

Memo for NSF “Workshop on Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research”

Jennifer Hochschild

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This note focuses on the logic of conducting intensive interviews and elite interviews. By the former, I mean long (at least 1 hour, usually more) discussions with people chosen at random or in some other way that does not refer to them as specific individuals. By the latter, I mean discussions with people who are chosen because of who they are or what position they occupy. That is, by “elite” I do not necessarily mean someone of high social, economic, or political standing; the term indicates a person who is chosen by name or position for a particular reason.

A central purpose of an intensive interview is conceptual mapping: How and why does the ordinary person on the street think and feel about a set of issues or ideas? What connections do people make; what apparent linkages do they not see? Where do they express ambivalence, incoherence, certainty, passion, subtlety, and why? A central purpose of elite interviews is to acquire information and context that only that person can provide about some event or process: What did that person do and why? How does he or she explain and justify his/her own behavior? What does the person remember of how others behaved, and why? How does the person understand and explain the trajectory of the event or process?

Both forms of interview are invaluable for a large swath of research questions in social science. Intensive interviews can be supplements to, inspirations for, or correctives of virtually any public opinion survey. Elite interviews can play the same multiple roles for most research that traces the history or development of a phenomenon over the past six decades, roughly speaking. Thus while each is, in one sense, just a particular form of systematic qualitative research, together they could be vital elements of almost any research program that engages with recent intentional human behavior.

Standards for Rigor: The trick with qualitative interviews is to know how much and what aspects of the standards for survey research are applicable to this research method. Some elements of survey design are valuable. These include 1) the appropriateness in many cases of obtaining respondents randomly rather than through convenience or snowball samples; 2) the appropriateness in many cases of presenting the same relatively neutral persona to the respondents so that they engage with the issues at hand rather than with the interviewer per se (but see below for a caveat); 3) the need for informed consent; 4) the need to frame questions that are not biased, leading, or otherwise likely to distort the respondents’ reported views; 5) the need for a systematic and replicable way of making sense of the data after the interviews are collected, and so on.

However, too many elements of survey research design can bleed into the logic of intensive interviews, and thereby confuse or even undermine their value. The tip-off is a discussion of generalization (inevitably defensive from a qualitative interviewer), or sentences that seek to show that more of X type of interviewees had a given response than of Y type of

interviewees. That is, treating interview subjects like a very small survey sample is a mistake – it will not convince surveyors, and it brings to the fore the disadvantages rather than the advantages of this type of research.

Instead, intensive interviews should focus on doing just what surveys cannot do, that is, finding out how people frame their own views, why they hold the views they do, and how they make connections or demonstrate disjunctions among discrete opinions. Intensive interviews can do directly what statistical analysis seeks to do indirectly and at a distance – show what attitudes or values are “correlated,” how strongly they are associated, and how and why people link or morselize particular views. For example, rather than controlling for race on the assumption that African Americans view aspects of American politics differently from whites, one can ask directly how, why, and how much race matters when a respondent expresses a view. One can also consider that issue indirectly, through examination of the respondent’s level of certainty, comfort, ease of explanation, unstated assumptions about what seems obviously true or false (or good or bad), wealth of anecdotes or supporting evidence and justification for a view, and so on.

Thus standards for rigor in intensive interviews should focus on the degree to which the respondent can be induced to express views, perhaps even to develop them in the course of the interview, and to examine carefully what lies behind his or her own views. The interviewer should focus especially on apparent inconsistencies, disconnections, or ambivalences in order to see, for example, if what appears to be ideological incoherence is simply a different way of ordering or clustering particular values that does not map onto a liberal-conservative dimension. The interviewer may need to change his or her persona in order to get the fullest set of responses from subjects; I have had respondents who would only talk with me if I was willing to argue back and engage in a genuine conversation rather than a one-way probing. Similarly, the interviewer may need to change the order of the topics under discussion, to change the wording of questions, to spend a lot (or a little) time on one topic compared with another, to make questions more or less abstract for a given respondent, and so on—all anathema to a survey researcher but all possibly necessary for the task of getting the respondent to think carefully, fully, and openly about the issues at hand.

Appropriate standards of rigor should also be developed for the analysis of the interviews (which should always be transcribed in full, in my opinion, including hesitations and emphases if possible). The great temptation is to pick and choose strong quotations that make the points that the interviewer wanted to have made to begin with, and to string together a set of ideas from the respondent that cohere in a particular way. This need not be dishonest or even intentional; intensive interviews contain a lot of what appears to be “noise,” and inevitably a lot of material must be discarded in order to develop a coherent, thematic narrative reporting the results. But it is essential that the researcher allow the anomalies, apparent inconsistencies, less savory aspects of the responses, even the incoherence itself, to be part of the analysis and report. As I argued in *What’s Fair?* at one point, a totally baffling and incoherent paragraph may reveal a great deal about how a person thinks about a complex problem; similarly, a respondent who suddenly announces, as one of mine did, that we should kill off all the people in the world who disagree with him can change one’s sense of what it might mean to be an deeply committed humanitarian liberal.

In short, rigor in intensive interviews is not the same as that for surveys, and may in some cases require the opposite behavior. It also requires the researcher to pay at least as much attention to what he or she does not like or did not expect or does not understand in analyzing the interview transcripts as to what seems to make sense along lines that were predicted (or predictable) before the research began.

Rigor in elite interviews is more straightforward, probably closely analogous to traditional journalists' ethics and rules of engagement. It is essential for the interviewer to know as much as possible about the stance, position, and past behavior of the interview subject before beginning the interview; that seems obvious for a member of Congress or corporation president, but is equally true for a community organizer or foreman on the assembly line. One does not want to waste the respondent's time, and one wants to get as complete, honest, and nuanced a story as possible from the respondent. Being able to say, "But how does that accord with what you said X days ago or what you did Y years ago?" gives the interviewer credibility, and helps to keep the respondent from telling partial or –shall we say – imaginative narratives. It also enables the interviewer to probe more deeply into the respondent's perhaps idiosyncratic or nonrational stances, and gives the respondent more material with which to effectively develop his or her own explanation of past behavior.

The interviewer can *carefully* triangulate among respondents; without revealing any confidences or names of previous subjects, one can sometimes use information gleaned from a previous interview to question or push a current subject a little more deeply. The interviewer should also always ask the opposite question from the one just asked ("What was your most effective strategy to accomplish X?" and then, "What did you try in order to accomplish X that didn't work as you intended?"). Finally, the same rules apply for interpreting these interviews as in qualitative interviews, or in conventional journalism: one must portray respondents fairly, give the reader enough evidence to show the complexities and problems in one's interpretation as well as its strengths, illuminate rather than distort the historical record as revealed by the respondents, and so on.

A final thought about interviews, especially elite interviews: it is tempting, particularly with well-educated or highly knowledgeable subjects, to ask them one's own research question. Even if the question is couched in layperson's language with a minimum of verbal flourishes, this is usually a mistake in my experience. Few interview subjects think in the ways that social scientists think, so posing one's own analytic puzzle to the subject usually just elicits puzzled stares and silence or stammers. More seriously, one purpose of this sort of interview is to leave enough space between the researcher's initial preconceptions and frameworks and the subjects' particular framework and vantage point so that the researcher stays open to surprise and anomaly. Doing too much to set up the interview in terms of one's own theoretical logic once again moves interviews too far in the direction of survey research. (This is not exactly a point about rigor, so I relegate it to the end of this section, but it does seem to me to be important in designing good qualitative research.)

Communicating these standards to other disciplines: A simple starting point would be more articles or book chapters laying out the logic of intensive and elite interviews. Such a document

should focus on their distinctive qualities and include, among other things, an explicit discussion of how they are *not* like survey research with a long interview schedule and small N. It would similarly be helpful to distinguish these types of interviewing from ethnographic research, which seldom asks research subjects for self-conscious statements of values and attitudes in an artificial context. Teaching the same points in courses on social science methods would help also, of course.

The article or book chapter should also address the vexed question of how to interpret the results once the interviews are complete. This is easier with elite interviews, since one is basically developing a history, or at least there is a chronological logic available as an initial template for the analysis. Intensive interviews are harder to interpret, and it is probably much harder to convey to someone else how to do it. Software is available for analyzing them; in my view it can provide a very useful starting point but should never be the only mode of analysis. In my experience, the process of developing themes and arguments out of transcripts of intensive interviews is endlessly iterative and develops out of some combination of initial framework, unpredictable insight, multiple readings, engagement with the extant literature on the subject, and many draft pages. An article or chapter that provides a chunk of unedited transcript, then walks the reader through the process of honing that material into finished pages would be very valuable (and hard to do!).

Topics particularly suited to intensive and elite interviews: Intensive interviews have three broad purposes. First, they can provide the research material itself: clearly, topics such as group identity, individual ideology, attitudes about newly developing policy issues, explanations for political activism or social engagement, recountings of events that one has experienced, and explications of relationships or emotions are all amenable to intensive interviews. Second, this sort of interview can be very useful for designing a theoretically elegant and empirically appropriate survey instrument. It can also be used to provide a context or set of insights that will enable a researcher to make sense of results from surveys that have already been conducted. Third and most generally, intensive interviews should be thought of as much as a vehicle for developing explanations for necessarily superficial survey results as in the more conventional way, as a means of pretesting ideas for a new survey. That is, perhaps the survey is the pretest, conducted mainly to suggest areas of discussion for the intensive interviews to follow.

Elite interviews can have the same three purposes. As the research content itself, a set of these interviews is clearly appropriate for the study of recent historical change, process-tracing studies of policy movement, the role of memory and perception in political or social activity, and the role of elites (broadly defined) in a political, social, or economic process. Second, , elite interviews can function as a sort of pre-test to help one discern which institutions or processes should be carefully studied through some other means. Third and most generally, elite interviews can give substance and meaning to analyses that have been framed around institutions and structures, or around rule-making and procedural control. Knowing how an open or closed rule works in a Congressional committee, for example, is valuable; talking with people whose political strategy depends on whether there is an open or closed rule gives depth to the more formal analysis of Congressional decision-making. That is, elite interviews can play the same role with regard to institutional analysis that intensive interviews can play with regard to survey

research: they can set up the alternative research strategies, or they can make sense of what has been gleaned from those strategies.