like Skype and Zoom are becoming common place [32]. Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst [33, p. 148] argue that while online interviews may "feel different" to offline interviews neither is inherently better or worse than the other. Jenner and Myers [34] found conducting interviews online had little impact on their ability to build rapport, interview length, cancellations, or on the willingness of participants to share deeply personal experiences. In fact, the distance offered by online interviews may be well suited to interviews dealing with sensitive subject matter [35]. However, the interview may feel less formal, and it may be easier for the participant to forget it is being recorded, which Weller [30] cautions may lead to them divulging more than they would, on reflection, wish. Further, familiarity with technology (or indeed, access to technology) should not be taken for granted and the researcher may need to offer directions, training, or support [35, 36]. Researchers do well to choose a technology that is free, and one that is likely to be familiar to participants. Researchers should ensure they use a professional rather than personal account, and seek training or support on how to handle inappropriate or unwanted contact, including unrelated sexually explicit communication or images, particularly when interviews are conducted anonymously [35].

Asynchronous online interviewing is also an option. In-depth email interviewing, by a series of back-and-forth emails over a given period of time, has the potential to elicit deeply reflective answers without the need for face to face interaction [37, 38]. Email interviews can be semi-structured or unstructured, starting with a single question as a prompt for a more organic exchange [39]. Like any form of technologically mediated interview, email interviewing reduces the need to travel, and transcription is not required, making it very cost-effective [38]. Although the back-and-forth takes time, this extended approach allows both researcher and participant time for iterative reflection [40]. Ratislavová and Ratislav [38] argue that email interviews lower the barrier to participation by allowing participants to participate in their own home, and in their own time. This high level of participant control can be especially important in research on sensitive topics (see box below).

Data safety and management are additional concerns. Email systems should be password protected and not able to be accessed by others [31], and the interview should be downloaded in a way that preserves the order of the exchange [38], and the emails themselves deleted on completion [31].

This approach may still be mentally and emotionally demanding for the researcher. Fritz and Vandermause [37] suggest that in order to manage different email conversations, only three should be conducted concurrently, and that for the most authentic responses researchers must be flexible and respond to different participants' rhythm, flow, and preferences. The researcher still needs to establish rapport, ask appropriate questions, actively listen and end the email interview appropriately [40]. Emoticons can help communicate tone and simulate non-verbal cues [37, 38].

Understanding how millennials make sense of their lived experiences in mixed-use communities using in-depth email interviews
Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez [40] used in-depth email interviews to conduct an exploratory pilot study to understand millennials' experiences of mixed-use neighbourhoods. This method was well suited to their prospective participant pool as millennials value flexibility and are comfortable communicating online. Establishing relationships and rapport with participants was still a prerequisite to gathering rich data. They observed that embedding questions within the body of an email results in a significantly better response rate than providing them in an attachment, and that they should not ask too many questions at once.

3.3.2 Group/Multi-participant Interviews

While we have primarily discussed interviews as comprising a researcher and one participant, an interview can also have multiple participants. Group interviews, or multi-participant interviews, are distinct from a focus group. In a focus group, the emphasis is on the interaction between participants, and the interviewer might be relatively passive, while in an interview, the focus is on the interaction between interviewer and participant [3]. This also holds true for multi-participant interviews; while participants will interact with each other, the interviewer remains central to the encounter.

Group interviews are any interview where there is more than one participant. They are often favoured for interviewing children [41], and may otherwise be useful when participants are hesitant or in need of someone to support them in their participation (see box below). Often group interviews are planned and instigated by the researcher, but sometimes the participant might request it themselves. You may need to allocate more time for a group interview, and you are likely to hear less from each participant than you would if you were one-on-one. Some participants can dominate the discussion, which may need to be managed by the interviewer. The informed consent process can be more complex too, and participants may, inadvertently or otherwise, breach the confidentiality of other participants [42].

Group interviews can become very conversational. Whatever control the interviewer is surrendering—whether they are taking a semi-structured or unstructured approach—is then shared by all participants, which can be generative, but may also heighten the potential for conflict. Where participants are well known to each other and the encounter flows as a conversation, the interviewer may find they begin referencing events and people or matters well known to other participants, forgetting that you do not know the backstory, so you may need to interject more. These interviews can also be time-consuming and/or costly to transcribe; each speaker including the interviewer needs to be identified in the transcript, and there is a higher likelihood of overlaps in talk, which can be hard or impossible to capture in the transcript.

Unanticipated group interview when studying emotional geographies of mine closure

Osborne [43] was conducting unstructured, storytelling-based interviews in her research, and she had arranged to meet a young woman at a cafe for an interview. She was a little nervous and had brought a friend along, not as passive support, but to contribute. After a chat, the friend called a family member who she thought would have lots to say, who promptly joined them at the cafe. It was a long, rich group interview between participants all well known to each other and enabled people to participate who otherwise might not have felt comfortable. Each participant had to be taken through the ethics protocols and sign a consent form, so this is a good reason to carry spares!

3.4 Other Considerations in In-Depth Interviewing

In this final section, we consider a range of contemporary considerations in interviewing including how technology is shaping interview practice and ethical concerns like confidentiality, reciprocity, the potential for harm in interviewing.

3.4.1 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Anonymity is one of the primary ethical considerations in human research. It is often standard to offer anonymity to participants, but this is rarely guaranteed. Even if you redact their name, if you refer to other aspects of their identity that might be relevant to your project (e.g. gender, age, sexuality, race, ethnicity, dis/ability, their affiliation with particular groups, the type of work they do, their family type, that they live in a particular area), it may become easy for people to infer who a participant is. De-identification is most effective in large datasets and participant pools, and where no one datapoint is given particular attention. But in-depth interview data do not tend to aggregate that way; it is often counterproductive to abstract data from the participant who generated it.

It is important to be honest with your participants about the limits of anonymity in your particular research project, so that they can make an informed decision about if and how they will participate. It is common practice, for instance, to refer to participants by a descriptive code (e.g. "pedestrian F20s" might refer to a woman in her mid 20s who walks to work), or by a pseudonym. Selecting a pseudonym can be more complex than it seems—should the pseudonym preserve the ethnicity of names (e.g. Amy becomes Mary), or might that compromise the participant's anonymity (particularly if they belong to a minority ethnic group in a fairly homogeneous participant pool)? You may wish to ask your participants to select their own pseudonym in discussion with you—while also reminding them that it is always still possible that a reader might deduce who they are. Some participants may be unconcerned, or prefer you to use their name. For instance, in Osborne's [43] Ph.D. research, an Aboriginal elder being interviewed, Aunty Donna Ruska, insisted her name be used. She said her people were given few opportunities to have their stories heard and she did not want her story stripped from her identity.

When reporting your research, avoid quoting or making direct reference to things that might identify participants. It is not always clear what details are identifying or not, so you might offer to let your participants review their interview transcript (or any direct quotes you wish to use) and redact anything they wish. This is also good practice if your interview covered sensitive topics; sometimes people tell you things because they want you to know them, but they do not want you to directly report on them.

Finally, consider fictionalising the data by using it to tell a story that unfolds in a fictional place [44]. This approach is common in business studies or education where companies or schools are fictionalised, however, in urban and geographical research place is usually one of our primary concerns, so displacing data might be counterproductive. Another approach would be to combine the stories of several participants to form "characters" or "archetypes", and report your findings through those amalgams [45]. Concerns with this approach are that it could essentialise or stereotype participants, muddle important contextual factors, and/or participants may resent not being to identify themselves in your work, or feel misrepresented if they do not identify well with how you have compiled your amalgams. Satchwell [46] actively involved their participants in creating the fictionalised accounts, which may avoid some of these issues while offering unique insights, but this could not be achieved through interviews alone, and additional methods would need to be employed.

3.4.2 Expectations and Reciprocity

Some communities, especially marginalised communities, do not trust researchers, and may not welcome a researcher's scrutiny; outsider interest can be dangerous [47]. If you are interested in conducting research with communities that have been harmed by researchers in the past, and/or who continue to experience oppression and exploitation, you may need to adopt additional ethical protocols and design your methodology with this in mind, starting by asking if you are the right person to do this research. How will you minimise harm, and how can you give back?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People have by and large been over-researched, and yet that research has generally brought them little benefit [48, 49]. Often, researchers have conducted what Martin [49, p. 203] calls "*terra nullius* research", which reinscribes the erasure and violence of settler colonialism. As such, some institutions have created detailed protocols particularly for doing research with Indigenous People. These offer some guidance but do not necessarily reflect the complexity of doing research with Indigenous Peoples, or the need to consider particular contexts and positionalities.

Researchers are often encouraged or required by ethics protocols to recruit participants via "gatekeeper" organisations and groups, especially when those participants belong to marginalised groups. While this may be appropriate, Sullivan [47] found that these organisations may silence the people they are ostensibly seeking to represent and/or protect. She maintains that these organisations are important and should not be circumvented, but that our engagement with them should be reflexive, critical, thoughtful.

Institutional guidelines may be little more than an "an exercise in compliance and risk management" [47, pp. 9–10]; it takes more than that to do research ethically. In-depth interviews are relational and situated; ethics too are about relations and relationships [49, 50]. Just as the knowledge produced by in-depth interviews cannot be abstracted, nor should the knowledge we seek in research be abstracted from considerations about the ethical implications of knowing, of claiming to know, and what knowledge might be used for.

Reciprocity is an important consideration, especially in research with marginalised people or communities keenly affected by an issue. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a full discussion of reciprocity, but it is important to reflect on how the method of in-depth interviewing may increase participants' expectations—reasonably or otherwise—for reciprocity. In-depth interviews often rely on relationship building, and they ask a lot from participants (e.g. time, vulnerability, sacrificing privacy). Participants may come to see you as a trusted expert, confidant, or friend, and that relationship might increase the expectation that they should receive some benefit from having offered you their time, knowledge, and/or access to their networks.

Finding meaningful practices of reciprocity in research is important—ideally, these should be developed in conversation with your participants and the affected community, and should reflect their needs, your capacities, and the kind of work you are doing. Examples include:

- Giving a seminar or workshop to share your findings
- Providing feedback to relevant organisations in a manner they prefer
- Joining advisory committees
- Assisting with the writing of policy/submissions
- Offering training/skill development
- Showing up to, and supporting, a community's events and causes.

What reciprocity entails will vary, but it is also important to manage expectations about what you are capable of. Sometimes researchers are imagined to have more power and influence than they actually do—participants may agree to an interview because they think the researcher will be able to intervene on their behalf, but typically our influence is far less direct. In-depth interviewing can intensify this, and you may increase social pressure and your sense of obligation than if you were more distant from participants. Be clear about what is possible for you to do, do not inflate your importance in the hopes of recruiting participants, and remember that over-promising and under delivering can destroy trust and relationships, and make it difficult for you or others to do research with that particular group again.

3.4.3 Interviewing and Harm

In-depth interviewing may cause harm, particularly if the subject matter is sensitive, traumatic, controversial, or otherwise difficult to talk about. By asking participants to share their experiences, stories, and opinions with us, we may be asking them to relate deeply painful matters, and revisit grief and trauma. Even when the subject matter is not particularly sensitive, the more room a researcher gives their participants to explore a topic, the greater the likelihood that they might touch unexpectedly on topics that are painful for the participant (or, indeed, for the researcher).

In-depth interviewers should consider the likelihood that the interview may cause distress, and create a plan for minimising harm. This might include being sensitive to timing (not rushing in after a loss/disaster), providing information on counselling services, and reminding participants of their agency in the process—that what and if they share is up to them, that they can refuse, and that they can pause or stop the interview at any time. It may also be appropriate to check in with participants after interviews (e.g. the following day or week) to see how they are going and offer support then if needed. Most qualitative researchers are not trained counsellors, so it is important not to step into that role, but we have a responsibility to extend our consideration to participants, and consider what is ethically and interpersonally required of us when we ask for people's participation in our project.

That said, many participants report that participating in in-depth interviews, even on distressing or traumatic subject matter, can be positive, even healing [28]. Taking the time and space to talk about oneself to an attentive listener, a listener who is taking what is shared seriously, honouring it, and building it into something bigger, can be cathartic, even empowering [51, 52]. This underscores the importance of reporting back and/or sharing findings and publications—it demonstrates to participants that their contributions, even if they were painful to share, were taken seriously and valued, and that their involvement may help others.

We have argued throughout that in-depth interviews are *relational encounters* between researcher and participants, and that it matters who is in the room (whether literally or digitally). But there are power asymmetries in interview relationships, and potential for harm, hostility, dislike, and worse. We should not assume that research interviews are inherently "warm, caring, and empowering dialogues" [53, p. 480], even though that might be the ideal. It is imperative that researchers are sensitive to power and interpersonal dynamics and the impact they can have both on the data generated and interview participants' experience of the interview process. Further, although it is relatively common for researchers, and for institutional ethics procedures, to consider the potential harm or distress a participant might experience as a result of an interview, insufficient attention is paid to the emotional and psychological impact conducting interviews may have on the interviewer [22]. It is quite possible for the researcher to find themselves affected by the interview, in ways that also might be distressing, uncomfortable, and/or traumatic. One way of minimising this for both researcher and participant is to follow Valentine's [14] suggestion to "warm down" the interview as it draws to a close by asking more relaxed or light-hearted questions that the interview interaction ends on a somewhat positive note.

There are also more direct forms of harm a researcher may experience, and some of the practices of in-depth interviewing—emphasising relationality and openness, muddling boundaries between researcher and participants, using gatekeepers and key informants, spending lots of time alone with participants, possibly over a number of days/visits—can increase exposure to harm. Sexual assault, harassment, and other forms of violence are not uncommon for researchers doing interview-based fieldwork. Some researchers face heightened risks due to aspects of their identity and/or position (e.g. their gender, sexual identity, race, age, lack of seniority etc.), and research institutions and academic communities have often ignored or externalised these risks [54, 55]. While it is essential for in-depth interviewers to be aware of and critically reflect on power dynamics and positionality in their research, it is also crucial not to flatten out these relationships, or assume that either power or vulnerability to harm is fixed exclusively with one party or another.

4 Conclusions

In disciplines that privilege quantitative research, in-depth interviews may seem like a soft option. They are anything but. They require a high level of commitment and skill on the part of the researcher and can involve a significant degree of ethical, theoretical, methodological, and analytical complexity. They do have drawbacks; they are time-consuming and often resource-intensive, they can include physical, emotional, and/or psychological risks to both interviewer and participants. Depth can come at the cost of breadth, the data can be very difficult to work with, and the results may have limited general applicability. Further, as the interviewer often works alone, it can be difficult to access the kind of training, mentoring, and support, and receive the feedback, that helps us become great interviewers (see box below for other helpful resources!).

However, the "pros" of this method is that the depth of understanding, nuance, and context they can offer are rich and unparalleled. Further, interviewing honours the lived experiences of participants. Interviewing is not inherently feminist but it has been the work of feminists to elevate and legitimise this approach to research, arguing that participants and researchers offer different but "equally important components of the knowledge project" [19, p. 146].

Often, urban research has neglected and excluded diverse ways of knowing and the people who hold them [56]. However, for some research aims, the identities, positions, contexts, and situations of both researcher and researched are not only important, they are essential to the work being done. Instead of trying to adopt a “view from nowhere”, researchers can actively seek out people with particular perspectives, situated in particular places and sets of relations, and draw on their own positionality to inform and enable their research [57]. In-depth interviewing provides a method to facilitate depth of understanding, and some questions we ask in urban analysis demand just that.

Key Points

- In-depth interviews allow us to explore complex, situated, uncertain, and unfolding issues with depth and nuance. They can help us learn how people understand issues and their worlds, make meaning out of events, and relate to each other and to place.
- In-depth interviews can be an effective and meaningful way to engage with marginalised peoples, communities, and knowledges.
- In-depth interviews can be semi-structured or unstructured and range from quite formal to very informal. The interviewer may use techniques that draw from story-telling, oral histories, and ethnographic research, and may speak to participants just once, or many times over the course of a project.
- In-depth interviews typically happen face to face and are audio-recorded, however they can also be conducted by phone, video call, or even over letters or email.
- In-depth interviews are very resource-intensive, and the data they produce can be uncertain, highly complicated, and difficult to work with.
- While in-depth interviews are often used in emancipatory research, or research otherwise concerned with questions of power and social justice, there are physical, ethical, psychological, and emotional risks to both researcher and participant that need to be carefully considered.

Further information

For those wanting to get further information about conducting in-depth interviews, there are a number of useful guides.

- MacCallum et al. [58] *Doing research in urban and regional planning: Lessons in practical methods,* Routledge offer a great handbook on urban planning research, which can provide more guidance on how interviews fitwithin a broader research process.
- Knapik [59]. The Qualitative Research Interview: Participants’ Respon sive Participation in Knowledge Making. International *Journal of Qualita- tive Methods*, 77–93 offers a thoughtful, reflexive account of participants’ reflecting on the experience of being interviewed—this account of how participants may experience the research encounter can help us reflect on our practices.
- Braun and Clarke [60] One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, provide additional reflection and guidance around thematic analysis, one of the most common ways interview data is analysed.

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