Where to Start? A Research Design and In-depth Interviews Toolkit

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This handout provides an overview of the tools and skills required for social science researchers to design and conduct in-depth interviewing. It will outline and explain the epistemological approaches of different methodological tools, guide through the process of interview protocol development with a focus on elite interviews, discuss ethics and common practice in the field, and introduce the concepts of reflexivity and positionality. This practical guide aims to equip researchers with the necessary concepts to develop and engage rigorous qualitative research.

Introduction

Where to start? When thinking about doing empirical research, probably the first obstacle every researcher faces is exactly the one of where to start. It is admittedly hard to have an overview of the entire research project while having to pick the first single task to complete in order to move forward.

With this consideration in mind, this paper is aims to be a short practical guide to novice and experienced researchers alike. Whether you are a research assistant, someone who needs a refresher on interviews or a quantitative researcher wanting to find out what interview ought to understand, this guide was written for you.

In what follows I will discuss how to tho think about conducting empirical research, why it matters, how different research designs answer different research questions, and, ultimately, how to implement this in the field.

This discussion stands on the assumption that study implementation as well as data collection and analysis should build upon an understanding of what each specific research design can or cannot study. In other words, to get a bit closer to the truth, to what we actually want to understand, we need to grasp how methods work and serve our specific research questions, or aspects of the same reserach question. Going back to the "where to start question?", this document will not provide readers with an answer, but will equip them the tools to ask necessary questions *before* you start.

In my discussion, I draw from the material developed by Dr Eleanor Knott, Dr Raphael Susewind, and Dr Aliya Rao, who teach introductory courses for qualitative methods at the London School of Economics and Political Science. I also draw from my personal experience interviewing and conducting focus groups in England and Italy. Throughout this handout, I discuss how I will apply these concepts and tools to my upcoming fieldwork in Austria. This will serve both as an illustrative example and as a reflective journal for this part of my fieldwork, where I will interview public officials and citizens to understand the relationship between compulsory civil service and citizens' attitudes.

Lastly, I want to clarify that this handout and this project take a positivist approach to interviews. This means that I use interviews to test hypotheses. In practice, positivist approaches build upon theories of how the world works and collect evidence to check their rigour. Under a positivist approach, we basically build on the assumption, we believe, that there is some ground truth in the world, and that with social science inquiry, we can get closer and closer to this truth.

How to think about interviews in the social sciences

One can think of many different ways and types of interviews we encounter in our daily life. From the interview of a Member of Parliament on the BBC, to the talk you have with Human Resources before getting a job, and the doctor or therapist trying to elicit, to understand, what is going on with a patient. Ultimately, interviews are just a very specific type of conversation where the interviewer is trying to get, understand, acquire something from the interviewee.

Apart from this common objective, different interviews have very different characteristics and serve very different audiences. Here we focus on social sciences interviews, namely interviews that help us understand the social world. How people think, what they think about, and why they do what they do.

More broadly, interviews help to get an understanding of facts, events, beliefs, values, experiences, decision making, life histories, thinking, processes, significance and meaning. These are just some of the questions we can answer with interviews, but, in my experience, they are by far the most common, interesting and informative types of questions you can answer with interviews.

Interviews in a social sciences research design serve mainly two purposes:

1. **Exploratory** - they help you explore the field, understanding and getting to know what you don't know yet about a case and make educated guesses about what is going on. They also help researchers to form and test hypotheses. This is a "hypothesis generation" function of interviews.
2. **Explanatory** - as a corollary of this first proposition, interviews help explain things, understand what is actually going on under the surface. Interviews in mixed methods studies can be used to identify *mechanisms* leading to specific outcomes.

In other words, interviews answer the WHAT, WHY and HOW questions.

In the case of my upcoming fieldwork in Austria, interviews will serve to first **explore** how this service works and how people think about it, what their opinion is, and second to help me make an educated guess about the relationship between this service and respondents' opinions, or put more simply, help me **explain** the relationship between taking part to this service and respondents' opinions.

The following quantitative part (representative survey) will help me estimate and measure the entity of this relationship. Quantitative methods, by definition, have to do with quantities and, more often than not, answer TO WHAT EXTENT and HOW MUCH questions.

In practice these two methods, interviews and the survey, answer two very different yet interrelated sets of questions.

That considered, it is important to keep in mind that interviews yield specific types of data, mostly subjective accounts of people's lives, individual/subjective experiences and perspectives, and what people do in specific situations. In other words, people do not always tell you what they think, or what they think is not always an accurate portrayal of reality in general, but it is a portrait of their reality in particular.[1]

This entails that we need to be mindful about which questions to ask, careful with the answers respondents provide, and critical in interpreting the data that is elicited through interviews.

What we can learn from interviews

As researchers navigate the unpredictable world of in-depth interviews, they inevitably encounter a common issue: reassuring interviewees that their experiences hold value. Eventually, every researcher will face interviewees' legitimate concern that their insights may not be representative enough. This taps into a larger debate in qualitative research about producing findings that extend beyond the single study, namely generalisability (DeLuca, 2022). At the heart of this debate lies the question of whether and to what extent qualitative researchers should adopt some of the basic principles of quantitative research in establishing standards of evidence. How can qualitative research be representative? How can findings of a small-n sample be generalisable? Understanding the perils and limitations of these questions as evaluation criteria for qualitative research is crucial for advancing and innovating the field.

Although generalisability has been a critical criterion in evaluating social science studies, its relevance for qualitative research is stagnant and hinders the development of the field. Qualitative studies in general, and interviews in particular, are not generalisable and should not aim to be. Research evaluation criteria should always be epistemologically compatible with the method adopted. The strength of in-depth interviews lies in their unique ability to capture

[1] As Aliya Rao recalls from her work on unemployment and hosuehold dynamics, none of the unemployed people she interviewed ever claimed that they were fired because they were bad at their job (and she interviewed over 50 people).

the nuances and context-dependent nature of human experiences, which are not reducible to generalisation standards.

In this sense, it is impossible to design a qualitative study that uncovers the perspective of the average person because this person simply does not exist. To be sure, quantitative studies adopt large samples to account for variation and ensure representativeness, which allows them to make claims about the "average working-class folk". The characteristics of this individual are nothing more than the weighted average of the many different values of all the observations, which, however, do not guarantee nor entail their exact existence in the population. This makes the objective of studying the "average working-class folk" in a small-n sample utterly unfeasible, because the "average working-class folk" does not exist. In the quest to interview the average British student, I often found myself wondering whether their perspective and experience would be "the commonly shared one" or "the representative one". And when faced with the fateful sentence "I am not like most British people", I could not help but feel a sense of defeat in realising that I set myself an absolutely unachievable task. Attempting to make qualitative work statistically representative is a futile endeavour, as large sample sizes, by design, will always prevail (Small, Forthcoming).

According to Small (2009), instead of trying to fit words into numbers and quantify their work, qualitative social scientists should try to define better suited epistemological assumptions. A suitable alternative is to design and conceptualise their studies as a set of subsequent cases to achieve saturation. According to Yin (2002), qualitative research should proceed sequentially to allow each case to provide an increasingly accurate understanding of the question at hand. This design enables researchers to refine their lines of inquiry through an iterative process, building the foundations of the research on interactions with interviewees and prioritising logical inference over statistical inference.

Who to interview

Once we understand what we can and cannot learn from interviews, whom do we interview and how many of them?

We first start by clearly defining your population or social group of interest. This involves establishing:

- **Inclusion criteria**: What characteristics must participants have to be relevant to your research question? [2]
- **Exclusion criteria**: What factors would make someone unsuitable for your study? [3]

[2] In the case of Austria it would be people that live in this particular region and are related to the compulsory civil service in some ways: they live in towns where it's implemented, they take part to the service etc.

[3] For the exploratory part of this study we will exclude people that don't take part in the service or live in towns where the service is not implemented. For the explanatory part of the fieldwork, I will also include people who don't do the service to understand the key differences and similarities between these two populations

Once we have assessed whom we need, how do we recruit them? Following the most common types of sampling in social science research:

Purposive sampling involves selecting only participants who can provide rich insights directly related to your phenomenon of interest.

Convenience sampling involves using existing networks and contacts. Whilst practical, be aware of potential biases this introduces.

Snowball sampling works particularly well for 'hard to reach' groups, where participants help you identify others with relevant experiences.

Stratified/quota sampling may be useful for larger qualitative projects where you want to ensure representation across key characteristics.

Random sampling is generally neither possible nor desirable in qualitative research, as our aim is depth and insight rather than statistical representativeness.

Remember: The aim is not empirical representativeness of a population, but **theoretical insight** - how does your sample of participants help us understand broader phenomena beyond the specific sample? What is your sample a case of?[4]

As Patton (2002: 244) notes, 'there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry.' Sample size depends on:

- What you want to know about the topic and population
- Available resources and duration of interviews
- Diversity of responses expected
- Whether comparisons are to be made
- What will satisfy mentors, peers, readers, and forestall critics

The key concept is saturation - conducting enough interviews until you're not discovering anything fundamentally new. This is challenging because it requires you to collect and analyse data simultaneously.

You may be reaching saturation when: - You can predict what participants will say before starting new interviews - No new themes are emerging from your data - You have sufficient diversity along characteristics important for your study - You've thoroughly explored the concepts, norms, or themes you're identifying

Important: The narrower your sample focus, the easier it is to reach saturation. The more diversity you seek, the more interviews you'll need.

[4] Speaking about Austria, what can we learn from this specific context about civic actions and public opnion in general

Typical range: 12-25 interviews for most qualitative studies[5]

What matters most is your **ability to build a convincing narrative based on rich detail and complexity** rather than hitting a specific number.

Important: Sampling in qualitative research is iterative. You'll adjust your approach along the way as you learn more about your topic and participants.

Reminder: You should always disclose if you are interviewing someone you know personally, as this affects how we interpret your findings.

Interviewing 'Elites'

Who Are the Elites?

Elite participants are "those with disproportionate access to or control over power" (Cousin, Khan, Mears 2018). This broad definition encompasses policy makers and elected officials, corporate executives and CEOs, senior civil servants, military leaders, academic administrators, religious leaders, and media owners and editors. What distinguishes these individuals as 'elite' is not simply their formal positions, but their disproportionate access to knowledge, power, resources, and networks.

Elite status often derives from privileged access to specialised information that others cannot easily obtain, combined with the ability to make decisions that affect large numbers of people. These individuals typically control significant financial, political, or social capital, and maintain extensive connections to other powerful individuals and institutions. Understanding these characteristics is crucial because they shape how elites behave in interview settings and what kinds of information they are willing or able to share.

Unique Challenges When Interviewing Elites

Interviewing elites presents distinct practical and methodological challenges that differ significantly from interviewing other populations. Time constraints are often severe, as elites typically have demanding schedules and may only offer brief windows for interviews. Access itself can be problematic, with multiple gatekeepers such as assistants and PR teams controlling who can reach these individuals and under what circumstances.

The settings for elite interviews often reinforce existing power dynamics. These conversations frequently occur in official spaces like corporate offices or government buildings, where the elite participant feels most comfortable and maintains greatest control. This raises important questions about presentation and power dynamics that researchers must navigate carefully.

[5]The first part of fieldwork in Austria is bounded by resources and time constraints so it will focus on collecting broader and varied information instead of narrow and targeted data or accounts. I want to have a broad vision and picture of what this service entails and how these people perceive it

What should you wear to interview a CEO versus a local council member? How do you present yourself to gain credibility whilst maintaining research independence? These seemingly practical concerns actually reflect deeper questions about how to navigate the inherent power imbalances in these interviews.

The Performance of Authority

Perhaps most significantly, elite interviews often become what we might call "scripted spaces." Many elite participants have practised their answers to common questions numerous times, whether through media training, previous interviews, or internal briefings. They are skilled at delivering well-rehearsed responses and presenting polished, official versions of events. This creates a particular dynamic where the interview becomes less about spontaneous revelation and more about observing a practised performance.

It's worth noting that this scripted quality may be less pronounced amongst smaller-scale elites, such as local mayors in smaller communities, who typically have less media training and fewer formal organisational constraints on their communication. However, even these individuals often operate within established norms about what should and shouldn't be discussed publicly.

One of the most common challenges in elite interviews is encountering what is called the "party line" - official positions that have been shaped by political messaging.

Rather than viewing this as purely a limitation, researchers should consider that the party line itself can be analytically interesting. The key is to focus on how elites present these positions rather than simply what they say. This means paying attention to word choice, emphasis, hesitations, and the logical frameworks they use to justify official positions. Asking for specific examples can help move conversations beyond abstract statements, whilst probing questions like "What was in your mind at the time when this decision was made?" or "Can you walk me through how you arrived at this position?" can reveal the reasoning processes behind public positions.

Elite participants may approach research interviews with considerable wariness, shaped by their experiences with public scrutiny and media attention. In a cultural context where various types of elites, particularly economic elites, face increasing criticism, many may wonder about the researcher's true intentions. They may worry about predetermined agendas, fear misrepresentation based on previous negative experiences with journalists or academics, or feel protective of their organisation's reputation.

Building trust requires demonstrating genuine knowledge of their field and current issues, being transparent about research goals and methods, and showing respect for time constraints through thorough preparation. Offering to share findings or provide summaries of results can help establish the interview as a more reciprocal exchange rather than a one-sided extraction of information.

The Practicalities of Conducting Interviews

Successful interviews depend on establishing what we might call a "working relationship" with participants, focusing on creating a productive dynamic where both you and the participant understand your respective roles and feel comfortable engaging with the research process.

Active listening forms the foundation of this working relationship. This means not just hearing what participants say, but paying attention to how they communicate - their tone, hesitations, emphasis, and body language. This meta-data (data about data) provides crucial insights into how participants feel about topics and how they're experiencing the interview process itself. Are they comfortable? Guarded? Excited about a particular topic? This contextual information becomes part of your analytical material.

Learning to speak the language and lexicon of your interviewees demonstrates respect for their expertise whilst making communication more natural. Participants are experts in your topic from their lived experience, and acknowledging this expertise helps establish the working relationship you need. However, remember that participants are not doing the social analysis for you - you're asking them for specific information about their experiences and knowledge, not for their interpretation of your research questions.

Treating participants with dignity and respect should go without saying, but it's worth emphasising because it affects every aspect of the interview process. This includes being prepared, arriving on time, explaining your research clearly, and honouring commitments about confidentiality and how their information will be used. It also means viewing "mistakes" as learning opportunities rather than failures - both your mistakes and moments when the interview doesn't go as planned can provide valuable insights about your research process and topic.

Understanding Positionality and Interaction

We need to remain constantly aware of how our positionality affects the interview interaction. Who we are - our age, gender, race, class background, institutional affiliation, accent, clothing, and demeanour - shapes how participants perceive us and respond to our questions. Different people will reply differently to the same questions depending on how they interpret our identity and intentions.

This isn't something to eliminate but rather to acknowledge and incorporate into our analysis. A young researcher might get different responses than an older one. A participant might be more guarded with someone they perceive as being from a higher social class. These dynamics don't invalidate the research; they're part of the social context that shapes all human interaction.

Structure and Flow

The structure of your interview guide significantly impacts the quality of information you gather. Keep similar questions together and aim for 3-5 main topics to maintain focus without overwhelming participants. The ordering of topics should flow logically - sometimes this means following a chronological sequence, other times it means moving from less sensitive to more sensitive topics, or from concrete experiences to more abstract reflections.

Good structure helps participants feel comfortable and makes it easier for them to provide thoughtful responses. It also helps you as the interviewer stay organised and ensure you cover all necessary ground whilst remaining flexible enough to follow unexpected but promising directions.

Crafting Effective Questions

The art of qualitative interviewing lies in asking open questions that invite elaboration. Your aim is to enable participants to recount stories and responses in their own words, providing concrete details, vivid descriptions, and their own arguments and interpretations. Think about the best way to access the social phenomena of interest to you - usually this involves asking 'how', 'what', 'why', and 'when' rather than questions that can be answered with simple yes or no responses.

When developing your topic guide, consider your interviewee's point of view. Questions should be concrete, engaging, natural, respectful, and demonstrate genuine interest. They should also be clear and easy to understand. Avoid academic jargon and instead use participants' own language where possible. This often means translating your research questions into more accessible topic guide questions.

For example, rather than asking "What is your perception of organisational culture?", you might ask "Can you tell me about what it's like to work here on a typical day?" or "How would you describe this place to someone who's never been here before?"

Resist the temptation to ask directly for participants' opinions on your research questions. Instead of asking "Do you think social media affects political participation?", ask about their own experiences: "Tell me about how you get political information" or "Walk me through what you did the last time you got involved in a political issue."

Avoid leading questions that suggest the answer you're looking for. Instead of asking "Some people experience discrimination and some don't - what about you?", simply ask "Tell me about your experiences in [relevant context]." Don't provide too much detail about your research focus beforehand, as this can lead participants to offer social analysis rather than personal experience.

Whilst qualitative research primarily uses open-ended questions, remember that you may need some factual information that requires more direct questions. The key is being intentional about when and how you use different question types.

Effective interviewing requires skilful follow-up. One simple but powerful technique is repeating interviewees' words back to them: "You mentioned feeling 'completely invisible' - can you tell me more about what that was like?" This shows you're listening whilst encouraging elaboration.

Ask for specific examples when participants make general statements. If someone says "It's always chaotic here," follow up with "Can you think of a particular time when things felt especially chaotic?" Stories and concrete examples often provide richer data than abstract generalisations.

Allow yourself to follow unexpected leads. If a participant mentions something intriguing that wasn't in your original plan, explore it. Some of the most valuable insights come from these unplanned directions. However, maintain awareness of time and your core research objectives so you don't lose sight of essential topics.

In Austria, I will mostly work with structured and semi-structured interviews, namely the interviews will follow a specific script in order to cover specific topics. This is because, on top of the exploratory and explanatory nature of this part of the fieldwork, I also need to uncover the factual characteristics of this service in any given town.

Important: Formulating questions is also iterative. You'll adjust your approach along the way as you learn more about your topic and participants.

Theory vs. Practice

Remember the distinction between topics and research questions. Your interview topics should focus on participants' experiences and knowledge, whilst your research questions guide your overall analytical framework. Participants provide the raw material - their stories, experiences, and expertise - but the theoretical interpretation remains your responsibility as the researcher.

This means asking participants to share their experiences rather than asking them to theorise about broader social patterns. They are the experts on their own lives and contexts, but you are responsible for connecting their individual accounts to broader analytical frameworks and research questions.

Table 1: Comparison of Basic vs Improved Topic Guide Questions

Basic Topic Guide	**Improved Topic Guide**
Opening	**Opening**

Basic Topic Guide	Improved Topic Guide
What's your name, age, and what do you study?	Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your studies?
Don't you think online learning is much worse than face-to-face?	What's it been like being a student over the past few years?
Experience	**Experience**
How frustrated were you when everything moved online?	Can you take me back to when courses first moved online?
What problems did you encounter? (Give me 5 examples)	How would you describe your online learning experience?
Did you struggle with technology because you're not tech-savvy?	What aspects worked well for you? What was more challenging?
How much did your grades suffer?	Tell me about a typical day of online learning.
I assume you found it isolating—tell me about that loneliness.	How did you stay connected with studies and other people?
Personal Impact	**Academic Impact**
Were you living in unsuitable housing that made studying impossible?	How did online learning affect your studies academically?
How depressed did online learning make you feel?	Were there subjects that worked better or worse online?
Which subjects did you fail during online learning?	How do you feel about your academic progress now?
Wrap-up	**Wrap-up**
Any other complaints about online learning?	Having experienced both, how do you compare online and face-to-face learning?
Should universities never use online learning again?	Is there anything important we haven't covered?

A note on Ethics

Thinking about ethics, is one of the foundational parts of research design and implementation. When we think about our study we always need to reflect about what do "owe" to participants as researchers. Researchers must continually reflect on their duties to participants, grounded in three core principles: respect, justice, and beneficence.

Duty of Care

Researchers have an obligation to prioritize participants' well-being while gathering necessary data. This involves:

- **Navigating sensitive moments**: Balancing the need to collect data with mindfulness of potential trauma. Researchers must be attentive to participants' emotional states and ready to adjust their approach when sensitive topics arise.
- **Managing competing concerns**: Safeguarding approaches depend on context—researchers must balance protection with avoiding patronising attitudes. Consider asking participants what they need while acknowledging your limitations.
- **Acknowledging professional boundaries**: When participants require support beyond the researcher's expertise, acknowledge this openly and clarify that you lack appropriate psychological training to provide therapeutic intervention.
- **Challenging cases**: Even when studying people with hateful ideologies, researchers maintain ethical obligations to participant welfare and duty of care.

Fair Representation

Researchers must ensure empirically grounded representations that accurately reflect participants' experiences, we should never distort participants' lived experience. Fair representation requires asking: Does the data capture their reality? Would participants be able to disagree with what you observed and wrote? Is your representation solidly grounded in empirical evidence? The goal is producing work that participants could reasonably recognize as accurate, even if they might interpret aspects differently.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymisation is the default approach in qualitative research, involving: - Using pseudonyms instead of real names - Obscuring identifying details (location, occupation, specific age) - Abstracting or anonymszing recruitment methods to prevent identification

Confidentiality sets a higher standard—ensuring no one outside the research team can link specific responses to individual participants. This approach isn't always feasible depending on interview study design.

Critiques of anonymisation raise important concerns: - **Lack of transparency**: Readers cannot verify researcher interpretations or check facts independently - **Sole reliance on researcher honesty**: No external verification possible (as argued by Colin Jerolmack) - **Barriers to reproduction**: Anonymisation impedes replication efforts in social science research - **Silencing marginalised voices**: Default anonymity fails to "give voice" to marginalized groups who may want recognition and credit for sharing their stories

Power Dynamics in Interviews

Power imbalances significantly shape researcher-participant relationships and must be carefully considered.

When researchers hold more power (common with vulnerable groups): - Greater access to knowledge and resources - Advantaged positioning within social hierarchies (race, gender, class, caste, nationality) - Superior understanding of how collected data will be used (arguments, representations, policy implications) - Ability to provide incentives that may influence participation

When researchers hold less power (often with elite participants): - Political, economic, or cultural elites may have greater institutional power - Researcher's own social positioning (gender, race, class, nationality, caste) may disadvantage them in the interaction - Elites may control access to information or future research opportunities

These dynamics affect data quality, participant comfort, and ethical obligations throughout the research process.

Conclusion

To circle back to the initial question, *where to start?* This handout has explored how and why we should be asking critical questions about our research before it even begins. What am I trying to find out? Is this the best method for my question? What interview questions should I be asking? How will my positionality shape my interviews? How can I be mindful of my respondents?

Answering these questions won't give you a definitive roadmap for where to start. There isn't just one right way of conducting qualitative research. But working through them will give you the right tools and concepts to start somewhere, or anywhere, with confidence and purpose.