Asking Questions with Reflexive Focus: A Tutorial on Designing and Conducting Interviews

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Interviews have been a key primary data source for research published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. This tutorial aims to walk readers through the design and execution of interview-based empirical research on consumers and consumption.

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INTRODUCTION

If you pick up an empirical article published in this journal that uses qualitative methods, you will most likely come across one that uses interview data. While there are exceptions in cases of historical research, or those employing macro-level data analysis, interviews have been a key primary data source for articles published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. This is rooted in the epistemological tenet that consumers' lived experiences can primarily be understood through their expressed subjective narratives (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). Interviews are useful because they give voice to people's lives and their perceptions of experiences important to them (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2013) and allow the researcher to understand the way they see the world (McCracken 1988; Thompson et al. 1994). While the number of nonprimary data sources that provide such narratives has skyrocketed (see Humphreys and Wang [forthcoming] for a discussion on sources for consumer-generated data), the interactive, flexible but focused nature of interviews still makes them one of the most trustworthy and effective sources of data about consumers. Note that not all research questions can be answered by interview data: think market-level studies, macro approaches, and historical methods that require less individualistic accounts of consumers. Still, even these studies can benefit from incorporating interviews as a supplemental source of insight. The focus of this tutorial is to walk you through the process of designing and conducting interviews, whether they are the primary data source for your qualitative research projects, or secondary.

I will start with a somewhat controversial and contestable position. While it is common in this journal to refer to interviews as "unstructured," I suggest you shy away from doing truly unstructured or unstandardized interviews, even if you claim to do grounded theory. The idea of having exploratory and fully unstructured dialogues with your participants, where you let their experiences unfold as they will, remains a romantic myth and would be an unfruitful pursuit for the type of contribution this journal seeks. As much as interviews are performative and constructivist (Alvesson 2003), you as a researcher should enter the interview with a research question, albeit a loosely developed and mutable one. You should have in hand a set of themes to explore while being open to the new directions presented by each interviewee. Fortunately, you also will bring all the theoretical baggage you have gathered as a scholar, drawing on particular frames of understanding and particular ways of seeing. For example, if you were trained in the

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Bourdieusian tradition, you will most probably see social class in most answers your participants articulate. Treat this as an advantage, but be reflexive regarding your own theoretical blind spots.

A contrast can be made between interviews that are standardized (you ask the exact same set of questions in each repetition) and those that are semistandardized (each interview takes its own form but follows a specific research question around a series of themes) (Berg and Lune 2012). The former takes a deductive approach, using data to verify hypothesized propositions, and is better suited to mixed-method designs where qualitative inquiry is used to fill in gaps from other types of data.[1] Due to space restrictions, this tutorial focuses on the latter, highlighting the inductive, emergent, and iterative nature of the type of qualitative research that gets published in this journal, while underlining that you should never pursue freestyle shotgun inquiries in the hopes that you will discover a theoretical needle in a haystack.

Why have some sort of structure and focus instead of diving right in? Interpretive research should indeed rely on the data to speak, but interviewing people without engaging in much theoretical and methodological preparation because you have a hunch about something interesting in a context might lead you to more noise than data. You can end up with interviews that are disjointed, discretely idiosyncratic, or redundant in light of literature because you asked about issues that the existing theories already address. Why not, instead, purposefully but reflexively let your prior understandings and your research question(s) guide your study design? A good model to follow is the extended case method, coined by Gluckman (1958) but later elaborated upon by Burawoy (1998). While not really a method per se, this epistemological approach suggests one should challenge existing theories reflexively to reconstruct new knowledge. For the purposes of the kind of contributions that get published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, a fitting way to consider interviews is, therefore, seeing them as orchestrated dialogues geared toward knowledge extension, employing a "reflexive pragmatic approach" (Alvesson 2003). In other words, your interviews should reflexively and purposefully be designed around existing theory, challenging it, and seeking to revise or extend it.

A focused approach doesn't have to be deductive and confirmatory. While situated in the context of each interviewee's life world, the interview should have an overarching purpose that persistently and progressively seeks new knowledge around an ever-evolving research question. Each data point and each iteration within the research process should compel you to reconsider your understanding and the motivating research questions. In that sense, even though the process of conducting interviews is presented in a somewhat linear fashion here, interviews should not be seen as the first stage of research design, nor should the research design be considered finished before your first interview. Interviews, like all data sources in interpretivist approaches, are a part of an iterative circle that continuously moves back and forth between conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, and theory building. In fact, never do all your interviews at once, unless you have field-related constraints such as a temporally bound event. Even when you do this, use your downtime to reflect on your provisionary findings. If you don't have constraints, spread your interviews across a few months. Do a few interviews first. Analyze, revise, repeat.

A reflexive approach means you should be mindful of the intersubjective nature of your encounter with your research participants (Wilk 2001), the power relations between you and your participants (Kvale 2006), and your own biases and preconceptions. This is important because while you have questions that guide the interview, your participants should also have control over their narrative and what they want to say and how they want to say it. Furthermore, your provisional findings should continuously challenge your assumptions, from your choice of words in the interview questions to the way you interpret the answers to these questions. In the next section, I will first discuss the differences between ethnographic and formal interviews. Following that, I will walk you through a four-step iterative process of designing and conducting interviews.

ETHNOGRAPHIC VERSUS FORMAL INTERVIEWS

Qualitative research interviews can be either ethnographic or formal. A recent example of research that includes both is Maciel and Wallendorf's (2016) ethnographic study of male craft-beer aficionados. While the authors primarily use participant observation, their data also includes both ethnographic and long or formal interviews to deepen their understanding of these observations. Maciel and Wallendorf not only use conversational-style

1 If you are doing exploratory interviews for a primarily experimental or survey-based project, you can be pragmatic. Consider as an example the highly cited scale development piece by Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz (1996). The authors use interviews alongside observational methods to identify dimensions of service quality, and then consider these dimensions in light of the existing conceptualization of the construct. Then they develop a scale. In cases like this, many of the concerns raised in this tutorial might not be relevant. For example, if you are developing a scale, it would be overkill to ask participants for long life-history narratives to better situate their consumption practices into their life worlds. Or if you are using interview data to realistically complement scenario-based laboratory experiments about the psychological outcomes of tragic decisions (Botti, Orfali, and Iyengar 2009), and you are not interested in how these effects pattern socioculturally, you might be fine focusing on these decisions and their aftermath, instead of devoting time to lifestyle questions. In these cases, your questions might also be more hypothetico-deductive, aiming at affirming or refuting your assumptions.

probes while brewing beer with their participants in their homes, they also schedule separate formal sit-down interviews with them afterward. This is ideal; however, in some cases, you might not have the opportunity for such follow-ups. Therefore, your only source of interview data might be ethnographic interviews conducted during participant observation.

Ethnographic interviews are short, in situ, and impromptu conversations that take place within the constraints of the field site. This type of interviewing might require more emergent design, and more spontaneous questions tailored for each observed moment to make the best use of time and space restrictions. Depending on your data collection site, you might be pressed in terms of how much time your participants can afford to give you and where you can conduct these interviews. For example, if you are interested in understanding the experiences of paintball players, as were Woermann and Rokka (2015), and were participating in a game, you might do short, pointed, and informal interviews with participants during the game downtime on the site. In such cases, you will be better off focusing on questions that reflect your observations of the particular experiences of that moment, instead of covering a predetermined set of issues that aim to get a bigger picture. If you can get a bigger picture, by all means do so, but you will most probably need to prioritize.

In ethnographic interviews, going through a written ethics protocol and asking your participant to sign a consent form might also be impractical. Still, you cannot forego informed consent regardless of how awkward you think this could be. The ethical consequences of not getting proper consent will be a disproportionately bigger problem than trying to find a good moment in the flow to tell participants that you are a researcher. Do not interview people under the guise of casual chat. Start your conversation by concisely and clearly explaining that you are a researcher studying [the subject matter], and are interested in hearing their experiences on this subject. If you are using a tape recorder, keep it very visible so that participants have no doubts about whether or not they are being recorded (though in most cases you might not even record these interviews). As soon as you leave the field site or take a break during data collection, write down your recollections in as much detail as possible.

The rest of this tutorial is written for the purposes of conducting a study where the primary data source is prescheduled and formal or long interviews.

A FOUR-STEP ITERATIVE GUIDE FOR INTERVIEW DESIGN

Step 1: Settle with an Epistemological Tradition

There are never-ending epistemological debates on what kind of scientific truth interviews reveal and how knowledge can be produced through interview data. This is not the tutorial to revisit paradigm wars. However, it is imperative that you familiarize yourself with the epistemological differences between various interview traditions. Whether you are using a phenomenological approach that focuses on the lived experience of individuals as the principal empirical evidence (Thompson 1997; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989; Thompson et al. 1994), a neo-positivist perspective that seeks patterns and quasi-causal explanations (McCracken 1988), or a social constructivist lens that sees interviews as cultural conversation or epistemic practice that invites both interviewee and interviewer to contribute to knowledge production (Brinkmann 2007; Moisander, Valtonen, and Hirsto 2009), you should have a clear understanding about what you expect interviews to reveal and what kind of theoretical stories you can tell with interviews. While undoubtedly shaping the ways you approach your research question, design your study, and collect your data, a coherent epistemological position is even more important when it comes to analyzing this interview data and making theoretical claims about the social world you are investigating.

Step 2: Prepare an Interview Protocol

An interview protocol is an outline of your interview, listing key points of exploration, provisional questions, and planned probes and transitions. Your protocol should incorporate three components. It should start with a brief introduction in lay terms, involving a description of the research project, an explanation of interview procedures, and an invitation to the interviewee to ask questions about the study and procedures. You do not tape this portion of the interview. This is followed by a procedure for establishing informed consent: the interviewee is informed about the consequences of participation and is asked to provide explicit consent to be interviewed. A signed written document highlighting the procedure and consequences of participation is preferred to avoid ambiguities. Some institutional ethics review boards will not allow you to get oral consent, unless justified or recorded on tape. Lastly, you should have a set of provisional interview questions.

Some researchers might tell you that they do not prepare interview protocols because they simply want to hear what their participants say. This is too idealistic and runs the risk of lacking focus. During an interview, you are not only listening to complex, compelling, and occasionally contradictory narratives, but also thinking about your next move by analytically deconstructing the meanings of these answers so that you don't miss a follow-up opportunity. On top of this, you will need to use the vocabulary and natural language most appropriate for the context, instead of using the academic jargon that you use when talking to your colleagues. For many of us, social settings with strangers can also be anxiety inducing. Navigating this situation without a roadmap in hand is quite possible if you are someone with an impressive theoretical arsenal on the area of inquiry, exceptional analytical skills that can help you interpret data in the moment, and sharp conservational abilities. Most of us are ordinary people and therefore could benefit from doing a bit of preparation. An interview protocol can (1) keep you focused during the process, helping you cover all the relevant concepts you have identified prior to this particular iteration, (2) give you a sense of control, (3) help you to analytically connect emic to etic (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993) by translating your research questions into natural conversations and vice versa, and (4) reignite conversation when things get awkward, or redirect your conversation when there is an extended digression.

Preparing Your Questions. Many resources will advise you to start each interview with warm-up questions to build rapport. As a consumption researcher, I find the term "warm-up" a bit puzzling, because the information you gather during this section of the interview is usually very important for contextualizing your participants' responses. You are not asking to get to know your participants and their everyday lives just for small talk or to build rapport (even though this kind of conversation undoubtedly helps to warm things up); you are asking these questions because you want to understand how and why they do things. How and why are frequently tied to individual life histories and lifestyles. Therefore, the ubiquitous "Can you tell me about yourself?" opener is an important question that you should pay attention to. You should heavily probe the responses to this question, digging as deep as you can about background, family, education, and current lifestyle. This is especially important if your research is related to class, taste, aesthetics, community, or lifestyle practices. For example, if you are comparing low and high cultural capital upper-middle-class people as Üstüner and Holt (2010) did, early life history, education, and family background will be exceptionally important for your analysis. Of course, while getting to know your participants, you will also build some rapport. You can even throw in some small talk to put everyone (including yourself) at ease, but don't treat the first half-hour of your interview lightly.

Once you cross off the life history subsection, you need to slowly transition to the subject matter. Think about the concepts that you would like to elicit narratives about, what McCracken calls "cultural categories" (1988). For this, you need to reflect on both the existing theory and secondary data sources. For example, if you are studying roller derby grrrls as did Thompson and Üstüner (2015), critical reflection on the representations and discourses surrounding this context will likely lead you to realize that gender is a central topic to cover in your questions. Note, however, that key concepts that emerged in Thompson and Üstüner (2015)'s research, such as "edgework," were probably not immediately apparent to these researchers, but most likely manifested themselves as they progressively analyzed their data. Once new concepts emerge, you can incorporate them in revised interview questions, carefully navigating the territory between gently steering the interview in this direction and putting words into your participants' mouths. More on this later.

During the early stages of your project, when you are conducting your first set of interviews, you will probably think about fewer (and more abstract) concepts. As you iteratively build theory from data, you will be refining your interview protocol alongside your theoretical story. For example, when Jonathan Bean and I first started our taste regimes project in the context of Apartment Therapy (Arsel and Bean 2013), we immediately agreed that this would be a project on how taste is shaped by media narratives. From existing theories, we also knew that taste practices are shaped by social class patterns. Our first-round interview questions, therefore, were heavily focused on social class backgrounds of our participants, and their relationship to the media brand. We also inquired about the layout and decoration of our participants' homes. As we iteratively analyzed our data, we realized that there was not much new to add to the existing theory if we wanted to tell a social class story. However, we were intrigued about how taste was manifesting itself in mundane everyday practices; something theoretically novel seemed to be emerging. So we started to ask even more detailed questions about objects, and specific domestic practices around these objects. While we still inquired about our participants' social class to ensure that we could locate their social positions, what they said about this remained theoretically obvious.

Research Questions Versus Interview Questions. Preparing an interview protocol will also help you translate your etic research questions into emic interview ones and start mapping your data theoretically. When you prepare your protocol, think about the concepts you are trying to evoke with each question. Then speculate on different scenarios to predict what kind of probing opportunities might arise, so that you are ready—but also know that most probes will be emergent and spontaneous and will be contingent on how well you listen to your participant. Listening carefully while simultaneously deconstructing the answers as your participants speak is a skill you will build gradually, and in the meantime it doesn't hurt to prepare a few possible probes before each interview.

In the beginning of your project, you will have a sparse set of concepts, as you are still discerning abstractions from rich subjective narratives. Though there is a strong connection between what your participants express in their answers and what you will write as a researcher—the basis of empiricism—there will also be an interpretive leap that you need to carefully build and navigate through theoretical abstraction. Simply put, even though they are connected, research questions and interview questions are not the same thing. Research questions are etic abstractions that map relationships between concepts, whereas interview questions seek to understand lay and subjective articulations of these concepts. Your duty as a scholar is to make the connection between the two as rigorously as possible, using people's subjective narratives to thoroughly and ethically substantiate your theoretical claims. However, ordinary life worlds do not always come in clearly defined stories around academic constructs. They come in metaphors, everyday vernacular, and subjective articulations, albeit shaped by shared sociohistoric conditions (Thompson et al. 1994). Your participants' narratives will be messy, full of contradictions and contestations. Good, this is exactly what you want. If you are expecting interviewees to give straightforward and concise answers, perhaps you are not asking a very novel research question. Your job as a researcher is to find a previously untold theoretical story in this mess and uncover what is not immediately obvious. To do this you need to continuously navigate between emic and etic.

When preparing your protocol, reflect on whether you are really asking what you want to ask about. Sometimes, when you are trying to understand macro- or meso-level issues such as market-level processes, you will be tempted to ask your participants questions about them. But lay theories about the social world articulated by your participants do not necessarily correspond to what is really going on at the macro or meso level. They simply represent how your participants see the world around them. Unless you are studying "consumer lay theories on issue X," this type of questioning might not be helpful. For non-individual-level questions, you might require a different level of analysis, and different type of data. For example, when I interviewed "indie consumers," my participants repeatedly stated that they were mistaken for hipsters (Arsel and Thompson 2010). This led me to question the connection between indie and hipster to better understand why (a) my participants found this problematic, (b) they felt misrecognized as hipsters when they did not self-identify. Although asking them, "How do you think indie became associated with hipster?" could reveal their own hypothesis, and might bring some preliminary insights, a more appropriate way to tackle this question is not seeking an answer from consumers themselves, but looking at market-level data (such as historicizing the term "hipster"). In sum, you will need to carefully think about what subjective experiences your participants can reveal—and what they can't—and how answers to interview questions relate to your research questions.

Let's take two articles to illustrate the difference between a research question and an interview question further. If you are studying veiling as stigma, as did Sandıkcı and Ger (2010), you will probably want to ask your participants about the moments they experienced this stigma. However, you cannot always expect your participants to use this sociological term, or unambiguously identify or articulate this complex experience. Instead, you will need to ask about their experiences wearing a veil in public, and with luck you might discover, as Sandıkcı and Ger did, that the "gaze and judgments of uncovered women" (19) are an important part of your participants' everyday experiences. If you had asked directly about whether they felt stigma or not, you might have faced one of three undesirable consequences. First, your participants might not have directly identified or expressed their experiences through this word, and therefore might have been confused about what it meant. Second, you might have gotten a binary "yes or no" answer, with an assumption that whatever you meant by stigma was what they subjectively experienced. Third, it might have turned out that what you were studying was not about stigma at all—but since you asked about stigma, your informants obligingly talked about it.

My second example is Weinberger (2015), who studied how dominant consumption rituals affect interpersonal identity goals. When conducting her interviews, she did not ask her informants, "Can you tell me how dominant consumption rituals affect your interpersonal identity goals?" because that is not how people talk about their everyday experiences (unless they are social scientists). She most probably said something along the lines of, "How do you feel when everyone around you is celebrating Christmas, and you are not?" By asking the question this way, the researcher can first empirically substantiate what she means by a dominant consumption ritual (Christmas as it is experienced by a noncelebrant) and then further inquire about interpersonal identity goals. If you impose the concept of "dominant consumption rituals" on your interviewees, you will most likely capture your own preconceptions with interview answers, building a study around a tautology (McCracken 1988).

Interview Protocol as an Ever-Evolving Document. An interview protocol is not a survey instrument that you need to follow religiously and consistently across participants, nor it is a fixed one. During semistructured interviews, you will probably not follow the planned order of questions because the conversation will take on a life of its own. You will also change the wording of questions to tailor them to each participant, and you will add new probes as you listen to their answers (Berg and Lune 2012). Treat your questions as checkpoints, or prompts (McCracken 1988) within the flow of the dialogue, but try to have a natural conversation. Let your participant steer the interview a bit to the spaces outside your worldview. This is particularly important during the first few interviews where the research project starts taking shape. Allowing your participants to freely talk will allow you to break down your preconceptions and revise your theorizations. Unless you are particularly pressed for time, don't be afraid if they digress a bit.

Sometimes more interesting stuff comes up where you least expect it. For example, when I interviewed participants for my dissertation with the intention of learning about the meaning of indie, my participants spontaneously started to talk about why they are not hipsters instead (Arsel and Thompson 2010). This prompted me to rethink my research questions around market myths and reposition my work.

This is particularly important for novice interviewers, but if you are rusty, or if your sample is one that is hard to reach (i.e., finding participants is difficult due to the nature of the particular subject matter you are studying), test your questions before interviewing your first real participant. Pick a friend who is not familiar with consumer research (or two, if the first one doesn't go well) to test your questions and their wording. Researchers tend to use overly theoretical wording in interviews, and people without the same level of expertise often get puzzled about the funny way we talk about everyday things. Ask for your friends' feedback to see if you were clear and whether you can improve your questions.

Knowing Your Participants. While I don't intend to get into a discussion on sampling or how to recruit participants,[2] I would like to add a note regarding the way your sample affects your interview design. Sampling in qualitative research is rarely random (for an exception, see Holt [1998], who used a random sample from the phonebook). As a researcher, you purposefully seek out specific people based on the topic of your inquiry. Are you interested in a community of consumption? In hobbyists? In people with a specific social class or gender position? This is important because these parameters will eventually determine the vocabulary of your questions as well as the questions themselves. Are you familiar with the context you are investigating? If not, getting familiar with the ethos and language of the people will be necessary. For example, for his master's thesis on communities of co-creation, Martineau spent some time familiarizing himself with the Threadless community, the online forums, and the way co-creation worked in this community (Martineau and Arsel 2017). He first gained an understanding of the task and the vocabulary used in the community before talking to participants, so that he wouldn't act like a Martian anthropologist (Belk et al. 2013) asking the obvious. Understanding the culture of your context will also help you to determine the proper dress, tone, and vocabulary to manage power distance.

Interviewing Other Market Actors and Multi-Actor Studies. In addition to consumers, you might decide to interview other market actors. These could, for example, be managers, gatekeepers, experts, media people, producers, or service providers. You might need to interview them to understand the backstage of a consumer story, unpack market-level processes, or contextualize your consumer data. For example, if your primary research revolves around Harley-Davidson owners (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), you might wish to triangulate your data with the marketers' perspective by interviewing store managers and staff at the corporate office of the company. Some of these employees might be busy people with time and access restrictions (Harvey 2011; Thomas 1993). You do not need their life histories, and your questions can be more purposeful and pragmatic, aiming to fill in the gaps that have emerged from the consumer data. It is fine if these interviews are shorter than typical consumer interviews.

If you have a multi-actor study, you might also need to determine if you need individual protocols for specific subgroups. Some studies necessitate that you interview both marketers and consumers (Dion and Borraz 2017). This type of study design will warrant two types of protocols, as you are investigating two interrelated facets of the same phenomenon, experienced by distinctly different actors. In other cases, where the unit of analysis is not the individual but a group, such as the family (Epp and Price 2010; Epp and Velagaleti 2014), a single protocol is likely adequate. However, when conducting studies where groups are the unit of analysis, researchers need to be attuned to the relational nature of identities that are in play, both concerning the topic of study (Epp and Price 2008) and during the interview process where different members of the group may be present, co-constructing a relational narrative.

Ethics in Asking Questions. In some cases, you might be interviewing people who are marginalized, disenfranchised, or simply in a relatively lower power position than you. As Spivak (1988) discusses, even attempting to understand or represent another person's experience is an act of power and when there is a power differential between the researcher and the participant, the effects can be oppressive. Consider in advance the potential power dynamics of your interviews and how knowledge construction and subjectification could be a form of dominance and control (Kvale 2006). Be aware of the fact that just because you think you can freely talk about something, it does not mean others can also express themselves on the same topic without any concerns or reservations. Understand that what could be an innocent question to you might convey symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) or epistemic violence (Spivak 1988) toward your interviewee. Publishing answers to your questions without carefully safeguarding your participants' identities also can put the person in a vulnerable situation. If you are not sure if you might be harming a participant by asking a

2 Recruitment is always a challenge. As much as this will sound not very helpful, I admit there are really no hard and fast rules for making contact with potential participants other than being persistent and ensuring that you follow your institution's ethical guidelines. Use social media, personal connections, and community organizations, and do not get discouraged if you get turned down a few times.

particular question, or printing a particular answer in your manuscript, check with your institutional ethics review board.

Here, I acknowledge that there is a great deal of cross-cultural variation in how much academic institutions undertake responsibility in governing research ethics and how ethical principles are enforced. For example, most European, Asian, and Latin American universities will assume that their employees bear their own responsibility in protecting the rights and well-being of research participants, whereas universities in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States institutionally regulate all research involving human participants, some even demanding to approve your interview questions before you embark on data collection. Beyond requirements laid out by local laws and institutional policies, I suggest you never forget two universal tenets: make sure your participants understand that their answers to your questions will be used for research (particularly important if you are dealing with minors, people with diminished capacities, or those with limited literacy skills), and do no harm. There are, however, exceptions for doing covert studies (Berg and Lune 2012). If you do not have an institutional ethics review board to consult, you might want to ask your peers for a second opinion.

Step 3: Conduct the Interview

Beginning the Interview and Building Rapport. There is really no magic trick I can reveal here to alleviate your fears about whether interviewees will trust you with their intimate thoughts and feelings. But here is what I recommend for increasing the chances of building good rapport: unless you have time constraints, I suggest you establish rapport before turning on the tape recorder. Clarify roles by explaining the interview procedure and what you expect from your participant. Explain the study, tell a bit about yourself, and say why you are interested in this project. Make yourself human. Most of us pick our topics not because there are material incentives to study them, but because we are interested in learning and saying something about these subjects. Sharing your personal story regarding the project with your participants will be transformative in terms of building a trustworthy relationship. This is also the point where you will need to decide how much to reveal to your participants. Qualitative interviewers do not need to provide a cover story so that they can get a controlled and unprimed effect in an experiment, and, consequently, neither do they need to do debriefings. But you will want to refrain from talking too much about your preconceptions. If you tell your participants in advance about your emergent findings or your speculations, their whole narrative might be shaped to either support or negate this explanation because they might try to help you, or show how sovereign they are. Give them a broad idea about your research that focuses on the context rather than theory (something like "I am trying to understand your experience with [research context]"), and let your concepts naturally come out during the interview instead. To ensure that you are not leading your participants, the rule of thumb is asking questions from broad to specific and not invoking key concepts from your end. This will allow participants to spontaneously emphasize the most important issues first themselves and will reduce your chances of writing up a tautology that simply reaffirms your own assumptions (McCracken 1988).

Probing. Probes are the most important type of question in an interview, and the most difficult to master. While your participant is answering your question, you should be carefully listening to the answer to identify opportunities to dig deeper. Sometimes you will hear inconsistencies in a participant's narrative that puzzle you. Do not try to justify these inconsistencies, or theorize about them, or judge your participant; instead, work with the interviewee to delve deeper into these inconsistencies. Like most people, your participants live in a complex world of contradictions, so they will also be interested in reflecting on these inconsistencies. Yet, however brilliant and insightful your probe is, do not interrupt your participants. Let them speak as much as they like, and make a mental note on what to follow up on later. If there is a natural break in the conversation, reflect back on the original answer and add your probe. If you do not trust yourself with remembering your next probe, have a piece of paper in hand and inconspicuously jot down your next questions. It is perfectly fine to revisit your questions during an interview; in fact, it is desirable. Circling back to earlier topics is a way to gain depth and fill gaps (Belk et al. 2013).

When probing, avoid questions that will close off the conversation. These are questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. You are interested in "yes," but you are also interested in the how, when, and why of this yes, and asking, "Do you do X?" will not yield the richness and complexity you seek. Thompson et al. (1989) argue that you should not ask "Why?" questions because it causes participants to start theorizing about their own experiences. But I think the issue of "Why?" is more complex than a blanket ban conveys. We should instead consider the tone, context, and delivery of how we ask "Why?" for a couple of reasons. First, asking participants to reflect on their own behavior, thereby giving them agency and power in constructing and shaping their own narratives, is important. As Spiggle (1994) says, we are not trying to read minds, but rather we should be translating the participants' experiences by "drawing upon our stock of previously grasped meanings" (499). We, as researchers, do not hold the key to the wisdom that our participants lack, nor are we smarter than them in that we can understand their own behavior better than themselves. We might have access to a better repertoire of interpretive tools and texts than an average nonacademic due to our specialized training, but our participants own the right to their own narratives and explanations. Second, I have yet to find a clearer, more direct, and more user-friendly question than the variant of asking "Why" that entails empathically following up on some statement with "Hmmm. . .can you tell me a bit more about why you say that?" Here, "Can you tell me a bit more" is the key, as well as your delivery and body language. There is a difference between showing curiosity about why people are doing a certain thing, and dryly and antagonistically asking them to justify their behavior from a position of power.

As important as empathy is, you can show too much. Novice interviewers rush to complete their participants' sentences, whether because they want to actively listen since it is a social convention, or because they take naïve pleasure in thinking that they finally solved their theoretical puzzle. Imagine you have the following exchange with an interviewee in a study on homeyness in third places:

> Interviewee: When I entered the coffee shop, it felt good.
>
> You: So, you felt at home?

This interchange, even when due to an unnecessary interviewer eagerness, ruins your data. It is also ethically questionable because your response forces into your data the concept of "home," which should have emerged naturally through your participant's own volition. A better way to probe and open up the conversation would be, "So, tell me more about what was good. What do you mean by 'good'?" You then hope that the notion of home, perhaps through metaphors, will come up in the conversation. If it doesn't, it might be time to rethink your conceptualization or figure out why this particular person does not invoke home, despite existing theories about third places.

At other times, you will try too hard to be on your participant's side because you want to maintain rapport. You can still make empathic statements without reflexively agreeing with your participants or putting words into their mouths. For example, instead of "I completely understand how you feel when your favorite café closes" (which closes down the dialogue, and also is presumptuous), say something like, "You said you were disappointed with the closure of your favorite café. Can you tell me more about this disappointment?"

Also note that during interviews, there will be silences (unless you are living in a *Gilmore Girls* episode). You can deal with a silence by seeking to understand its meaning, assessing whether it is just a pause in the conversation for a little break, or whether your participant is bored, frustrated, in pain, disinterested, tired, confused, or upset. Silence can also be effectively used as a probe; waiting a few seconds while looking confused or curious might encourage your participants to elaborate (Belk et al. 2013; Berg and Lune 2012). Be aware of body language—yours and theirs. Note, also, that silence is data (Poland and Pederson 1998). Sometimes silences are opportunities to redirect the conversation from the awkward or inappropriate to a new and more fruitful direction. Once in a while, you will also meet a participant who, despite all your efforts, is not opening up. Unless you think there is a particular problem with the way you are conducting the interview (such as your implied power positionality with respect to your participant, or your inadvertent use of words that intimidate, disturb, or offend them), let it go. Some people find it uncomfortable or unnecessary to express themselves in long, quotable sentences that academics love. Accept this, and move on to the next participant.

Lastly, end every interview with "Is there anything I have not asked regarding your experiences that you'd like to tell me?" This will give the participant an opportunity to raise issues that you might not have considered yourself. Some of my own interviews took a new turn after this question and added upward of an hour of unforeseen dialogue that deepened and enriched my understanding of my participants' experiences.

Step 4: Iterate

Once you have finished interviewing your participant, it is time to reflect back on your experience before moving on to the next interview. Did all questions work as expected, or did you face a disinterested person who didn't care about your questions or didn't know what you were trying to get at? Maybe it is time to rethink your questions or their wording. Is there anything unusual, unexpected, or contradictory in your participant's narratives? This is nothing to be alarmed about; in fact, most interesting findings start to emerge when your participants are not telling you what you thought they would. Consider this an opportunity to revise your interpretations and rethink your question. Position your interview in your whole data set, and reflect on how all the puzzle pieces fit now that you have one more. In other words, analyze your new data in light of the existing data set. Repeat until you have an analytically robust, empirically rich, and theoretically original story.

CONCLUSION

My goal for this tutorial was to walk you through one component of the research process, focusing on interview design and execution. While I tried to isolate fundamentals concerning these two skills for pedagogic purposes, remember that the practice of doing qualitative research is not compartmentalized, nor is it sequential. Conceptualization, research design, data collection, data analysis, and theory building are inseparable components that continuously affect each other. At this point, you might also wonder how you are going to analyze all this data. Unfortunately, my mandate ends here. For that I recommend you consult two books I frequently refer to in this tutorial and use in my teaching: one by Belk et al. (2013) and the other by Berg and Lune (2012). These two books are not the sole authorities, of course, but they are both excellent starting points and they include extensive bibliographies for you to discover more resources.

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