

The background of the cover is a photograph of a person walking away from the viewer on a long, narrow wooden pier that stretches into a misty sea. The sky is a soft gradient of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

The In-depth Interview Method

12 Articles on Design & Implementation

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The contents of this compilation include a selection of 12 articles appearing in [Research Design Review](#) from 2012-2019 concerning the in-depth interview method. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that the proper citation is given.

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Distinguishing Between the Research IDI & Everything Else

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 51).

The research in-depth interview (IDI) method has been compared to interviewing styles employed outside of qualitative research—such as the interviews used in



journalism, psychotherapy, and law enforcement—with the assertion that “there are not necessarily hard-and-fast distinctions between these interview forms” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 4). It is true that, in every case, the IDI consists of an interviewer who enters into a one-on-one dialogue with an interviewee in order to discover some aspect of personal information about and from the interviewee. The interviewer is typically in control of the questions that are asked and, when the interviews

are completed, the information is analyzed in order to create a story or narrative that conveys an understanding of some topic of interest. Whether it is an interview with a cancer survivor in a qualitative IDI study, the new city mayor for the local newspaper, a psychotherapist’s request for more details related to the patient’s mood disorder, or a police detective’s interrogation of a crime suspect, the IDI approach is “the method by which the personal is made public” (Denzin, 2001, p. 28) to the researcher and the information is used to convey a story about a person or phenomenon.

The qualitative research IDI does, however, differ from these other forms of interviews in two important aspects: the **goals** of the interview and the interviewing **strategy**. Whereas the goal of the journalist is to gather the facts for a news story, and the psychologist’s objective is to alleviate an individual’s mental suffering, and the police detective interviews witnesses and suspects to eventually gain a confession, the qualitative researcher conducts IDIs to obtain intricate knowledge, from a small number of members in a target population, based on a well-thought-out research design constructed to maximize credible and analyzable outcomes. Research IDIs are ultimately utilized to make changes or improve the lives of the target population as well as other target groups in similar contexts. With divergent interviewing goals, it is no wonder that qualitative researchers employ interviewing strategies that are partially at odds with especially those of the journalist or detective.

Interviewer training in the unique and necessary skills and techniques associated with the IDI method is mandatory. Unlike other variations of the IDI, the interview approach in qualitative research is not inherently combative or confrontational and does not purposely create conflict to provoke the interviewee but rather centers on building a trusting relationship where all input is honored and candid revelations can thrive because it is understood that they will remain confidential unless the interviewee permits them to be disclosed. Indeed, the interviewer–interviewee relationship is the cornerstone of the research IDI, making this one of the most personal of all qualitative research design methods.

There are many distinguishing facets of the IDI method that researchers think about in order to maximize the integrity of their data and the usefulness of the outcomes. A few of the many articles on the subject matter in *Research Design Review* include [“Applying a Quality Framework to the In-depth Interview Method,”](#) [“Rapport & Reflection: The Pivotal Role of Note Taking in In-depth Interview Research,”](#) and [“Designing a Quality In-depth Interview Study: How Many Interviews Are Enough?”](#)

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K. (2001). The reflexive interview and a performative social science. *Qualitative Research*, 1(1), 23–46.

Image captured from: <https://animals.mom.me/distinguishing-characteristics-madagascar-sunset-moth-5375.html>

Strengths & Limitations of the In-depth Interview Method: An Overview

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 56-57).

Strengths

The potential advantages or strengths of the in-depth interview (IDI) method reside in three key areas: (1) the interviewer–interviewee relationship, (2) the interview itself, and (3) the analytical component of the process. The relative closeness of the interviewer–interviewee relationship that is developed in the IDI method potentially increases the credibility of the data by reducing response biases (e.g., distortion in the outcomes due to responses that are considered socially acceptable, such as “I attend church weekly,” acquiescence [i.e., tendency to agree], and satisficing [i.e., providing an easy “don’t know” answer to avoid the extra cognitive burden to carefully think through what is being asked]) and nonresponse, while also increasing question–answer validity (i.e., the interviewee’s correct interpretation of the interviewer’s question).



An additional strength of the IDI method is the flexibility of the interview format, which allows the interviewer to tailor the order in which questions are asked, modify the question wording as appropriate, ask follow-up questions to clarify interviewees’ responses, and use indirect questions (e.g., the use of [projective techniques](#)) to stimulate subconscious opinions or recall. It should be noted, however, that “flexibility” does not mean a willy-nilly approach to interviewing, and, indeed, the interviewer should employ quality measures such as those outlined in [“Applying a Quality Framework to the In-depth Interview Method.”](#)

A third key strength of the IDI method—analyzability of the data—is a byproduct of the interviewer–interviewee relationship and the depth of interviewing techniques, which produce a granularity in the IDI data that is rich in fine details and serves as the basis for deciphering the narrative within each interview. These details also enable researchers to readily identify where they agree or disagree with the meanings of codes and themes associated with specific responses, which

ultimately leads to the identification of themes and connections across interview participants.

Limitations

The IDI method also presents challenges and limitations that deserve the researcher's attention. The most important, from a [Total Quality Framework](#) standpoint, has to do with what is also considered a key strength of the IDI method: the interviewer–interviewee relationship. There are two key aspects of the relationship that can potentially limit (or even undermine) the effectiveness of the IDI method: the interviewer and the social context. The main issue with respect to the interviewer is his/her potential for biasing the information that is gathered. This can happen due to (a) personal characteristics such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, and education (e.g., a 60-year-old Caucasian male interviewer may stifle or skew responses from young, female, African American participants); (b) personal values or beliefs (e.g., an interviewer with strongly held beliefs about global warming and its damaging impact on the environment may “tune out” or misconstrue the comments from interviewees who believe global warming is a myth); and/or (c) other factors (e.g., an interviewer's stereotyping, misinterpreting, and/or presumptions about the interviewee based solely on the interviewee's outward appearance). Any of these characteristics may negatively influence an interviewee's responses to the researcher's questions and/or the accuracy of the interviewer's data gathering. A result of these interviewer effects may be the “difficulty of seeing the people as complex, and . . . a reduction of their humanity to a stereotypical, flat, one-dimensional paradigm” (Krumer-Nevo, 2002, p. 315).

The second key area of concern with the IDI method is related to the broader social context of the relationship, particularly what Kvale (2006) calls the “power dynamics” within the interview environment, characterized by the possibility of “a one-way dialogue” whereby “the interviewer rules the interview” (p. 484). It is important, therefore, for the researcher to carefully consider the social interactions that are integral to the interviewing process and the possible impact these interactions may have on the credibility of an IDI study. For example, the trained interviewer will maximize the social interaction by utilizing positive engagement techniques such as establishing rapport (i.e., being approachable), asking thoughtful questions that indicate the interviewer is listening carefully to the interviewee, and knowing when to stay silent and let the interviewee talk freely.

Krumer-Nevo, M. (2002). The arena of othering: A life-story study with women living in poverty and social marginality. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(3), 303–318.

Kvale, S. (2006). Dominance through interviews and dialogues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(3), 480–500.

Image captured from: <https://upgradedhumans.com/2015/10/21/a-mile-wide-and-an-inch-deep/>

Applying a Quality Framework to the In-depth Interview Method

Please click on the image below to view the presentation that was given on applying the Total Quality Framework to the in-depth interview method.



Designing a Quality In-depth Interview Study: How Many Interviews Are Enough?

Here is a topic that is worthy of more discussion in the research community: What is the optimal number of in-depth interviews to complete in an IDI study? The



appropriate number of interviews to conduct for a face-to-face IDI study needs to be considered at two key moments of time in the research process – the initial research design phase and the phase of field execution. At the initial design stage, the number of IDIs is dictated by four considerations: 1) the breadth, depth,

and nature of the research topic or issue; 2) the hetero- or homogeneity of the population of interest; 3) the level of analysis and interpretation required to meet research objectives; and 4) practical parameters such as the availability and access to interviewees, travel and other logistics associated with conducting face-to-face interviews, as well as the budget or financial resources. These four factors present the researcher with the difficult task of balancing the specific realities of the research components while estimating the optimal number of interviews to conduct. Although the number of required interviews tends to move in direct step with the level of diversity and complexity in the research design, there is little guidance in sample size for the researcher at the planning stage.

The other key moment in time when the researcher considers the adequacy of the sample size is during the field phase when interviews are actually being conducted. This has been the most widely discussed point in time by many researchers because it is then, when in the field, that the optimal number of interviews is determined. Specifically, researchers utilizing [grounded theory](#) (also see Strauss & Corbin, 1994) rely on the notion of “saturation” (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2016; Morse, 2015; Morse, 1995) or the point in time when responses no longer reveal ‘fresh insights’. On this basis, the researcher deems that a sufficient number of interviews have been conducted when no new themes or stark variations in interviewees’ responses are coming to light. There are, however, few guidelines for determining the number of interviews by way of saturation, and some have questioned its value given the lack of transparency (O’Reilly & Parker, 2013).

A more quality approach to the question of how many face-to-face IDIs to conduct considers the design phase as well as results in the field but goes further. For

instance, it is not good enough to simply evaluate interview completions in the field based on the point of saturation. While it is important to determine the degree to which interviews are or are not reaping new meaningful information (see the fourth question, below), there are many other quality concerns that need to be resolved. To assess the number of face-to-face IDIs at the field stage, the researcher needs to more broadly review the quality of the interview completions based on the answers to these eight questions:

- Did every IDI cover every question or issue important to the research?
- Did all interviewees provide clear, unambiguous answers to key questions or issues?
- Does the data answer the research objective?
- To what extent are new ideas, themes, or information emerging from these interviews?
- Can the researcher identify the sources of variations and contradictions in the data?
- Does the data confirm or deny what is already known about the subject matter?
- Does the data tell a story? Does it make sense and does it describe the phenomenon or other subject of the study?
- Are new, unexplored segments or avenues for further research emerging from the data?

From there, the researcher can determine whether additional interviews are justified.

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough?: An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82.

Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Marconi, V. C. (2016). Code Saturation Versus Meaning Saturation: How Many Interviews Are Enough? *Qualitative Health Research*, 1049732316665344.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316665344>

Morse, J. M. (2015). “Data Were Saturated . . . “. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(5), 587–588.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315576699>

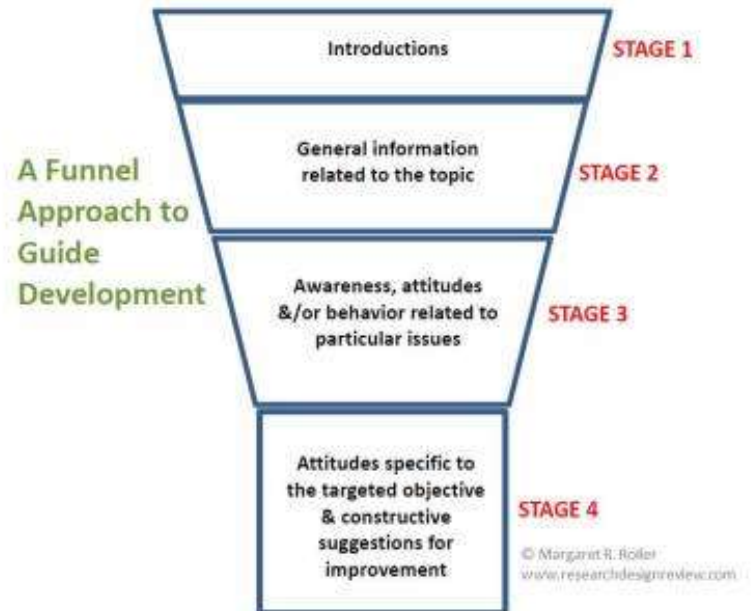
Morse, J. M. (1995). The significance of saturation. *Qualitative Health Research*, 5(3), 147–149.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1474-919X.1947.tb04155.x>

O’Reilly, M., & Parker, N. (2013). “Unsatisfactory saturation”: A critical exploration of the notion of saturated sample sizes in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 13(2), 190–197.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112446106>

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 273–285). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Interview Guide Development: A 4-Stage Funnel Approach

In-depth interviewers and focus group moderators typically work from an outline of relevant topics and questions that guides them through the interview or discussion. The guide is intended to be just that, a *guide*, and not a strict, prescriptive document. With the guide, the ultimate goal is to enable the interviewer or moderator to efficiently incorporate all of the issues that are important to achieving the research objectives. Maintaining clarity throughout the interview or discussion on the related issues is actually a more essential purpose of the guide than the actual questions or follow-up probes it may contain.



The most typical and effective approach in constructing an interview or discussion guide is to begin broadly and progressively narrow the topic area to the subject matter of greatest importance to the research objectives, i.e., a “funnel” approach. The funnel consists of four basic stages.

Stage 1: Introductions

The interviewer or moderator introduces him/herself, briefly explains the purpose of the research, the use of audio/video recording, participant’s anonymity, etc., and allows the participant(s) to comment or ask questions.

The participant(s) introduce themselves by way of answering a few simple questions related to the research objective. For example, in a focus group study with new homeowners, the researcher might ask participants how they picked the home they did and one or two things they love about living there.

Stage 2: General information related to the topic

This stage provides background and context to the topic broadly defined, giving the researcher a necessary perspective from which to pursue certain questioning as well as conduct an informed analysis at the conclusion of the research. In the study

with new homeowners, this stage might include a discussion about their attitudes toward the mortgage loan process.

Stage 3: Awareness, attitudes &/or behavior related to particular issues

At this stage, the interview or discussion begins to home in on the ultimate objective of the research. Now, for instance, the new homeowners might be asked about their recall and attitudes toward the various mortgage documents (the *real* focus of the study) they reviewed and signed during the mortgage process.

Stage 4: Attitudes specific to the targeted objective & constructive suggestions for improvement

Aided by the relevant background and context provided in stages 1-3, the final stage of the funnel approach is when the researcher dives into the true “meat” of the interview or discussion. Using the study with new homeowners, this stage might ask about participants’ reactions to prototypes of re-formatted mortgage documents, asking them to compare these prototypes with those used in their mortgages, and asking for suggestions on how to improve the prototypes in order to better communicate with new borrowers.

A four-stage funnel approach is useful – efficient and effective – in creating one-on-one or group interview guides that lead researchers on a path toward reaching their objectives.

Guide Development & the Integrity of Qualitative Research Data

The funnel four-stage approach to in-depth interview (IDI) and focus group guide development is an effective and efficient method for gaining key insights among qualitative research participants within an allotted time frame. A 2015 article in *Research Design Review* offers a schematic of this approach and outlines the intended purpose associated with each of the four basic stages (see [“Interview Guide Development: A 4-Stage ‘Funnel’ Approach”](#)).



But what exactly does “effective and efficient” mean as it relates to guide development, and why should we care? The answers lie in the fact that a thoughtful funnel approach to guide development enables the researcher to derive quality data from their qualitative research while achieving research objectives and maximizing the ultimate usefulness of the outcomes. By having a clear understanding of what it means to develop an interview or discussion guide that is both effective and efficient, the researcher has added greatly to the integrity of the qualitative research data and design.

There are at least six ways that the funnel four-stage approach to guide development is important to the effectiveness and efficiency of IDI and focus group research. The funnel approach:

- **Mitigates bias.** Progressively moving to the primary topic of interest allows the interviewer/moderator to gather an understanding of perceptions and behavior unblemished by the researcher’s own agenda.
- **Helps identify variations.** The general-to-narrow approach inherently provides the researcher with the necessary fundamental information that is needed to compare and contrast earlier comments with participants’ later remarks. In this way, the interviewer/moderator is able to identify variations in what is being said and conduct the necessary follow-up.

- **Fosters rapport through a friendly flow of conversation.** By beginning the interview or discussion with questions that are general in nature, the interviewer/moderator is facilitating the researcher-participant relationship in a conversational and non-threatening way.
- **Reduces repetition.** The flow of conversation that is grounded in a general-to-narrow method logically circumvents the potential problem of inappropriately repeating the same or similar topic areas or asking redundant questions.
- **Encourages engagement and cooperation.** Just as the funnel approach facilitates rapport building through conversation, it also creates an atmosphere in which participants feel emboldened to engage with the researcher and, in focus groups, with the other participants. This heightened level of cooperation fuels otherwise hidden insights which in turn help to mitigate bias and bolster data quality.
- **Aids in analysis.** By mitigating bias, helping to identify variations in the data, fostering rapport, reducing repetition, and encouraging engagement and cooperation, the funnel approach to guide development ultimately advances data analysis. The analyst is able to discern categories and themes, as well as outliers, in the data in a straightforward way based on well-thought-out transitions in the conversations.

Image capture from: <http://www.modernvillagallery.com/artists-2/sarah-goodnough/>

Consider the Email Interview

The idea of conducting qualitative research interviews by way of asynchronous email messaging seems almost quaint by online research standards. The non-stop evolution of online platforms, that are increasingly loaded with snazzy features that equip the researcher with many of the advantages to face-to-face interviews (e.g., presenting storyboards or new product ideas, and interactivity between interviewer and interviewee), has driven the Web-based solution way beyond the email method and constitutes an important mode option in qualitative research.



The email interview, however, has been taken up by qualitative researchers in various disciplines – most notably, social work, health sciences, and education – with great success. For example, [Judith McCoyd and Toba Kerson](#) report on a study that was ‘serendipitously’ conducted primarily by way of email (although face-to-face and telephone were other mode possibilities). These researchers found that not only did participants in the study – women who had terminated pregnancy after diagnosis of a fetal anomaly – prefer the email mode (they actually *requested* to be interviewed via email) but they were prone to give the researchers long, emotional yet thoughtful responses to interview questions. McCoyd and Kerson state that email responses were typically 3-8 pages longer than what they obtained from similar face-to-face interviews and 6-12 pages longer than a comparable telephone interview. The sensitivity of the subject matter and the sense of privacy afforded by the communication channel contributed to an outpouring of rich details relevant to the research objectives. [Cheryl Tatano Beck](#) in nursing, as well as [Kaye Stacey](#) and [Jill Vincent](#) who researched professors of mathematics, and others have reported similar results.

Research professionals in sociology, medicine, and education who are utilizing the email approach clearly offer lessons of import to all qualitative researchers. While many researchers may not work on the kinds of issues faced by these social scientists, they are certainly capable (and obligated) to learn design best practices where they find it. In others’ use of email interviewing we learn that, among a list of varied advantages to the email mode, there are three key benefits that rise to the top:

- **Email empowers the interviewee to tell a story.** In a private environment with unlimited freedom to relate their narrative – and where emotions can be expressed freely and the interviewee can cry or laugh or burn with rage without the social pressure of face-to-face contact – the participant is emboldened to share and give details.
- **Email gives the interviewee the opportunity to reflect and edit.** The ability to read and re-read responses to interview questions *before* they are given to the researcher is important to gaining the thoughtful feedback qualitative researchers are after. Mobile research may be great at tapping into in-the-moment behavior but qualitative research is more about understanding how people think. The opportunity email provides for reflection and consideration, in order to get at that thinking, is an important advantage to the mode.
- **Email enables the interviewer to reflect on responses and modify questioning as needed.** The email method not only benefits the interviewee but the interviewer gains the ability to ‘custom fit’ the interview questions based on an interviewee’s response. And, importantly, the interviewer can take useful time to carefully consider the response(s) and calculate the most appropriate follow up.

I hope to read more from qualitative researchers in the future about their use of email interviewing, and to learn their best practices for this Internet-based qualitative research method.

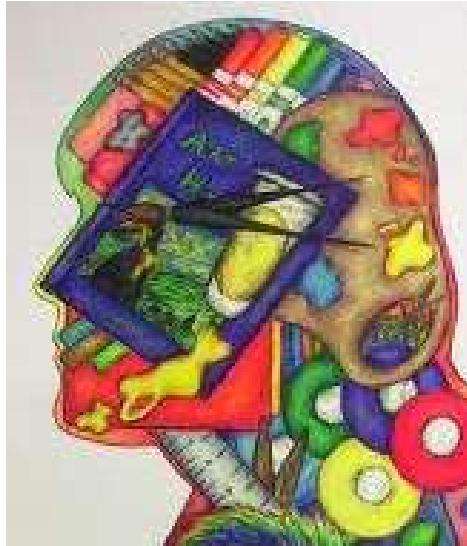
Beck, C. T. (2005). Benefits of participating in Internet interviews: Women helping women. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(3), 411–422. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1049732304270837>

McCoyd, J. L. M., & Kerson, T. S. (2006). Conducting intensive interviews using email: A serendipitous comparative opportunity. *Qualitative Social Work*, 5(3), 389–406. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1473325006067367>

Stacey, K., & Vincent, J. (2011). Evaluation of an electronic interview with multimedia stimulus materials for gaining in-depth responses from professionals. *Qualitative Research*, 11(5), 605–624. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111413237>

Interviewer Bias & Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

Research design of any sort has to grapple with the pesky issue of bias or the potential distortion of research outcomes due to unintended influences from the researcher as well as research participants. This is a particularly critical issue in qualitative research where interviewers (and moderators) take extraordinary efforts to establish strong relationships with their interviewees (and group participants) in order to delve deeply into the subject matter. The importance of considering the implications from undo prejudices in qualitative research was discussed in the April 2011 *Research Design Review* post, “[Visual Cues & Bias in Qualitative Research](#),” which emphasized that “there is clearly much more effort that needs to be made on this



issue.” Reflexivity and, specifically, the reflexive journal is one such effort that addresses the distortions or preconceptions researchers unwittingly introduce in their qualitative designs.

Reflexivity is an important concept because it is directed at the greatest underlying threat to the accuracy of our qualitative research outcomes – that is, the social interaction component of the interviewer-interviewee relationship, or, what Steinar Kvale called, “the asymmetrical power relations of the research interviewer and the interviewed subject” (see “[Dialogue as Oppression and Interview Research](#),” 2002). The act of reflection enables the interviewer to thoughtfully consider this asymmetrical relationship and speculate on the ways the interviewer-interviewee interaction may have been exacerbated by presumptions arising from obvious sources, such as certain demographics (e.g., age, gender, and race), or more subtle cues such as socio-economic status, cultural background, or political orientation. Linda Finlay, in [her 2002 article](#), identifies five ways to go about reflexivity – introspection, inter-subjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique, and discursive deconstruction – and discusses utilizing these techniques in order to understand the interviewer’s role in the interview context and how to use this knowledge to “enhance the trustworthiness, transparency, and accountability of their research.” An awareness of misperceptions through reflexivity enables the interviewer to design specific questions for the interviewee that help inform and clarify the interviewer’s understanding of the outcomes.

It is for this reason that a reflexive journal, where the interviewer logs the details of how he or she may have influenced the results of each interview, should be part of a qualitative research design. This journal or diary sensitizes the interviewer to his or her prejudices and subjectivities, while more fully informing the researcher on the impact of these influences on the credibility of the research outcomes. The reflexive journal not only serves as a key contributor to the final analyses but also enriches the overall study design by providing a documented first-hand account of interviewer bias and the preconceptions that may have negatively influenced the findings. In this manner, the reader of the final research report can assess any concerns about objectivity and interpretations of outcomes.

Reflexivity, along with the reflexive journal, is just one way that our qualitative research designs can address the bias that most assuredly permeates the socially-dependent nature of qualitative research. Introspective reflexivity – along with [peer debriefing](#) and [triangulation](#) – add considerably to the credibility and usefulness of our qualitative research.

Rapport & Reflection: The Pivotal Role of Note Taking in In-depth Interview Research

Note taking is fundamental to the in-depth interviewing process and an essential interviewer skill. And yet note taking – e.g., why note taking is important, how to take notes, and how to use notes from a completed interview – does not get much attention. Note taking is important – actually, *critical* – to the in-depth interview method because it is about much more than jotting down a participant’s comments and responses to the interviewer’s questions.



In fact, an effective note taker is a more effective interviewer. This is because

- Taking notes during an interview helps to focus the interviewer’s attention on the participant’s point of view and lived experience relevant to the research question.
- Taking notes helps the interviewer internalize what is being said by the participant which in turn helps the interviewer identify seemingly contradictory statements and follow up on new, insightful topic areas that may not appear on the interview guide.
- The interviewer’s heightened focused attention and internalization helps to build rapport and enhances the participant-researcher relationship.
- The interviewer can add sidebar notations while taking notes that add context to what is being discussed or remind the interviewer to follow up on a particular comment.
- Taking notes allows the interviewer to identify and flag important quotes made by the participant in the moment when the contextual import of participant’s statements can be fully appreciated and noted.

An effective note taker is also better equipped to conduct meaningful analyses of the data, leading to useful outcomes. This is because

- The notes serve as an immediate resource for reflection: 1) during the interview – when the interviewer can flip back and forth to consider the participant’s earlier comments and ask for clarification as the need arises to fully comprehend and better analyze the participant’s point of view – and 2) at the completion of the interview – when the interviewer can quietly review the interview notes and add any informative annotations that will aid analysis.
- The interviewer can use the notes from each interview to record the participant’s attitudes and behavior related to each primary and secondary research question. Ideally, this should be done within an hour of the interview completion and by way of a spreadsheet of some kind, where the columns consist of key research questions and the rows contain input from each participant. This format allows the researcher to quickly capture interview data when it is fresh on the mind as well as easily review and analyze the data within and across participants.

Importantly, the note taking discussed here pertains to notes *written by hand* (pen [or [Echo smartpen](#)] on paper) in contrast to taking notes with an electronic device. Research has shown that the use of laptops (for example) is great at creating large volumes of notes (with lots of verbatims) but it also encourages a “mindless” transcription rather than a meaningful engagement with the material. Indeed, [as reported in this research](#), individuals who wrote their notes by hand demonstrated “a stronger conceptual understanding and were more successful in applying and integrating the material” compared to those who took notes with their laptops.

Handwritten note taking compels the interviewer to fully engage with the participant and fosters highly reflective behavior in the researcher. You might say that, in this way, note taking helps to maintain the all-important participant-researcher relationship throughout data collection and analysis; a relationship that can be too easily lost when utilizing more mechanical processes such as the reliance on audio recordings and data transcripts.

Image captured from: <https://www.skipprichard.com/power-handwritten-note/>

In-depth Interviewer Effects: Mitigating Interviewer Bias

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 83-84).

The outcome of a qualitative in-depth interview (IDI) study, regardless of mode, is greatly affected by the interviewer's conscious or unconscious influence within the



context of the IDIs—that is, the absence or presence of interviewer bias. The interviewer's demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race), physical appearance in face-to-face IDIs (e.g., manner of dress), voice in face-to-face and telephone IDIs (e.g., a regional accent), and personal values or presumptions are all potential triggers that may elicit false or inaccurate responses from interviewees. For example, imagine that an IDI study is being conducted with a group of public school teachers who are known to harbor negative feelings toward the district's superintendent but who express ambivalent attitudes in the interviews as the result of the interviewers' inappropriate interjection of their own personal positive opinions. In this way, the interviewers have

caused the findings to be biased. In order to minimize this potential source of distortion in the data, the researcher can incorporate a number of quality enhancement measures into the IDI study design and interview protocol:

- The IDI researcher should conduct a **pretest phase** during which each interviewer practices the interview and learns to anticipate what Sands and Krumer-Nevo (2006) call “master narratives” (i.e., the interviewer's own predispositions) as well as “shocks” that may emerge from interviewees' responses. Such an awareness of one's own predispositions as an interviewer and possible responses from interviewees that might otherwise “jolt” the interviewer will more likely facilitate an uninterrupted interview that can smoothly diverge into other appropriate lines of questioning when the time presents itself. In this manner, the interviewer can build and maintain strong rapport with the interviewee as well as anticipate areas within the interview that might bias the outcome.

For example, Sands and Krumer-Nevo (2006) relate the story of a particular interview in a study among youth who, prior to the study, had been involved in drug use and other criminal behavior. Yami, the interviewer, approached one of the interviews with certain assumptions concerning the interviewee's educational background and, specifically, the idea that a low-level education most likely contributed to the youth's illicit activities. Because of these stereotypical expectations, Yami entered the interview with the goal of linking the interviewee's "past school failures" to his current behavior and was not prepared for a line of questioning that was not aimed at making this connection. As a result of her predisposition, Yami failed to acknowledge and question the interviewee when he talked about being a "shy, lonely boy" and, consequently, stifled the life story that the interviewee was trying to tell her.

- The interviewer should use **follow-up and probing questions** to encourage the interviewee to elaborate on a response (e.g., "Can you tell me more about the last time the other students harassed you at school?"), but not in a manner that could be perceived as seeking any particular "approved" substantive response.
- Using a **[reflexive journal](#)** is an important and necessary feature of an IDI study design. This device enhances the credibility of the research by ensuring that each interviewer keeps a record of his/her experiences in the field and how he or she may have biased interview outcomes. The interviewer reflects carefully after each completed IDI and records how he or she may have distorted the information gathered in the interview (inadvertent as it may have been) and how the interviewee's behavior and other factors may have contributed to this bias. This "reflexive objectivity" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) helps the interviewer gain "sensitivity about one's [own] prejudices, one's subjectivity" (p. 278) and consider the impact of these influences on the credibility of the data. This objectivity might also reflect on any personal characteristics of the interviewer (e.g., voice parameters, personality traits, demographics) that affected the interview and resulted in unintended variation across all IDIs. By way of the reflexive journal, the research is enriched with a documented firsthand account of any interviewer bias or presumptions as well as variations in the interviewer's handling of interviews throughout the study.

- A reflexive journal can also be used in **the triangulation of interview data**. From a [Total Quality Framework](#) perspective, a best practice is to have an impartial research team member review the audio or video recordings from one or more IDIs to identify how and under what circumstance the interviewer may have biased interviewees' responses. In turn, this review can be used in cross-reference with the interviewer's reflexive journal and discussed with the interviewer to help him/her better understand lapses in self-awareness. This journal also becomes an important component of the study's audit trail and a tool in the final data analysis and interpretation.

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sands, R. G., & Krumer-Nevo, M. (2006). Interview shocks and shockwaves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(5), 950–971. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406288623>

Image captured from: <http://www.jeannievodden.com/light-effects-11-x-15-c2009/>

The Interviewee's Role in the Qualitative Interview: Interpreter or Reporter?

In all sorts of research it is common to ask not only about behavior – When did you first begin smoking cigarettes? How often do you take a multivitamin? Where did you go on your most recent vacation? – but also the “why”* and/or “what” questions – What prompted you to start smoking? Why do you take a multivitamin? Why did you pick that particular spot for your most recent vacation? It is usual for the researcher to want to know more than just what happened. The researcher’s goal is typically to go beyond behavior, with a keen interest in getting to the *thinking* that can be linked with the behavior. It is this “probing” that enables the researcher to make associations and otherwise interpret – give meaning to – the data.



This is, after all, what keeps marketing researchers up at night. It is difficult to remember a time when marketing researchers were *not* obsessed with the reasons people buy certain products/services and not others. Whether rational or irrational, conscious or not conscious, or the result of “slow” or “fast thinking,” marketing researchers have always been gold diggers searching for the psychological nuggets that *motivate* one (buying) behavior over another.

Researchers – and, especially, *qualitative* researchers – in all disciplines are interested in what lies beyond behavior. The educational researcher, for example, does more than simply correlate test scores with teaching methods but delves – on a student level – into why some teaching methods work better than others. The qualitative sociologist is not interested in looking at the incidence of domestic violence without also gaining the victims’ personal narratives that ultimately serve to shape the researcher’s analysis. Psychologists may conduct experiments to assess the factors most associated with levels of stress, but it is the underlying emotional connections within each individual that give meaning to experimental outcomes.

It is common, therefore, for the researcher to be interpreting, making sense of, qualitative data that is packed with participants’ own thoughts (own *analysis*) of their behavior. It is by analyzing participants’ own account – e.g., associated with

their purchase behavior, their response to certain teaching methods, or their victimization – that researchers form broader interpretations of the data.

And yet, a case can be made for limiting participants in a qualitative interview to strictly descriptive narrative – this is what happened, this is what happened next, ... – and actually stifling their speculation or elaboration on the whys and wherefores of their experiences. [Karin Olson](#), a professor of nursing at the University of Alberta, presented a webinar on February 11, 2015 in which she talks about [“Interviewing in the Context of Qualitative Research.”](#) Among other things, Dr. Olson stresses the importance of *not* allowing interviewees to self-assess or interpret their experiences; prescribing instead that interviewers lead interviewees down a purely descriptive path whereby the focus is on recounting “instances of the experience.” In fact, when “deciding whom to interview,” Dr. Olson identifies five characteristics of the “ideal informant,” one of which is “non-analytic.” A non-analytic participant, according to Dr. Olson, is someone who “is able to focus just on description and not on analysis,” leaving it to the researcher (not the participant) to “answer the ‘why’ question.”

The research objective of any particular qualitative study will dictate what, and how much, is asked of participants. In the case of research with hospital patients, for instance, the objective may be to record the experiences of people who have undergone a form of therapy to treat a specific type of cancer. The researcher here is interested in the consequences of therapy (e.g., level of fatigue), not necessarily the patients’ assessments of what contributed to these “instances of experience” resulting from therapeutic treatment.

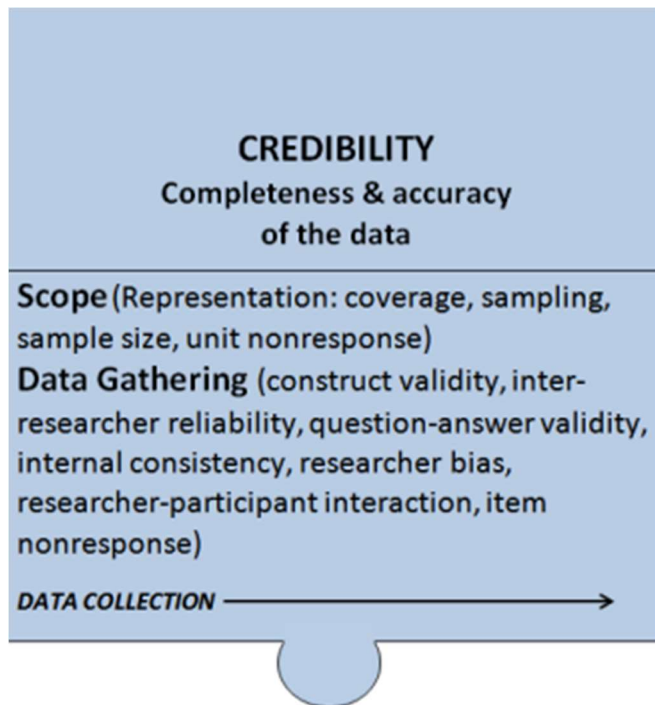
So, while the interpretation of qualitative data is often a joint venture, where both participants and researchers have a say on why participants think a particular way or behave as they do, there are times when qualitative researchers want interviewees to act as reporters, describing “just the facts” from which the researcher can draw relevant interpretations.

* For a discussion of the “why” question, [see this RDR article](#).

Image captured from: <http://blog.a-b-c.com/2014/07/15/just-the-facts-maam>

Applying the TQF Credibility Component: An IDI Case Study

The [Total Quality Framework](#) (TQF) is an approach to qualitative research design that integrates quality principles without stifling the [fundamental and unique](#)



[attributes of qualitative research](#). In so doing, the TQF helps qualitative researchers develop critical thinking skills by showing them how to give explicit attention to quality issues related to conceptualization, implementation, analysis, and reporting.

The following case study offers an example of how many of the concerns of the Credibility (or data collection) component of the TQF were applied to an in-depth interview (IDI) study conducted by [Roller Research](#). This case study can be read in its entirety in [Roller & Lavrakas](#) (2015, pp. 100-103).

Scope

This study was conducted for a large provider of information services associated with nonprofit organizations based in the U.S. The purpose was to investigate the information needs among current and former users of these information services in order to facilitate the development of “cutting edge” service concepts.

Eighty-six (86) IDIs were conducted among individuals within various grant-making and philanthropic organizations (e.g., private foundations, public charities, and education institutions) who are responsible for the decision to purchase and utilize these information services.

There were two important **considerations in choosing to complete 86 interviews**: (a) the required level of analysis – it was important to be able to analyze the data by the various types of organizations, and (b) practical considerations – the available budget (how much money there was to spend on the research) and time restrictions (the research findings were to be presented at an upcoming board

meeting). In terms of mode, 28 IDIs were conducted with the largest, most complex users of these information services, while the remaining 58 interviews were conducted on the telephone.

Participants were **stratified** by type, size, and geographic location and then selected on an ***n*th-name basis** across the entire lists of users and former users provided by the research sponsor.

A high degree of **cooperation** was achieved during the recruitment process by way of:

- A preliminary letter sent to all sample members.
- Identification of the research sponsor (whose positive reputation strengthened the credibility of the research).
- A non-monetary incentive consisting of a summary of the research findings, which was highly desired by participants given their interest in knowing how others were using nonprofit information as well as others' reactions to several proposed concepts that were presented during the interviews.
- Utilizing one professional executive recruiter who was highly trained on how to gain access to and cooperation from decision makers. This recruiter shared office space with the researcher to facilitate a close interaction to discuss the scheduling needs of potential interviewees and work out ways to meet these needs to their satisfaction.
- Flexible scheduling, e.g., in-person interviewees were allowed to choose a location for the interview without restrictions, and all interviewees were permitted to select any time – day or night, week day or weekend – for the interview.

Data Gathering

The researcher/interviewer, with over 30 years of professional experience, developed the interview guide and completed all 86 IDIs. The **validity and accuracy** of the research results were maximized by:

- Meeting with various managers within the sponsoring organization who had a vested interest in the outcome of the research – e.g., the president and CFO as well as the directors of research, programs, and communications – in order to gain a clear understanding of the research objectives and the constructs to measure.

- Learning as much as possible about the category via websites and literature particular to competitive providers of similar nonprofit information, how organizations use this information, and background details on each of the organizations that were included in the sample.
- Reviewing and deliberating with the sponsoring organization on multiple drafts of the interview guide for both the in-person and telephone IDIs.
- Organizing the interview guide as a “funnel,” moving from broad to narrow topics.
- Prioritizing topics so that the issues of most importance to the research objectives were consistently discussed in every IDI – e.g., opinions concerning other types of information providers and the usability of specific features on the research sponsor’s website.
- Ensuring that each interviewee was a qualified participant. For instance, making a concerted effort during recruitment to track down the person within each organization that met all screener requirements including being the decision maker and user of nonprofit information.
- Scheduling IDIs at least two to three hours apart so the interviewer did not rush the interviews and allowed the interviewees to talk beyond the 45-minute time commitment (some in-person IDIs ran up to two hours and some telephone IDIs ran an hour or more).
- Building rapport with interviewees early in the process by way of emailing and telephoning recruited individuals to confirm the interview appointment and introduce the interviewer, along with providing contact information for the interviewee to use in order to request a change in the schedule or otherwise communicate with the interviewer. The interviewer also encouraged interviewees to ask questions about the research before, during, and after the IDI.
- Emphasizing at the onset of each interview that, even though the client was openly acknowledged as the sponsor of the research, the interviewee’s candid opinions were essential to the success of the study. The interviewer reminded interviewees that she was not affiliated with the sponsoring organization and she had no vested interest in the research outcomes beyond the quality of the data, analysis, and reporting.
- Maintaining an informal reflexive journal in which the interviewer recorded her thoughts and observations of her conduct and that of her participants.

[Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. \(2015\). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.](#)