Interviews are a form of qualitative research in which you ask questions with the goal of eliciting as much rich, detailed information as possible from your participants. It is important to note that sometimes people refer to conducting face-to-face surveys as “interviewing” because it’s done in person. This is a misnomer, however, as it bears little resemblance to interviewing. Face-to-face survey “interviewing” is really nothing more than reading a survey aloud to participants and recording their answers for them. Interviewing (sometimes called qualitative interviewing for clarity), however, involves asking questions about complex topics that cannot be reduced to a predetermined set of multiple-choice–type answers. Interviewing is aimed at eliciting lengthy responses and explanations that include extensive detail. Additionally, in face-to-face surveys, it is the researcher who does most of the talking. In interviews, the vast majority of the talking is done by the participant, not the researcher, because it is impossible to get into someone else’s head and understand what they are thinking if you are doing most of the talking! By the term interviews, then, I always mean qualitative interviews.

Qualitative research in general is somewhat less likely to be used in applied ways than is quantitative research, but it can be a helpful tool. When interviewing is used for applied research, it is most typically used for evaluation research, whose purpose is to evaluate a program or policy. Interviewing is particularly appropriate when the program or policy being evaluated has clearly failed to have the desired effects, or when there has suddenly been a drastic or unexpected change in the program’s outcomes, and you want to gain a deep and thorough understanding of why this is so. Interviewing is also sometimes used in conjunction with survey research, so that the interviews are used to help understand the complexities behind the most important, unexpected, or disquieting findings from the quantitative analysis.
Real People, Real Research

Feven Seyoum

Feven Seyoum graduated with her BA in sociology in 2011. She is a case manager for an international foster care program in the state of Washington. She works with children, mainly between the ages of 7 and 12, who have been detained by border patrol when crossing into the country without documentation. When the children are transferred to her program (within 72 hours after detention), Feven conducts semistructured interviews with them (usually in Spanish) about their voyage, the conditions in their home country, and their family in the United States. Of particular importance is creating good rapport with the children, who may have had a terrifying journey and are often afraid to get family members in trouble with Immigration. She takes notes during the interviews and enters them into a computer system that stores them as part of the case notes. Once family members are located, she also interviews them about their ability to care for the child.

Michele Bechard

With an MSW, Michele Bechard is a mediator for the court. She works with families to help mediate child custody agreements when parents separate or divorce. With the children, she conducts loosely structured interviews, and is required by law to remain neutral and avoid leading the children in her questions. She also interviews each of the parents, beginning with loosely structured interviews and then, if the mediation heads toward impasse, switching to more directed semistructured interviews. She may also interview extended family members, therapists, doctors, law enforcement officers, or other people who may have relevant information for the case. She takes notes while conducting the interviews, but for confidentiality, uses a shorthand that others have difficulty deciphering. Because her goal is to reduce conflict and offer solutions, when she writes her report and makes her recommendation, rather than use direct quotations from the interviews, she provides a neutral summary of the most pertinent information. Ultimately, her job is to reduce conflict while determining the custody arrangement that is in the best interest of the children.
Additionally, interview research is sometimes used to put a “face” to survey findings, so that the audience is reminded that the statistics are not just abstract numbers but are based on real people.

There are two predominant types of interviews: semistructured and loosely structured. In **semistructured** interviews, you develop a list of questions in advance that you will ask of all the participants. You may not word the question exactly the same way for each participant, but the questions will basically be the same across all the interviews, although not necessarily always in the same order. You will augment these questions during the interview with many other spontaneous follow-up questions that elicit more information about the participant’s responses (see Box 2.1). New interviewers often choose this form of interviewing because they feel more comfortable having predesigned questions in front of them. It is also the form of interviewing that researchers who primarily engage in or were trained in quantitative research prefer, because it allows them to collect generally the same information from all the participants, making it more standardized, and therefore—to the quantitative mind—more useful.

While semistructured interviewing is a legitimate form of qualitative research, experienced interviewers with a background in qualitative research are more likely to prefer **loosely structured** interviews. In a loosely structured interview, you do not develop a list of interview questions in advance. Rather, you begin the interview by introducing the general topic and asking a starting question. Most all of your other questions will then develop directly from what the participant says (see Box 2.2). It often sounds frightening to the novice researcher to go into an interview without a list of questions on which to rely. Yet remember, it’s what you do in regular conversation all the time: You listen, and then you ask a question based on what the other person has told you. Thus, it feels much more “natural” than a semistructured interview. Unlike natural conversations, however, in loosely structured interviews you usually have a list of general topics that you want to have covered in the interview; therefore, you will occasionally introduce new topics from the list into the conversation. At the end of the interview, you may also consult your list to make sure that all the topics were covered in some way, whether the participant spontaneously discussed the topic or you introduced it. If so, you simply end the interview; if not, you may introduce the remaining topics. Many qualitative researchers prefer this form of interviewing because it is based less on what the interviewer thinks is important to know, allowing the participant to talk about what is most important to them, and this can help the researcher better see the world through the participant’s eyes.
What follows is an excerpt from a student’s interview with a professional working in the juvenile justice system. I have omitted the participant’s responses, but notice that the questions here tend not to depend upon the participant’s answers. In other words, the questions are generally determined in advance, though they may not be worded in the same way or in the same order for each participant, and some follow-up questions are necessary.

Interviewer: Over your career working with juveniles, what have been some of the biggest challenges, specifically working within the system?

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. And then what were some of the challenges you faced working with the juveniles’ parents? I don’t know how much you do of that.

Interviewer: What different types of emotions have you experienced with your job?

Interviewer: Did you ever find yourself getting callous and numb to what you saw?

Interviewer: What aspects of the system do you think are failing to reduce recidivism?

Interviewer: Do you have any specific cases that stuck with you where it was really like, “I guess all the odds were against the kid, and they just failed horribly”?

Interviewer: Do you have any other vivid examples?

Interviewer: I know you already mentioned some of the successes with the system. Do you have any others?

Interviewer: Focusing now on substance abuse, do you think we are succeeding in treating substance abuse?

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the problems that you encounter with some adolescent substance abuse?

Interviewer: How do you personally establish a bond with the kids in your caseload?

Interviewer: The issue of gangs hasn’t really come up yet, but I’d be interested to hear a little bit more about your experiences with it.

Interviewer: What differences do you see between the kids that are associated with gangs and the kids that aren’t? Like . . . do you think there are differences between the two?

Interviewer: So what are your feelings on trying to sentence juveniles as adults?
Chapter 2  Interviewing

Box 2.2  Example of Questions in a Loosely Structured Interview

What follows is an excerpt from a student’s interview with a middle-aged Chicana woman about the cultural messages she received about sexuality. I have omitted the participant’s responses. Contrasting these questions with those of the semistructured interview in Box 2.1, without even knowing what the participant has said, we can see that the interviewer’s questions were not predetermined, but stem directly from the participant’s responses.

Interviewer: Can you describe to me the earliest memory you have where your family began to openly discuss the topic of sex with you?

Interviewer: So while they gave you specific books to look at, they didn’t really engage you in a conversation or try [participant interrupts]...

Interviewer: Okay, so it may have happened?

Interviewer: You mentioned that you’re the youngest of four. Do you think that being the youngest, they did things differently to kind of let you know what was OK and not OK for a girl to do in terms of her sexuality?

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Interviewer: Well, yeah, that’s what I was going to say. It sounded like a celebration of becoming a woman and it sounds like you felt very special, that it meant a lot for you.

Interviewer: And the way that your mother handled it, you know the celebration and making it very, very comfortable for you, do you think that sort of reflected what other families were doing? Or do you think she was a little different?

Interviewer: OK, and how much do you think that’s been an influence on how you feel about sex today?

Interviewer: Can you describe what you’re feeling? Because it sounds pretty intense when the conversation comes up.

Interviewer: And how strongly do you think that reflects the way you were brought up in that they didn’t openly discuss it with you?

For applied research, the loosely structured interview is more beneficial than the semistructured interview because it best helps you reach these goals. If students are failing despite the new tutoring and mentoring that your after-school program has put into place, and you want to understand
why, you will more completely understand if you let the participant lead you to what is important. Their failing grades may have little or nothing to do with what goes on in the classroom or in the after-school program, and instead be related to domestic violence, cultural norms and expectations, lack of proper nutrition, or something else you never considered. But if you assumed that the failing grades were necessarily a by-product of something going on in the classroom, and conducted a semistructured interview focused on this premise, you would entirely miss the important information you were seeking.

**METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative interviewing is most commonly grounded in interpretivist methodology. The interpretivists aim, first and foremost, to understand, as deeply and fully as possible, the world through someone else’s eyes—to know what it feels like to walk in their shoes, and to see and understand the world as they do. You can begin to accomplish this goal by allowing your participants to try to explain to you in as much depth and detail as possible what they have experienced, and how they have thought and felt about it. It is nearly impossible, however, to do so through the use of the “scientific method,” which is cold, detached, and highly structured. If you want your participants to open up and share their innermost thoughts and feelings with you, you have to create a warm and genuine relationship with them, one based on trust. They have to feel that you will not judge them for what they reveal, and that you will try hard to understand things from their perspective, even if you do not share their experiences. Everything about interviewing research, from finding participants to analyzing the data, is grounded in this logic and these fundamental goals. To this end, interviewers usually approach the interview as a collaborative effort. Both the researcher and the participant work together to produce the information: the researcher by asking the relevant and important questions, and the participant by providing honest responses to them. This teamwork-type approach to research leads interpretivists to usually refer to the people who take part in their research as research participants rather than as “respondents” or “subjects,” neither of which connote the trust, genuineness, or collaborative aspects of the interview relationship.

You may have heard that research should always be objective or unbiased. Interpretivists have a different perspective on this. They maintain that all research is biased in some way: Even the topics that the most scientific of researchers deem worthy of investigating come out of a sort of bias. In this context,
bias is any characteristic, experience, knowledge, or attitude that might affect the research you do. Rather than trying to root out all bias in their research, interpretivists instead believe that you should be upfront about your biases and disclose them in your report. For example, if you are a White female researcher investigating the unique issues that face Asian American women as they pursue college degrees, you might reveal this information in your research report, since being White and female will have affected how you interpret the data they have provided you. Bias, according to interpretivists, is unavoidable. Objectivity, on the other hand, means something entirely different. To an interpretivist, to be objective is to put your own views and experiences aside, and to accurately report the views and experiences of the people you are studying, even if you don’t like these views. It is to be open to anything the participant shares and to remain nonjudgmental about it. To the interpretivist, remaining objective (while acknowledging your biases) is the only way to get high-quality data.

When interpretivism is the methodology used, it will, like all methodologies, affect every aspect of the research process. Because among the central aims of interpretivists is understanding the world as others experience it, they ask research questions that seek this sort of understanding. They choose samples in a way that will help them understand very well the experiences of a few people in certain contexts but that don’t aim to generalize that understanding to other people. They don’t worry about bias in sampling or data collection but always try to remain objective (by their definition). They focus all their efforts in data collection in getting as much in-depth, rich data as they can, rather than on getting the same information from every respondent. Additionally, even if two interpretivist researchers analyze the same data, they will come up with different analyses because each will focus on different aspects of the data; in other words, analysis is not cut and dry but allows many interpretations to be made. Finally, interpretivists will judge the quality of research on its depth, honesty, and the richness of the data rather than on how scientifically the research was conducted. In short, every aspect of the research project will be affected by the methodology used because the methodology—in this case, interpretivism—is the philosophy from which the research is conceived.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Interviewing is the best method for understanding meaning, lived experience, and complex emotions and perspectives. It is also particularly good for developing detailed descriptions and for understanding decision-making processes. It is *not* appropriate for studying demographic or social trends, attitudes,
opinions about issues, or concepts that are best measured with numbers or amounts, such as likelihood of voting a particular way, level of self-esteem, or frequency of sexual intercourse. Examples of research questions that are appropriately answered through the use of interviews are provided in Box 2.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Appropriate for Interviews Because It Examines…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do college students decide whether to experiment with drugs?</td>
<td>Decision-making processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do people cope with suicidal thoughts?</td>
<td>Lived experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do young feminists understand gender roles in their romantic heterosexual relationships?</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do butch lesbians come to conceptualize their identities?</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do middle school teachers describe the changes in their classroom experiences after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act?</td>
<td>Detailed description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do siblings of people with cancer perceive family dynamics to have changed after the cancer diagnosis?</td>
<td>Perceptions, complex emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do patients at the North State Free Health Clinic perceive to be the barriers they face to being healthy?</td>
<td>Perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do students perceive their learning experiences in college to have changed after participating in Northern State University’s A’s for Everyone tutoring program?</td>
<td>Perceptions, perceived effects, evaluation research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does power manifest within women’s sexual relationships?</td>
<td>Complex issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do women on welfare explain their own need for assistance as compared to that of other women on welfare?</td>
<td>Perceived causes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note that it is also very difficult to study cause and effect using interviews, since the participant's perceptions of the cause (or effect) of a particular behavior may not actually be the real cause (or effect). For example, we are likely to attribute our success or failure in school to the amount of studying we do, to our personal motivation, or to our level of skill or intelligence. Statistical tests, however, reveal that our race and social class are perhaps more important determinants in our success or failure than are any of these other factors (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, 2002; Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Thus, we don’t always accurately assess cause and effect, even in our own lives. Nonetheless, sometimes as researchers we want to understand how people interpret the causes of their own behavior, or that of other people, because it helps us understand their subsequent decisions. For example, your friend may have left her boyfriend because he is an alcoholic, but if he thinks it’s because she didn’t love him enough, he is unlikely to seek help for his drinking problem. Even if his assessment of the cause of the breakup is inaccurate, however, his perception still has real consequences. Research questions investigating participants’ perceptions of causal relationships must be carefully worded to clarify that the research concerns the participants’ perceptions or understandings of causes or effects, not the actual causes or effects.

**Check Your Understanding**

Write two research questions about relationships with coworkers that are appropriate for interviewing research. One of your questions should be appropriate for basic research, and one for applied research. Make sure both follow these criteria:

- They are answerable and feasible.
- They aren’t answerable with a yes/no or one/two–word answer.
- They cover all aspects of the topic you want to investigate without using subparts or multiple questions.
- They say exactly what you mean and don’t need explanation.
- They are grammatically correct and end in a question mark.

Now write an explanation of why each of these research questions is appropriate for interviewing research.
The process of reviewing the literature for interviews is done in the same way, and for all the same reasons, as when using other research methods. Even though you are conducting qualitative research, in your review it is important to include both qualitative and quantitative research. You should use this research to help you develop and refine your research question. If you will be using a loosely structured format, you will also use the literature to help you generate a list of possible topics to be covered in the interviews. If you will be using a semistructured format, you will use the literature to help you develop your list of interview questions. These can be inspired by the findings of other researchers, from questions asked by other qualitative researchers (you may borrow good questions that they used, for example), and from your critiques of the existing research. You may also find research that has produced results the researchers were unable to explain because the method they were using was not able to do so. For example, let’s say you are interested in how doctors make decisions about how to treat patients based on nonmedical information, such as appearance, apparent intelligence, social class, race, gender, etc. In your review of the literature, there is a study that finds that doctors are less likely to prescribe pain-relieving narcotics to Black patients than to White patients (Associated Press, 2008). The authors imply that this is so because of stereotypes that Black patients are more likely to be drug users. This, however, is just a guess because the researchers used existing statistics (the hospitals’ records) as their method. This allowed them to see racial differences that doctors may have been unlikely to admit to or even realize, but it doesn’t help them know what the doctors were actually thinking when they made these prescription decisions. After reading the article, you might decide to ask the doctors in your sample what factors they take into consideration when prescribing pain medication; specific negative experiences they have had with unknowingly prescribing pain medication when it would have been better not to; how they think race might affect their own prescription decisions; and whether they think the racial disparity occurs at their hospital, and why. In addition to helping you generate topics and interview questions, the literature review should be used to help you generate a list of codes that you will use in your analysis (see the data analysis section later in this chapter).

**ETHICS**

The steps that interview researchers must take to protect their participants are quite extensive. First and foremost, you must get full written informed consent from the participant. To do this, you provide the participant with an informed consent form. The consent form should include information about the purpose of the research, the procedures that will be followed, the risks and benefits of participation, and the participant’s right to refuse or withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. It should also include a description of any procedures that may be considered intrusive, such as the use of sensitive or personal information. The consent form should be written in clear and understandable language, and it should be signed by both the participant and the researcher. Once the participant has signed the consent form, you should keep a copy for your records and make sure the participant has a copy as well.
consent statement that details the research process and all of the steps taken to protect the participant's identity. This statement is fairly standardized and usually includes the following:

- A short, one- or two-sentence description of the research topic, as well as the general areas that will be covered in the interview.
- A statement of who may participate in the research, including all of the qualifications for participation (for example, single mothers over the age of 18 who have never been married).
- A description of how the research will be used (for publication, for presentation to an employer, etc.).
- An estimate of the amount of time, and number of interview sessions, to which the interviewee is agreeing to participate.
- A statement that participation in this research is completely voluntary and that the participant may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty or repercussion. This means that if the participant wants to withdraw their information even after the interview has been analyzed, you must not include it in the final analysis or report.
- If the interview will be audio or video recorded, this must be stated in the informed consent statement. Additionally, the participant is advised that they have the right to have the recording device turned off at any point during the interview and that you will only recommence recording with the participant’s permission. Additionally, you must disclose what you will do with the recordings and transcripts after the completion of your research. (Often, though not always, the recordings are destroyed.)
- A statement advising the participant of their right not to answer any questions they do not wish to answer.
- Notification that the research will be completely confidential, which means that no one other than you will know the identity of the participant. Steps taken to protect the participant’s identity include replacing the participant’s name with a pseudonym (fake name) in the transcripts and in labeling recordings; deleting identifying information (such as hometown, name of high school, name of place of employment, etc.) from the transcripts; if the recordings are kept or backed up on a physical device such as on CDs, keeping them in a locked room or cabinet; password-protecting the electronic recording and transcript files; and keeping no record that links the participant’s name with a pseudonym. Also, the informed consent should identify who, in addition to you, will hear the recordings (such as an advisor, research assistant, or paid transcriptionist) or read the completed transcripts.
• Full disclosure of any potential risks for participating in the research. With interview research, there usually is little to no risk, but sometimes participants may be warned that they may feel some possible emotional discomfort if the interview is likely to include questions about emotional or traumatic events, such as a death in the family, a battle with anorexia, or an act of violence that they have experienced.

• Full disclosure of any immediate benefits to the participants for their participation in the research. Again, in interview research, there usually are none, but occasionally a researcher may provide a small monetary token for participation, or conduct a drawing in which one of the participants in the sample wins a prize.

• Your contact information.

• The contact information for the chair of the governing Institutional Review Board (IRB). The participant needs to be advised that they may contact this person if they feel that any of their rights as a research participant have been violated.

• A statement indicating that the participant has a right to ask additional questions about the research and that these questions will be answered.

Finally, the informed consent statement should have a statement indicating that the participant has read the entire document, that all their questions about the research have been answered, and that they have given their consent to participate in the research. This should be followed by a place for the signature and the date. In all but rare cases, the participant should sign their real name, not the pseudonym, on the informed consent statement.

You should keep the signed consent form in a private and secure location. Additionally, you should give an unsigned copy of the document to the participant so that they not only have a record of their rights, but also the contact information for yourself and the chair of the IRB, should they have further questions. You may see a sample of an informed consent statement in Box 2.4. Of course, it goes without saying that you must not only inform the participant of all of these steps taken to protect them from harm, but also carry through with them. Not doing so is not merely unethical; it also runs the risk of sanctions from the IRB or supporting organization, or a lawsuit from one of the participants.

**Special Considerations**

If a participant is under the age of 18, you must receive informed consent from their parents. Depending on the participant’s age, you may also be required to get the consent of the participant. If you are going to conduct
Chapter 2  Interviewing

You are invited to participate in a study on the classroom experiences of African American men at Big River State University. The purpose of this study is to understand the ways in which African American men perceive their race to affect their experiences as students. You are eligible to participate if you identify yourself as an African American male, are at least 18 years of age, and have been enrolled as a full- or part-time student at BRSU for at least one entire semester. This research is being conducted by Dr. Rita Book, a professor in the Department of Sociology at BRSU. The results of this research will be used for campus and professional presentation, as well as for publication.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will take part in one face-to-face interview lasting between 2 and 3 hours. Approximately 20 participants in all will be interviewed. These interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. I will turn off the recorder at any time if you ask me to do so, and I will not resume recording without your permission.

Your participation in this research is entirely confidential. Your name will not appear on any of the recordings, files, or transcripts. You will choose a fake name, which will be used on the recordings, transcripts, and final report. Any identifying information will be changed or deleted. The only people who will hear your recordings will be myself and a paid transcriber. Transcripts and digital recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer. Backups of the recordings on CD will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, and will be destroyed at the end of the research project.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to ask questions about this study and to have your questions answered. There are no anticipated risks or benefits to you from your participation in this research. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to participate in this study, you have the right to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact me, Dr. Book, at (987) 555-1234, or via e-mail at rbook@brsu.edu. If you feel your rights as a research participant have been violated, you should contact the chair of the Human Subjects in Research Committee at Chico State, Dr. Strict, at (987) 555-5678.

I have read the above and have had all my questions about participation in this study answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary, and that I can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

Signature __________________
Date ________________
research with minors through an organization (such as their school), you will also need to get permission from the head of the organization (in this case, the principal and the school board).

Regardless of the participant’s age, if you ask questions that are likely to yield any information about illegal behavior, you must use extra caution and employ additional steps to protect them, including full disclosure in the informed consent statement about how that information will be used, and what the possible consequences are to the participant for providing you with that information. In rare cases, the recordings, notes, and transcripts of researchers have been subpoenaed in legal cases where the judge has reason to believe that the researcher had information relevant to the case (Rosich, 2005). The bottom line is that the participant should never suffer any harm or negative repercussions for their participation in your research.

Sometimes it becomes clear during the course of an interview that a participant needs some sort of help with issues in their life. For example, a participant may admit to having a physically abusive partner, or to struggling with an addiction that is out of control. These cases are ethically tricky, as you are a researcher, not a trained therapist, and therefore should refrain from acting as such. Nonetheless, it is generally appropriate to offer the person resources that may be able to provide them help, such as information about the local battered women’s shelter or addiction treatment programs. The ethics are more vague, however, about how far to involve yourself in getting the participant help. If she doesn’t have transportation to the shelter, for example, should you offer to drive her? Should you call her to check in on how she is doing, or whether she received the help you recommended? The answers to these questions are unclear, and it is up to you, the researcher, to decide what you think is the most ethical response, while maintaining both personal and professional boundaries.

**Other Ethical Issues**

In addition to protecting the participant from harm, other ethical considerations arise in interview research. For example, you may find yourself interviewing people you do not like, either because you don’t find their personalities agreeable or because they have engaged in behavior of which you disapprove or find to be immoral. Scully and Marolla (1985), for example, interviewed convicted rapists in prison about their motivations for raping women. Pryor (1996) interviewed men who had a history of molesting children. Interpretivist methodology dictates that, even if you find the participants or their behavior abhorrent, you must always treat them with the respect that you would afford
any other research participant. This is the way in which interpretivists remain objective. If a research participant expresses racist or even White Supremacist views during an interview, for example, you don’t have to agree with those views, but you must maintain a nonjudgmental and respectful demeanor, regardless of how judgmental or disrespectful you find the views the person is expressing. Some people may consider it unethical not to raise objections in this situation, but a researcher’s focus is on the ethical treatment of the participant, which takes priority. After all, not only is the participant sharing with you their perspective on the world, but if your goal is to understand the world through their eyes, you have to be willing to accept that they see things differently than you do. To pass judgment or to treat the participant disrespectfully is not only an ethical issue; it will also jeopardize the quality of your data. Would you, after all, continue to reveal your true thoughts to a person you felt was judging you for your beliefs?

A related issue is your portrayal of the participant in your analysis. While you may have learned many things about your participant during the course of the interviews that you find unsavory or even distressing, some researchers feel that portraying participants in the analysis in unflattering or even disparaging ways is unethical. The participant would likely not have agreed to take part in the research if they had known that it would be used to make them (or people like them) look bad. Additionally, unflattering portrayals can have negative effects on the people you have studied, or on groups like them. If your actual participants read the study, it may hurt their feelings or affect their sense of self-esteem. At the very least, it will likely lower others’ opinions of the population you are studying, which can have both intangible and concrete effects on that group. Finally, once you present your results, you have no control over how others will use that information, so a mildly negative portrayal of your participants could get blown into something much more severe. All of that being said, it is at the same time considered unethical to withhold important findings from your research simply because it may be unflattering to your participants. Like many ethical dilemmas, there is no easy solution to this problem, but generally interview researchers try to be honest with their findings, while also avoiding negatively portraying their participants. Sometimes you can do this by focusing not on the behaviors or characteristics that make you uncomfortable, but on the situations, contexts, reactions, or other forces beyond their control that play a role in these behaviors, or by balancing the negatives with other positives that you have learned through the interview as well. Other times you can successfully and ethically negotiate this simply by writing your analysis in a way that shows your respondents as human (and thus as feeling, thinking, and vulnerable), rather than as simple stereotypes or caricatures.
SAMPLING

Because interviews are usually based on interpretivist methodology, your goal as an interviewer is to understand the perspectives of your participants as fully and deeply as possible. In order to do so, you need to use a sampling strategy that will provide you with participants who are willing to share detailed and thorough information with you about what might be fairly private issues. Additionally, this method of research is time-intensive, so you need participants who are willing to spend the time to give you the information you need, and will not just try to get through it as quickly as possible. For these reasons, it is inappropriate to try to randomly choose people to participate in your research. Instead, you need to target people who are interested in, and maybe even excited about, your research. Interview researchers therefore generally use nonprobability sampling, which means that not everyone in the population shares the same chance of being chosen to participate in the research. This will certainly bias your research—those who are interested in or excited about your research are people who may have had particular types of experiences regarding your topic, or who want their perspective to be heard. While such bias can be a serious problem in quantitative research, it is not considered problematic in interpretivist research, because with interviews you will avoid generalizing your findings beyond your sample to a larger population. That is, you must avoid making any claims about anyone outside of your sample. For example, even though you found that the teachers in your study expressed great frustration with having to design their curricula to the standardized tests their students take, you cannot then conclude that this frustration is typical, or even that any teachers outside your study share it. The limitation of this, of course, is that the information you learn is confined to a very small group of people. The benefit is that by not trying to generalize, your sample can be biased without having any negative effects on your study. This is because you are not claiming that these participants are

Check Your Understanding

If you were carrying out research based on your research questions about relationships with coworkers, what are all the things you would need to do to protect your participants? Remember to apply the principles of ethics to each particular case, so that if you are interviewing adolescent employees in the workplace, for example, you will do some things differently than if you are interviewing adults.
in any way representative of other people in the population. Even if you draw a
very unusual sample of highly disgruntled teachers, you will understand the
experiences, frustrations, and perspectives of those disgruntled teachers very
well. It does not mean that you can say anything about any other teachers, but
you have the opportunity to learn a lot about why those particular teachers in
your sample are so terribly unhappy. To the interpretivist researcher, this is in
fact the goal of research, not to try to learn something that applies to everyone
in some sort of unbiased, scientific way.

The logic, therefore, that underlies interview sampling is based neither on
representativeness nor on randomness, as it is for most quantitative research.
Instead, it is based on selecting the people who can best help you answer your
research question. Best always includes the requirement that the participant is
interested in the project and is willing to spend the necessary time with you on
it. The more interested and willing the participant is, the better the data you are
likely to get, so these characteristics are of utmost importance. A majority of
interviewing research, therefore, uses the strategy of calling for volunteers by
posting fliers, placing ads in local newspapers, putting announcements on web-
sites like Craigslist or on a website with substantive content related to your
project, sending out e-mails to related distribution lists, or making announce-
ments to relevant groups and organizations. This is called convenience sam-
pling, because you are not strategically selecting the individuals in your sample
but instead are alerting people of the opportunity to participate and allowing
them to choose you, which is ostensibly a more convenient and expedient way
of sampling. (Most interview researchers have, however, learned that finding
enough appropriate volunteers can require a lot of time and work, as well as a
willingness to be creative in advertising the research.)

Snowball sampling is the other most common sampling method for inter-
view research. Snowball sampling involves recruiting people who participate in
the research and who then recruit other people they know to participate in the
research as well (and who, in turn, might recruit more participants for you).
This method is particularly suitable when the groups of people you want to
have participate are difficult to find or identify, are likely to know others like
themselves, and are unlikely to participate in official organizations through
which you might contact them.

Sometimes it is important to your research question to be selective in your
sampling, in which case you would choose a different, usually somewhat more
difficult, sampling method. Box 2.5 shows some of the possibilities. In fact, there
are over a dozen different nonprobability sampling strategies that are appropri-
ate for interview research, but to avoid getting bogged down in too many defini-
tions, I show only a portion of them to you here. All of these methods are types
of nonprobability sampling. Each of these sampling strategies is also considered to be a type of **purposive sampling** because the participants are *purposely* chosen for a particular reason. For applied interview research, especially evaluation research, it is very important to avoid interviewing only those people who will tell you what you want to hear. For this reason, in applied research you should use purposive sampling, rather than convenience sampling, whenever possible. Of particular use is **maximum variation sampling**, in which you try to recruit a sample with as much diversity of experience and opinion as possible. Although interview research is never representative, seeking maximum diversity in your sample ensures that you take into account the wide variety of experiences likely to be found among this population when making decisions that may have serious consequences to their lives.

**Gatekeepers**

Sometimes in order to gain access to the people in a population to let them know about your study, you need to use a **gatekeeper**. This is a person who is in a position to grant you the access you need to some group of people. It may be

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Chapter 2  Interviewing

Check Your Understanding

If you were sampling for your two interview research projects on relationships with coworkers, which sampling method would you choose for each? Why?

Sample Size

Because interviewing is aimed at understanding the participants’ experiences and perspectives in great depth and detail, and also because you will not try to generalize your findings, the sample size for interviewing is usually relatively
small. The exact size depends on how large the research team conducting the interviews will be, and on how long the interviews run. A lone researcher interviewing participants for approximately 1 hour each will use a larger sample size than the researcher who interviews the same participants over several sessions for a total of 5, 10, or even 15 hours each. Also, the larger the number of interviewers working on the project, the larger the sample size will likely be. Given these tremendous variations, there is no “right” sample size. Typically, interview research uses sample sizes of 15 to 30 participants, though shorter interviews by multiple interviewers may lead to as many as 50. Sample size doesn’t frequently exceed 50 for this research method. Similarly, sample sizes smaller than 15 are somewhat rare in published sociological research, unless the researcher is taking a case study approach, meaning the researcher concentrates very heavily on only a handful (sometimes as few as 3 or 4) participants but interviews them for many hours (sometimes as many as 100 or more) over the course of months or even years. Case studies, however, are much more common in psychology than in sociology, where they are rare.

Before you can apply for IRB approval, you must decide exactly who is eligible to participate in your project (such as single mothers over the age of 18 who have never been married), your sampling strategy, and your approximate sample size. This information is part of the IRB application. After receiving IRB approval, you may then begin the process of recruiting your sample. Note that it is forbidden to begin recruitment prior to receiving approval from your IRB.

**Check Your Understanding**

*Again thinking about your research projects on relationships with coworkers, how large of a sample would you use for each? Why?*

**PREPARING FOR DATA COLLECTION**

In interview research, preparation for data collection can begin while you are awaiting approval from the IRB (sometimes even before) and often continues into the early stages of participant recruitment. Preparing for interviews primarily involves practicing interviews on the topic, securing the necessary equipment, and making logistical arrangements.
If you have never conducted interviews before, you should spend several weeks working on developing your interviewing skills. Ask friends, family, and acquaintances if you may practice interviewing them. It doesn’t have to be on your research topic—just get some practice asking questions, listening, and eliciting as much detail as possible. Many new interviewers are surprised at how much skill it actually takes to conduct a good interview, and these skills are only developed through practice. You may also be surprised to find that the less you know an individual personally, the easier it is to interview them, so don’t be afraid to ask people you don’t know or barely know, such as the friends of friends, or the neighbor you say hello to but don’t really know. After all, you won’t know your actual research participants either, and it is good to practice interviewing strangers. As you begin to feel more comfortable with the process, you may ask your practice interviewees to role-play different difficult interviewing scenarios, such as being terse in their answers, getting angry or crying, or straying far from the topic in their answers. Practice dealing with these situations. Although they are not the norm in interviews, they do occasionally come up, and feeling confident that you can deal with them will make you much less nervous going into your real interviews. You should also practice explaining the informed consent statement, transitioning from informed consent to beginning the interview, as well as ending the interview, as new interviewers may find these moments somewhat awkward.

All researchers, even experienced interviewers, should practice at least one or two interviews on their topic with people who fit the same criteria as the people in the sample. These are called pilot interviews and will not be counted in the actual sample or used in the final analysis. The purpose of these pilot interviews is to make sure that the topics you intend to cover in the interview are appropriate and relevant and that your questions are answerable. Additionally, they will help to improve the quality of your data by alerting you to possible difficulties or problems before they have a chance to compromise the data you are collecting.

I also recommend that interview researchers reverse roles during a practice interview. Ask someone to interview you on the same topics and use some of the same or similar questions that you might use in collecting your data. The interview will be less smooth, of course, because your “interviewer” will not know which ideas to pursue with impromptu questions or which details to elicit; nor will they likely have excellent interviewing skills. Nonetheless, if you write down a list of interview questions and then have someone ask you these questions and try answering them yourself, you will learn a lot that will improve the quality of the data you gather. If you are very different than your participants will be, you may need to revise the topics or questions for this kind
of practice interview. For example, if you are interviewing teen mothers about how they cope with stigma, and yet you have not been a teen mother and perhaps haven’t even been pregnant, you can instead answer similar questions about some other characteristic or behavior that has caused you to be stigmatized. Although not ideal, it still affords you the opportunity to better understand how your participants will feel being interviewed. You should use this exercise to reflect on why some questions were easier to answer than others; how vulnerable you felt answering the most sensitive questions, and how that affected your responses; and what the interviewer did that put you at ease, or helped you to provide more detailed information. This experience can then be used to improve your subsequent interviews.

In addition to practicing interviewing, you will need to secure the necessary equipment. Most interviewers record their interviews, which is highly recommended. You will therefore need batteries and a reliable recorder that can produce high-quality recordings. If you use a digital recorder, you will probably use a computer program that facilitates the transcription of digital recording. Though becoming less common, some interviewers still choose to use an old-fashioned tape recorder, in which case you will need tapes and a transcription machine. In addition, if you will be using a computer program to help you manage your data, you should obtain and learn to use the software.

Logistical arrangements are primarily focused on finding a comfortable, private, safe place to conduct the interviews. You can interview participants in their own homes, but be aware that if there are other people present in the home at the time of the interview, or if there are interruptions from children, pets, phone calls, or other general distractions, it will negatively affect the quality of your data. In some circumstances, you may be able to interview the participant in your home, but again, the presence of other people or distractions will reduce the quality of your data. In addition, safety can be an issue. Some participants, especially women, may not feel safe going to a stranger’s home; likewise, there may be cases in which researchers feel anxious having strangers coming to their home or knowing where they live. Neutral locations away from the actual organization always work well but are particularly advisable for evaluation research, as they may encourage more honest answers. If you are choosing such a location, it needs to be a quiet, comfortable, and private place that is readily accessible to the participants and that, preferably, can be reserved in advance. Some community centers, city buildings, public libraries, university campuses, or places of worship have appropriate rooms that can be used, although sometimes they charge a fee. Another logistical issue to handle is arranging your schedule, as much as possible, so that you
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will be available to conduct interviews at times that are convenient for your participants. You should also make sure that interested potential participants can contact you via phone and that any message they leave will not be heard by others, which would compromise their confidentiality. Also, you should prepare a drawer in a locking file cabinet or other secured place to store transcripts and completed consent forms.

DATA COLLECTION

Once you have received approval from the IRB, have completed preparations for your interviews, and have scheduled an interview time with your first participant, you are ready to begin collecting your data. Regardless of the type of interview you choose to do (loosely or semistructured), according to interpretivist methodology, the primary determinant in the quality of your data will be how well you establish rapport with each of your participants. Rapport is the relationship of trust, cooperation, mutual respect, and sense of ease you have with one another. Any interview in which you fail to establish at least a decent amount of rapport with the participant will be arduous and of poor quality. Because rapport is so vital to producing good research, you will take a number of steps to establish rapport with each participant:

- In early communication with the participants about the research, be polite, pleasant, and enthusiastic about the project. You should also take great care to make sure that they fit the criteria you set for participation, that they understand what the research is generally about, that they know how long you expect the interview to take, and that their decision to participate is entirely voluntary and they do not feel in any way pressured to participate. No matter how desperate you are for participants, you do not want to interview someone who has consented out of a sense of obligation, guilt, or pressure. Not only is this ethically questionable, it likely won’t be a pleasant experience for either one of you, and the data that it yields will most certainly be of poor quality.
- Dress appropriately for the interview. What you wear depends on whom you are interviewing—you should dress differently to interview the CEO of a Fortune 500 company than you would to interview a college student, a prison inmate, or a mother living in subsidized housing. Although you need not dress in exactly the same way as your participant, you should nonetheless make sure that your appearance is not likely to be intimidating or to undermine your credibility.
• When you and the participant first arrive at the meeting place, engage in easy, casual conversation. It doesn’t have to be lengthy or personal, but even asking if the participant had any trouble finding the place or talking about the weather can help to break the ice and make both of you feel more comfortable when the interview actually begins.

• After the interview has begun, you should give the participant your full and concentrated attention. Show your interest in the participant’s answers by asking follow-up questions and by demonstrating attentive listening. Give both verbal and nonverbal cues that let them know that you are listening and want them to continue.

• Express genuine empathy. If they are relaying an experience that made them angry, you might say, for example, “How frustrating for you!” If they discuss a difficult time in their life, you could respond, “I can only imagine how hard that must have been.” Your responses should feel genuine, not forced, and your facial expressions should match your responses. That is, if you say something to express empathy but have a bored look on your face, it will seem fake and likely damage, rather than encourage, rapport.

• If you personally disagree with the participant’s interpretations or perspectives, or if they are describing behaviors that you find troublesome (or even horrifying), you should take care not to convey this to them. Both verbal and nonverbal cues should indicate a lack of judgment on your part. Remember, your goal is to understand what they think or what they have experienced, not to condemn or change them.

• Believe what the participant says, and convey this to them through your verbal and nonverbal cues. Rarely do participants lie outright. The more rapport you establish, however, and the more they feel they can trust you with information without being judged, the less likely it is that this will occur. If you try to trick your participant or trip them up in what you think is a lie, however, you will most certainly destroy the trust necessary for the interview to continue. Relatedly, never badger a participant. Sometimes we are so wedded to what we believe must be true, we have a hard time accepting an answer that doesn’t match up with our expectations. For example, one of my students conducted a research project on how people decided to convert to Catholicism amid all the allegations of sexual abuse and the Church’s position on controversial issues. The student became interested in the topic because she herself was considering becoming a Catholic. During one interview, she asked a participant about the doubts he had about converting. The participant said very plainly that he had no doubts. Because she had her own doubts, however,
and because other participants had expressed some doubts in previous interviews, the researcher did not believe her participant. She continued to ask the question several times, at which point it became badgering, and the participant got frustrated. A better way of handling this situation would be to try to repeat the question by rephrasing it once, but no more. Then switch to finding out more about the person’s answer. For example, you might say, “That’s really interesting. Some of the other people I have interviewed have expressed quite a few doubts. Why do you think your experience has been so different from theirs?” This not only provides you with more information on the issue, but also preserves the trust and respect you have built with the participant.

- Become comfortable with silence. Some participants need to think about your question before they answer, rather than just rattling something off the tops of their heads. Don’t assume that just because there are a few seconds of silence the participant doesn’t want to answer the question or is unable to. In addition, sometimes if you remain silent after a participant answers a question, that silence will encourage them to add more information to their response. My students are regularly amazed at how well this last strategy works.

If you are conducting evaluation research, you will need to pay special attention to fostering as much rapport with the participants as possible in order to get honest answers. While honesty is important to the validity of any interviewing research, in evaluation research the respondents are perhaps more likely to feel that you, the interviewer, have an agenda, or want to hear particular answers. For this reason, it is sometimes best for an outsider (someone not related in any way to the program being evaluated) to conduct the interviews, so that participants feel the researcher is objective. If you cannot have an outsider do it, then you must convince your participants with your verbal and nonverbal cues that you really are interested in their experiences and not just in validating the program. You must make sure they understand that you are willing to listen to all their experiences with the program, no matter how negative or positive.

For all interviewing research, in addition to establishing rapport, you will need to do a number of other things to ensure the quality of your data. These include the following:

- Audio record the interview! It is very difficult to take accurate and complete notes during an interview without slowing the participant down while you are trying to keep up, which can compromise the quality of your data (if they are busy repeating things for you to write down, they
will say less). Additionally, for most people it is difficult to listen intently, write down everything the participant says, and still come up with spontaneous questions that elicit rich information. Recording allows you to concentrate on what’s most important—listening to your participant. Finally, the accuracy of your data will be much greater if you record the interview, because in doing so you will capture exactly what the participant said and how they said it. Even so, participants in applied research may be particularly hesitant to have their interviews recorded, especially if they do not trust the confidentiality of the interviews, or if they believe there is a possibility of being sanctioned for negative evaluations. While recording significantly increases the quality of your data and analysis, if either of these seems to be a concern to the participant, it is better to put the respondent at ease and not record than to have them watch every word they say because you have insisted on recording them. If you cannot record the interview, do not try to write down everything that the participant says—you will never succeed, and you will miss much of the important information that the participant gives you. Instead, take quick, jotted notes, only writing down words and phrases that will trigger more complete details of the interview later. Keep the note-taking as unobtrusive as possible, and avoid slowing the respondent down or asking them to repeat themselves. Learn shorthand or develop your own style of shorthand so that you can write quickly yet still read your notes later. Immediately after the interview, write down, as fully as possible, everything you remember the participant having said, as closely to verbatim as your memory allows. Use your jotted notes to trigger your memory. Make sure that you test your equipment with the participant before beginning. It is a huge waste of your time and theirs if you conduct a 2-hour interview, only to realize that your recorder didn’t capture any of it. If your recorder does fail, use the jotted-notes technique described above during the interview.

- Questions should be wide open, meaning they should not be answerable with yes/no responses, or with a couple of words or a short phrase. Your goal in interviewing is always to elicit as much detailed information as possible. Avoid survey-style questions, which are easily answered with multiple-choice-type answers. For example, “How have your perspectives on this issue changed since that first meeting?” will elicit better data than “Now, do you agree with him more or less than you did before?” Yes/no questions should only be used to check your understanding, or for clarification purposes (“So, do you mean that you think it was unfair of her to do that?”).
In order to elicit as much rich detail as possible (called thick description), ask questions about specific instances and examples instead of asking for generalizations. For example, “Can you walk me through your morning today, step by step, from the time you woke up until you left the house?” will likely yield a more in-depth answer than “What do you do to get ready in the morning?” Box 2.6 shows several examples of the types of questions that elicit details about specific examples. Novice interviewers often fear that getting many details about one particular experience won’t give them the information they need, and so they try to go for generalizations—what usually or typically happens instead of what occurred in one particular instance. In fact, the opposite is true because generalizations don’t allow for the level of detail that really provides insight and that allows you to conduct a strong analysis.

Never start with questions requesting demographic information. Interviews are not an appropriate method for collecting large amounts of demographic data, but sometimes you want to ask a few such questions, such as the participant’s age or occupation. Do not, however, begin an interview with these questions. The first questions you ask will set the tone for the interview and will signal to the participant what kind and how much information you want supplied. If you begin an interview with demographic questions, you signal to the participant that all their answers should be short and unreflective. Instead, your first question should ask for a lot of detail in order to set the proper tone for the interview. Be patient about demographic information—sometimes this information will be mentioned in the course of the interview without your

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**Box 2.6 Questions Eliciting Information About Specific Examples**

How did you tell him for the first time that you love him?

Tell me a little bit about the last argument you two had.

Can you describe for me a particularly memorable evening you two shared together?

What was the best present he ever gave you?

Can you remember a time when things in your relationship were particularly stressful?

Perhaps you could recount for me the conversation you had last night.

Can you give me a recent example of how you have come to a compromise on that issue?
ever needing to request it. If not, wait until the end of the interview to ask these questions.

- Try to avoid putting words in the participant’s mouth. Instead of asking, “Did that make you feel relieved, or was it kind of scary?” ask, “How did that make you feel?” This will help to ensure that you are getting a direct view through the participant’s own eyes, rather than their reactions to your assumptions.

- Try to be clear about whether you are asking about their behavior, thoughts, or feelings (Weiss, 1994). You can ask about all three, but not all at once. You might begin, for example, with “How did you break the news to her?” (behavior), and then follow that with “What were you thinking while you were trying to broach the subject?” (thoughts). You might finally ask, “How did you feel after you told her?” (feelings). This will provide you with more detailed information and help the participant to stay focused.

- End the interview by asking two questions: “Is there anything else you would like to add?” and “Is there anything I didn’t ask about that I should have?” This gives the participant the opportunity to clarify or stress the importance of previous statements, to revise a statement that they have been reconsidering during the rest of the interview, or to bring up issues that you hadn’t considered but that they feel are important to your topic. Sometimes these questions can produce another 30 minutes or more of useful data.

- Immediately after you leave the interview, take a few minutes to write down what you think were the most important issues and themes that arose during the interview, anything that struck you as surprising or unexpected, and new questions or topics that you would like to add to future interviews. This is helpful both for analysis and for improving your subsequent interviews.

**Semistructured Interviews**

If you are conducting semistructured interviews, in addition to the above you will want to follow these guidelines as well:

- Memorize your questions, and only occasionally glance at a cheat sheet. This will make the interviewee feel more comfortable.

- Word the questions in a relaxed, casual way, so that they sound more natural. Avoid asking formally worded questions that sound stiff and may be off-putting.
• Remember that this is not a survey—you do not need to ask each question with exactly the same wording to each participant; in fact, to do so can make the question seem awkward and clumsy. When possible, link the question to what the participant has just said. This can make the participant feel like their answers are useful and interesting to you. It also allows for smoother transitions and a more natural flow to the interview.

• Avoid asking questions that they have already addressed just because you haven’t formally asked the question yet. “You may have already answered this one, but...” often yields little new information and causes awkwardness because the participant may not know how much to repeat of what they have already told you. Instead, ask specific questions that prompt the participant to elaborate on particular points they have already made in order to fill out the information you are looking for on that topic. For example, instead of asking, “You may have already answered this, but how was it to go back and forth between your mom and dad’s house?” ask, “You’ve already brought up how the rules differed between your mom’s house and your dad’s house, and you said your mom was much stricter. I’m curious about how it felt, then, to go back to your mom’s on Sunday evenings after spending the weekend with your dad, who you said pretty much let you do anything.”

• Be flexible about the order in which you ask your questions, so that they seem to flow more naturally from the participant’s answers, thus allowing you to avoid awkward transitions.

Loosely Structured Interviews

Here are some guidelines for best practice if you are conducting loosely structured interviews:

• Go into the interview knowing what topics you want to cover, but remember to let the participant’s experiences and responses direct the interview. Some 80% or more of your questions should flow directly from what the respondent is saying. In responding to questions, participants drop markers: passing references to information that they think might be relevant. By mentioning the information, the participant is signaling to you that they have this information and that they are willing to tell you more about it, if you are interested. A main task for all interviewers, but especially for those conducting loosely structured interviews, is to identify markers and decide which to let drop and which to ask more about (you
can never follow up on every marker). It is as if the participant is giving you a driving tour of a city, pointing out various landmarks and points of interest, and then says to you, “Let me know if you want to stop and get out to look at any of these places.” In the loosely structured interview, the participant is the tour guide, giving you markers to consider, and it is up to you to say, “I think I’d like to spend some time here, at this one.” Refer back to Box 2.2 to see a list of questions that a student researcher asked during an interview about women’s expressions of sexual agency. I omitted the participant’s answers to these questions to highlight how you can tell just from her questions that she is picking up on markers, so that her questions flow directly from what the participant had just told her.

- Listen fully to the participant rather than thinking about what your next question is going to be. Not only will it distract you, causing you to miss potentially important markers, but the participant will often be able to sense your lack of attention and will begin to provide shorter and shorter answers; this, of course, will reduce the quality of your data. **You don’t need to think of new questions; If you just listen, you will find markers that will give you your next question.**

- Keep a list of general topics to cover, but put it out of sight. When you don’t have any new markers on which you want to follow up, and no burning questions come to mind, pull out the list, saying, “Let me see what we haven’t covered yet”; or, if it’s toward the end of the interview, state “Let me see if I’ve missed anything.” Using this technique helps keep you from feeling like you have to think of a next question instead of really listening; it also helps you focus on what is important to the participant, rather than on the topics you presuppose to be important. In addition, it eases the transition for a significant change in topics, making the process less awkward.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

**Transcription**

Unlike with most quantitative research, qualitative analysis happens **concurrently with** data collection. Ideally, as soon as you finish your first interview, you should transcribe it and begin analysis on it, even while you conduct more interviews. The first step is to **transcribe** the interview, which means to type out, word for word, what was said during the interview. Transcription is a very time-consuming and tedious process, although the amount of time required varies greatly, depending on the transcriptionist’s typing ability and the quality of the
recording. It takes a reasonably good typist about 2 to 3 hours to transcribe 1 hour of interview, provided the recording is of high quality. It can take the same typist 6 to 8 hours to transcribe 1 hour of recording with poor sound quality. This happens in cases when the microphone was too far away to clearly pick up the voices, when the speakers dropped the volume of their voices while speaking (as they often do when discussing more private or emotional matters), or when there was a lot of background noise. Transcription is time-consuming enough that it must be taken into account when making decisions about the feasibility of an interview project, and when choosing a sample size. Some researchers have the resources to hire paid transcriptionists to do this step for them, while others prefer to do the transcription themselves. Some researchers argue that they learn much more about the interview by transcribing it (including what they can improve upon in their interviewing skills), since their attention is focused differently than during the actual interview. Transcribing your own recordings may also make the transcriptions more accurate, since you have the benefit of memory to help when something is inaudible on the recording.

While you may hope to skip the transcription process by using voice recognition software, most of the technology is not quite advanced enough to do this well in an interview situation. Sound conditions during interviews are very different than when one person speaks directly into a microphone: Recordings vary in quality, there may be background noise, speakers often drop their voices to low levels, you and the participant may have very different accents or inflections, and dialog always has some overlap in speaking. Thus, it is unlikely that voice recognition software will produce a good transcript for interviews. If you do use voice recognition software, you will need to listen to the recording as you correct the errors, which can sometimes occur every few words, and you will need to indicate who is speaking at each speech turn. You will also need to indicate such things as pauses, laughter, and instances when both people talk at once. This process can be just as time-consuming as transcribing the recording yourself. Qualitative interviewers eagerly await the day that the technology is advanced enough to produce an accurate transcript with few errors, significantly decreasing both the time and cost of interview research.

**Steps in Data Analysis**

The process of qualitative analysis is an **inductive** one, which means that rather than testing existing theories and hunches to see if the data support or contradict them, instead you start from the data and, as you analyze it, you
start to develop hunches and theories. In other words, the theories and hunches come out of the data that you have gathered, rather than the other way around. The analysis process usually begins with coding. Coding is the process of identifying important themes in what the participant said or in how it was said. Codes are usually one to four words long and are shorthand for abstract concepts or themes that characterize pieces of the data. To code, the researcher identifies a section of the transcript (sometimes a phrase, a sentence, or a whole paragraph) and writes the code name next to it. For example, next to the description of a spouse’s extramarital affair, you might put betrayal, dishonesty, infidelity, and/or breaking wedding vows. It is common to have several codes for any section of a transcript. There are no right or wrong codes, and different researchers can come up with different codes for the same interview, though they will all be affected by the research question. There are several different types of codes. A priori codes are codes that you brainstorm before you begin analysis, and perhaps even before you conduct your first interview. They are the themes and issues that you expect to arise, given your knowledge of the topic. A priori codes are often inspired by the literature review. Open codes are codes that you develop while reading through the transcript. They are the themes and issues you see emerging in the data. Most of the time these open codes are analyst constructed—that is, you have come up with them yourself. Sometimes, however, they are indigenous codes, which means they are concepts that the participants themselves use. For example, if you are interviewing people about femininity, and several of your participants distinguish between “girly-girls” and women who are simply “feminine,” you might adopt both as indigenous codes. All these types of codes are used to mark up the entire transcript, identifying each section with the desired codes. A list of codes is kept, and each code should be given a definition, so that you remain consistent in your coding over time. With each new transcript, you will create new codes. Again, to maintain consistency, you must keep a record of these so that if you create a new code while reading transcript no. 5, you can go back to transcripts nos. 1 through 4 to look to see if the code should be applied, now that you know to look for it.

The process of coding each transcript (using all the types of codes, including a

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**Check Your Understanding**

Try coming up with a list of 10 a priori codes that you could use in analyzing your interviews for one of your research projects on relationships with coworkers.
priori codes) and assigning definitions to each code is sometimes called open coding to distinguish it from subsequent steps of analysis that also include “coding” in their names.

The second stage of analysis is usually to make sense out of all this coding. Sometimes called axial coding, it involves using the codes to look for patterns. Lofland and Lofland (1995) describe several common patterns that researchers look for, including frequencies, magnitudes, types, processes, and structures. To aid our discussion of these patterns, let’s suppose you are researching feminist identities. Although frequencies might sound quantitative, it just means looking for the themes or patterns that were most frequently found in the data. What were some of the most common experiences or perspectives that people had related to their feminist identities? Looking for magnitudes, on the other hand, recognizes that sometimes something really big or important only happens occasionally, or to only a few individuals in your sample. Even though it wasn’t among the most common patterns, it nonetheless had a huge impact when it did happen and therefore is important information. Having a parent who refuses to conform to gender stereotypes may not be a common phenomenon, but it may have a huge impact on the development of a feminist identity. Sometimes researchers look to see if some of the concepts or experiences they are studying fall into different types. This means that not all the participants had the same experiences with the phenomena, but some of the experiences were similar to one another and could be grouped accordingly. For example, you may discover that your participants described experiences of discrimination at work that could be grouped into four different types of discrimination, or there were three different ways in which your participants interpreted the meaning of “being feminist.” Looking for processes means searching for a series of steps or stages that are common for all or many of the participants in their journeys from point A to point B, such as the stages each went through from knowing little or nothing about feminism to self-identifying as feminists. Finally, to analyze the structure of a phenomenon you’re studying means to break it down and identify its essential parts. Note that this is different than types: Although the participants may have described several different types of discrimination they have experienced, every act of discrimination has specific components that make it count or qualify as discrimination. In analyzing for structure, you try to identify those components. Axial coding usually begins when all, or most, of your interviews have been completed. Sometimes researchers look for all these types of patterns; more often, they search for those patterns most closely suggested by their research question and their data. In applied research, you are probably more likely to focus on
patterns of frequency and magnitude (and perhaps process, depending on your research question) than on structure or type.

The patterns that you identify during axial coding become your hunches, or working hypotheses, about what is going on in the data. The final, but absolutely essential, step of analysis is sometimes called selective coding. It involves testing to see if your hunches are indeed backed up by the data. In this step, you comb through the transcripts again to find everything in them that supports your patterns. This helps to verify that there is indeed a good amount of evidence for your hunch. Next, you comb again through the data to look for any and all negative cases. Negative cases consist of evidence that contradicts, does not support, or is an exception to the pattern. This step is vital—it is what makes qualitative analysis systematic and keeps it from being “just opinion.” In other words, by searching for and identifying all the negative cases, you are searching for all the evidence that would suggest your hunch is incorrect. If you find more than a few negative cases, then you either have to decide that you were mistaken and focus on other patterns, or you must revise your description of the pattern so that it applies to the negative cases as well—which then turns them into supporting evidence. If this happens, you will then need to repeat the entire process of selective coding until you have few or no negative cases and a preponderance of evidence supporting your pattern.

Throughout all the stages of analysis, you will also write memos, which are notes to yourself about ideas that you have, new questions or hunches that arise, new leads that you would like to pursue later, or issues that you find puzzling. Memos can also be written to document where you are in the analysis process, which is especially important if it will be even a few days before you resume analyzing. It’s amazing how many great ideas you forget and how much work you end up needlessly repeating if you don’t write memos.

It is important to point out that there are several different types of qualitative analysis that are appropriate for interviewing. I have described one of the most common, but there are others. Narrative analysis and discourse analysis, for example, focus less on what is said than on how it is said. Life-course analysis and life-history analysis focus more attention on the sequencing of events and the impact of the particular historical moment on these events. The various types of analysis tend to differ primarily on what they are looking for, but there can also be some differences in how the analysis gets carried out. In all these cases, however, you search for patterns and must also check yourself to make sure that there is ample evidence of the patterns that you identify.
Timing in Data Analysis

I have already mentioned that qualitative data analysis should happen concurrently with data collection. This is for two main reasons. First, in interpretivist research, the aim is to understand the phenomena you are studying as fully as possible. As you analyze the data, new questions may arise, and you might want to know new or different information. Thus, your analysis should inform your subsequent interviews. During the course of the data collection, the interviews should continually change to reflect the new issues, ideas, and themes that you need to understand. Second, interpretivist methodology posits that the people you are studying know and understand more about their world and their experiences than you, the researcher, ever can, and so interpretivists often enlist help from their participants with the analysis during the interview process. For example, you think you are beginning to see a pattern in the data. In your next interview, you might say, “I’ve already conducted several interviews, and it seems to me that people tend to use three different strategies for dealing with that situation: avoidance, confrontation, and distancing. What strategy do you use? Have you ever used any strategies besides these three? Can you think of any examples when you’ve seen someone else using a different strategy?” Alternatively, you might seek the participant’s interpretation of the data by asking, for example, “Several people I’ve interviewed have told me that they have had difficulty making friends in this community. Why do you think this is?” Both of these tactics allow you not only to elicit new and relevant data, but to check your hunches to see if they hold up, or if the participants can give you new insights.

Using Software in Data Analysis

Traditionally, qualitative data analysis was done by hand—researchers coded by writing directly on the transcripts, sorting the data into piles based on the codes assigned, and then sifting through those piles again and again to conduct the axial and selective coding. Today, most qualitative researchers use a software program to help them organize the data and to make each step of the analysis easier. Although these software packages are typically referred to as “qualitative analysis programs,” they don’t in fact analyze the data for you. Much like word-processing programs, which don’t write your papers for you, they simply make the mechanics of the process simpler. There are several popular packages, including ATLAS.ti, Ethnograph, N Vivo, MAXQDA, and Coding Analysis Toolkit (CAT). Although each operates a little differently, they all aim to simplify the process of coding and to allow you
to more easily sift through the data. For example, with just a couple clicks of the mouse you can view everything you coded in all your interviews as, say, dishonesty, so that you can then look to see if there are patterns that you can identify, such as different types of dishonesty. Most of these software packages also allow you to make diagrams to depict the relationships between codes (which is especially helpful for those who are visual thinkers) and to write memos and cross-reference them with particular codes or sections of the transcripts. Some of the software packages can also allow you to code images and audio files, as well as text.

CONCEPTUALIZING AND OPERATIONALIZING

You will recall that in Chapter 1, we learned that conceptualization is the process of developing precise definitions for the abstract concepts you are studying, and operationalization is the process of deciding how to elicit the information that allows you to measure those concepts. In interview research, the processes of conceptualizing and operationalizing can happen both before and during data collection, as well as during analysis, and do not exist as separate stages of the research process.

Before data collection, you may conceptualize while working on your literature review, defining concepts you want to ask about in your interviews. Then, when you decide on the list of interview topics (for loosely structured interviews) or interview questions (for semistructured interviews), you are operationalizing; that is, you are deciding how you are going to elicit the information you want about the concepts that are important to your research.

During your interviews, conceptualization sometimes becomes an explicit part of the interview itself: It is not unusual to ask a participant what a concept or term means to them. In this case, you are using the participants’ definitions in order to better understand, and ask questions about, their experiences, as well as to inform the way you yourself conceptualize the term in your research. Operationalizing happens during the interview process when you decide which markers to follow up on and which to let go of. In doing so, you are deciding how best to elicit the information you need.

Finally, during data analysis, the entire process of open coding involves moving back and forth between conceptualizing and operationalizing. When you create new codes, you must define them (which is to conceptualize them). As you make decisions about which codes to apply to which sections of the transcript, you are operationalizing, because you are deciding which statements are giving you information about particular concepts (codes). Thus, conceptualization and operationalization occur throughout the research process in interview research, rather than as separate stages of the process.
EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

We have already discussed many steps that need to be taken at each stage of the research process to ensure the high quality of your data and your analysis. In interview research, the quality of data and analysis is evaluated on their validity. The more the data accurately represent the experiences and perspectives of the participant, the more valid they are. It is important to note that interviewers realize that no report or description that a participant gives can ever be 100% complete—it is simply impossible to capture every aspect of an experience in words and convey it to another person. Nonetheless, the aim is for data that are as valid as possible. One sign of data validity is detailed answers with concrete examples. Additionally, the transcripts of good interviews show that the amount of time the interviewer spent talking is minimal and that most questions posed were followed by long and detailed answers from the participants. This is because in order to fully and accurately understand another person’s perspective or experience, you have to have as much detailed information about it as possible. Obviously, rapport plays a role here, since participants will be willing to give you more information when you have established good rapport with them.

To ensure the validity of applied research, the participants must be made to trust that there are no rewards or penalties for anything they say. In other words, for valid data, they must be absolutely confident that nothing they say will be used against them in any way, or earn them any favors or positive regard in relation to the program or policy. Additionally, because the participants will be informed of the uses of the data, they will understand that what they say may have an effect on decisions that are made, and therefore on their own lives or the lives of others. While this can be a real incentive to participate in the research, it can also tempt some participants to hide, misrepresent, or overemphasize certain aspects of their experiences in order to influence the decisions in a particular way. While you can never completely eliminate this possibility, good interviewing skills and maximum variation sampling can help to minimize it.

The validity of the analysis for interviews is based primarily on how well it represents the data. In other words, a valid analysis is one that identifies patterns that are well supported in the data. This is why selective coding is so crucial—it helps to ensure the validity of your analysis. The validity of the analysis is also based on how accurately you depict the ways in which the participants experience or view the phenomena. That is not to say that the analyst can’t ever make interpretations that differ from those of the participants. For
example, in interviews with men who have been in unhealthy relationships, several participants may express that the main reason they didn’t leave those relationships was that they knew their partner really loved them, and they thought their partner could change. As an analyst, you may come to the conclusion that these men exhibit signs of codependency, though none of the men indicated that they thought of or recognized this as a possibility. It is legitimate for you to draw that conclusion—provided, of course, that there is good evidence that supports it and that there are few or no negative cases. You must, however, differentiate for your audience between what the participants said and what you, the outsider, believe is going on. To confuse the two or neglect to draw the distinction is to compromise the validity of your analysis.

Qualitative research is too often unfairly evaluated as deficient simply because the critic has judged it based on the criteria by which we judge quantitative research. This is not only unjust; it shows a fundamental lack of understanding of the logic, goals, and strengths of interpretivist research. Qualitative research should never be found deficient based on its lack of generalizability, its unrepresentative sample, or its departure from the scientific method. Remember, interpretivist qualitative research neither claims nor aims to be generalizable or representative, and it would be virtually impossible to gather good interview data using cool, detached, bias-free, highly structured scientific procedures. Additionally, qualitative research does not set out to predict behavior or to determine causal relationships. It also is not replicable—that is, if someone else conducted the same research, even with the same participants, they would produce neither the same data nor the same analysis as you did. This is because participants tell different aspects of their stories in different ways to different people. Think about someone asking you on a Monday morning, “So, how was your weekend?” Your response would probably differ depending on who was doing the asking, how well you know them, and what their relationship is to you, as well as the location, time, and context in which they are asking. You may give three different answers to your boss, your best friend, and your grandmother. That is not to say that you would lie to any of them; rather, you would give more or less detail about particular experiences and would choose to include or exclude information based on who asked the question. The same is true with interviewing research: Participants will give different information to different interviewers, based on the amount of rapport they have, the skill of the interviewer, the level of detail requested, and the particular markers on which the interviewer decides to follow up. Therefore, interview research should not be judged negatively for its lack of replicability. Instead, it is essential to evaluate interview research based on its own merits and on
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how well it reaches its goals of understanding as thoroughly as possible the experiences and perspectives of the research participants.

Interview research should be judged on the following:

- The degree to which the interviewer accurately and vividly conveys the participant’s meanings, understandings, and experiences
- The degree of rapport that the interviewer can demonstrate
- The degree to which the data support the patterns identified by the researcher
- Evidence of a search for negative cases, and a discussion of those negative cases and what they mean for the patterns identified
- A clear distinction between the researcher’s analysis and the participant’s perceptions if the analyst sees patterns the participant doesn’t see
- The degree to which the researcher recognizes the limits of the research and stays within those limits (for example, doesn’t try to generalize findings to a larger population)

PRESENTING THE RESULTS

Whether you are presenting your results in writing or orally, interview analyses are generally presented in the same way. After briefly discussing your research question, the methods you used to collect your data, some information about your sample, and the basic procedures you used to analyze the data, you begin to discuss the patterns you found in your analysis. For each pattern (or each main point you wish to make), you should explain that pattern, and then provide at least one, and sometimes up to several, quotations from the participants’ interviews that both exemplify and support your point. The quotations should be verbatim (or nearly), though the grammar or punctuation may be cleaned up so that it is easier for your audience to follow (since natural speech is often confusing and awkward when written down). Each quotation should be identified with the pseudonym of the participant who said it; and you will be more likely to convince your audience of the validity of your analysis if you use quotations from as many different people in your sample as possible, rather than drawing many quotations from just a few participants. In addition, you should discuss any negative cases you found for each pattern. This will further help give your audience confidence in the validity of your analysis. You should end your presentation with a discussion of the implications of the research. This includes theoretical implications (Does it provide evidence for or against a particular theory? Does it suggest that a theory is missing an important aspect
of the participants’ experiences that it should take into account?). It also includes implications for future research (What new issues does your analysis suggests need further research? What’s the next group or population that should be studied? What other methods could be used to build upon your newfound results regarding this phenomenon?). Finally, the implications should make it clear what this research means for real people’s lives (What types of social action might be suggested by your research? How would this action affect your participants?).

**SUMMARY POINTS**

✓ Qualitative interviews are the best method for investigating the complexity of social life and for truly understanding others’ experience as they perceive it.

✓ Interviewing is based not on the principles of the scientific method, but on techniques for fostering rapport with the participant in order to yield rich data that are high on validity.

✓ While the results are not generalizable, the interviewer will understand the experiences of a small group of people extremely well.

✓ Interviews allow the participant to direct the researcher toward important areas of relevance that the researcher may have never considered had a more structured research method been used.

✓ Analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection, and it is made systematic by the search for evidence and negative cases.

**KEY TERMS**

- a priori codes
- analyst-constructed codes
- axial coding
- bias
- case study
- codes
- coding
- conceptualization
- confidential
- convenience sampling
- evaluation research
- frequencies
- gatekeeper
- generalizing
- indigenous codes
- inductive
- informed consent
- statement
- interpretivist methodology
- interviewing
- loosely structured
- interview
- magnitudes
- markers
- maximum variation
- sampling
- memos
methodology  
negative cases  
nonprobability sampling  
not replicable  
objective  
open codes  
open coding  
operationalization  
pilot interviews  
processes  
pseudonym  
purposive sampling  
rapport  
research participants  
selective coding  
semistructured interview  
snowball sampling  
structure  
thick description  
transcribe  
types  
valid analysis  
validity