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WITH A FOREWORD BY WILLIAM E. CROSS, JR.

# Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond



From  
Research Design  
to Analysis and  
Publication

## CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by William E. Cross, Jr.</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi

Introduction	1
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### SECTION I: SETTING THE STAGE

1 Crafting a Design to Yield a Complete Story	9
2 The Semi-Structured Interview as a Repertoire of Possibilities	45

### SECTION II: THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW: COLLECTING AND ANALYZING QUALITATIVE DATA

3 Conducting the Interview: The Role of Reciprocity and Reflexivity	75
4 Ongoing and Iterative Data Analysis	119

### SECTION III: SYNTHESIZING AND INTERPRETING RESEARCH FINDINGS

5 Building Theory	149
6 Writing Up and Speaking Back to the Literature	173

Afterword: Loose Threads	191
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<i>Appendix A: Sample Protocol for Student Participants</i>	195
<i>Appendix B: Past as Present, Present as Past: Historicizing Black Education and Interrogating “Integration”</i>	203

<i>Notes</i>	231
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<i>References</i>	235
-------------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	241
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<i>About the Author</i>	245
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## Summary

As suggested in the introduction of this book, it is indeed a challenging task to construct a research design reflective of your research interests and purpose. Your review of the pertinent literature will inform the development of your research question, as will dimensions of your experience and, if applicable, your knowledge of the research context. Consider what particular interpretive tradition is appropriate for your study and in keeping with your philosophical orientation about the construction of knowledge and ethics of research. In crafting your design, you lay the groundwork in terms of methods of data collection and analysis that will guide you for the duration of the project.

Through a discussion of the desegregation study, I have outlined key components to a research design. My experience has been used here to help you to imagine *some* possibilities in qualitative research and particularly in the use of the semi-structured interview. In the next chapter I will discuss the actual construction of the semi-structured interview. I will introduce ways in which you might capitalize on the versatility of this method in texturing data, thus attending to the depth and complexity of individual lives positioned within overlapping and interacting contexts.

## 2

### The Semi-Structured Interview as a Repertoire of Possibilities

A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organization, but analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence which it has upon their lives.

—Thomas and Znaniecki (1918/1927, cited in Chase, 2008, p. 60)

The semi-structured interview, valued for its accommodation to a range of research goals, typically reflects variation in its use of questions, prompts, and accompanying tools and resources to draw the participant more fully into the topic under study. Semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the participant as well as data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within which one is conducting research. Formulating questions and ordering them requires considerable time and trial and error through the field-testing of the protocol, which is the set of questions guiding the interview. Each interview question should be clearly connected to the purpose of the research, and its placement within the protocol should reflect the researcher's deliberate progression toward a fully in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study.

This chapter focuses on the purpose and construction of the interview and offers one route among many to developing an interview protocol. In order to illustrate the versatility of the semi-structured interview as a method for exploring data grounded in participants' experience as well as those data that are theory laden, the chapter includes a discussion of the development of the interview protocol for the desegregation study. It offers as an example the use of three segments within the interview, moving from very open-ended questions focused on concrete experiences to more specific and theory-driven questions. The use of three segments does not represent a fixed requirement. Your interview protocol may involve more or fewer sections. Moreover, some interviews are carried out in several sessions, reflecting a continuum of structure over the course of the sessions. The examples provided by the desegregation study are not prescriptive but are intended to stimulate your thinking about what is possible in the construction of your interview protocol. This chapter details not only my development of the semi-structured interview protocol but also some experiences I had in using the protocol. It thus offers insight into the type of deliberation that can occur in your effort to respond to your research question through a well-crafted interview protocol.

#### Opening Segment: Creating Space for a Narrative Grounded in Participant Experience

As you plan the opening segment of your interview protocol, keep in mind several tasks you'll need to accomplish before the interview actually begins. You should begin with a statement of the purpose of the research and an expression of gratitude for the participant's involvement. If the participant has not yet signed a consent form, she or he should do so before the interview begins. This ensures participants' understanding of their rights, including the right to not answer a question and to end the interview should they feel the need to do so. If the participant gives consent to audiotape or videotape the interview, you would turn on the recording device at the same time you open with your first interview question. These are the preliminary steps to consider.

In planning the protocol, the early part of your interview is intended to elicit from the participant the central story that will give your inter-

#### Opening Segment of the Semi-Structured Interview

establish a level of comfort and ensure understanding of participant rights

move into broad questions that create openings for participant to begin to speak from her or his experience

when necessary, probe for clarification

mentally note meaningful junctures in participant's story to which you'll return later in the interview for greater exploration and depth

support the flow of the narrative with probes that guide its direction as it relates to your research topic

Figure 2-1. Opening segment

view direction and depth. The questions are open-ended in order to create space for participants to narrate their experiences; however, the focus of the questions is very deliberate and carefully tied to your research topic. The objective is to guide a participant in conveying an account of an experience as it relates to the topic of study. As this segment is typically the most open-ended, it will elicit data you cannot anticipate in advance. In this sense, the opening segment relies on your knowledge of your topic and your ability to support the unfolding of the participant's narrative. A good deal of your exploration of the topic with your participants is constructed from the material in this first segment of the interview (see figure 2-1). In many ways, it is the richest and most provocative source of data, as it is the narrative that is in place before the use of more theoretically shaped questions follows.

Your attention during this segment of the interview is focused on listening carefully to the unfolding story, probing to ensure portions of the narrative are clear, and noting particular details, events, observations, insights, and emotions within the narrative that are relevant to

the topic and that you may want to return to at an appropriate place later in the interview. In many ways, you are formulating a short list of important statements made by the participant that you know will be relevant to questions later in the interview. This also requires some discipline on your part as you allow space for the narrative to develop, holding back some questions until the participant has covered sufficient ground in the opening questions. On the other hand, this is not to preclude your probing for meaning. Your thoughtful questions often serve as helpful guides for participants, so they can focus on the direction of their responses to your question.

Achieving space for data deeply grounded in the participant's experience and angle of vision should be the primary focus of the first segment of your interview protocol. This requires that the questions in the early part of the interview create openings from which you can learn about the participant and his or her experience. Your beginning segment is intended to be the most open-ended in your interview, focused on encouraging a generative narrative, a way into the phenomenon of study *as determined by the participant*. In many ways this early segment is the most important, because it provides the initial narrative to which you will return and build on in a reciprocal manner, engaging the participant in his or her experience in terms of clarification, generating meaning, and critically reflecting as you move forward. While the structure of this early segment and the nature of its questions should be unfettered by theoretical concerns, its intent nonetheless is saturated with theoretical considerations. As in all segments of the interview, your interpretive tradition will influence the direction of your questions and the degree of structure within your protocol.

Consider ways to elicit narratives that are detailed and in-depth. As you move along in this first segment, you may want to offer an opportunity for participants to further explore the topic. How might you use tools and resources that bring to the surface ideas, perspectives, and experiences that might not be immediately accessible to the participant? For example, to assist participants in their recall of an event that may have happened several years earlier, you might use photographs, newspaper headlines, video footage, and other archival materials. Asking your participants to create a map or representation of an experience

and then talking about their thoughts and/or feelings regarding the particular phenomenon may also be useful. Such tools facilitate a means through which participants can shed greater light on their experiences and generate meanings about the research topic. They may also yield additional contextual details about the experience that could be discussed later in relation to other questions in the interview. This is particularly helpful when words are not enough—when images, symbols, and artifacts open up new lines of communicating dimensions of an experience. Such tools can evoke conversations that often prove to be analytically rich (Bagnoli, 2009; Sirin & Fine, 2008).

For each question you include in your interview protocol, it is important to be clear about the purpose each question serves. In other words, is the question necessary and how will it contribute to the study of your topic? One way to assess the utility of a protocol is to pilot it in two or three interview sessions, ideally with individuals who reflect some of your criteria for participation in the study. The pilot will give you much to think about in terms of your phrasing of questions, their order, the usefulness of the questions, and the structure of the interview.

### Middle Segment: Questions of Greater Specificity

The middle segment of the semi-structured interview may be designed to pursue your topic of study in more depth with the participant. This is achieved in different ways, depending on your analytical framework and the interpretive tradition that guides your work. Regardless of these variations, the middle segment will draw from what you have already learned from your participant in the opening segment of the interview, and it will move the interview along, with an eye toward eliciting data of greater specificity and, perhaps, broader contextual levels.

This middle piece of your protocol involves consideration of questions that will ensure your research topic is adequately explored. While the first segment of your interview protocol used questions sufficiently broad to move the participant into her or his story, the questions in this next segment attend to the nuances of that story, either through questions structured into the protocol or through a series of probing questions constructed by the researcher as the interview proceeds (see

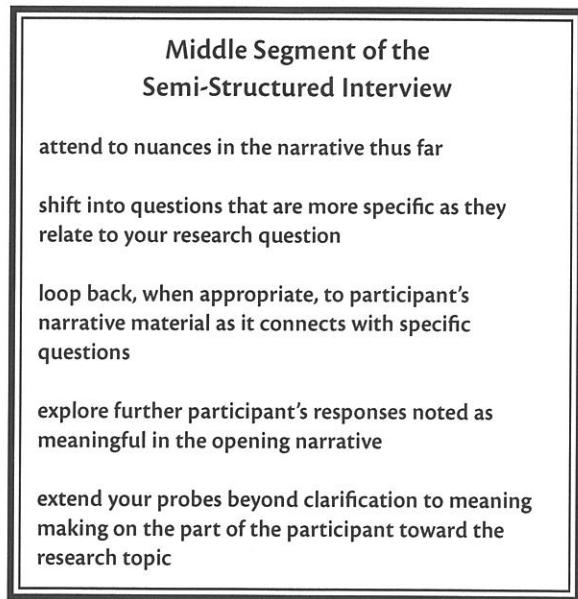


Figure 2-2. Middle segment

figure 2-2). The intent is to create space to explore the complexity of your topic, and the depth you achieve is largely dependent on the effectiveness of your opening questions in the first segment of the interview, further guided by your probes.

Questions of increased specificity are typically put on hold initially: they can be more informed once the participant has talked about her or his experience as it relates to the research topic. Questions in the middle segment are more suited farther along in the interview after some degree of trust has been established and some reciprocity between the researcher and participant has been attained. These are not personal questions designed to make the participant feel vulnerable; instead, they are somewhat narrower than the first set of questions and more comfortably located well after the opening narrative provided by the participant. Should these more specific questions be included too early in the interview, they may shortchange the participants and the researcher of the emergence of data grounded in the perspective and experience of the participants.

### Concluding Segment: Revisiting the Opening Narrative for Important Theoretical Connections and Moving toward Closure

The final segment of your interview protocol offers an opportunity to return to points in the participant's narrative that are still in need of exploration. Whether you carry out your interview over several days or in one setting, you should design your protocol with space in which to connect back with earlier ideas expressed by the participant. More nuanced questions or those that reflect the theoretical areas of focus in your study are more fitting for this segment of the interview. In this way, the data that are grounded in lived experience and those addressing theory might converse.

The movement from the opening narrative to more in-depth and perhaps theory-laden questions in the final segment illustrates the range of possibilities available with this method. Both in your formal questions and in your prompts, you are supporting your participant in generating meaningful responses. You have an opportunity to engage the participant in clarification, meaning making, and critical reflection, particularly as it relates to more abstract and theoretically driven questions.

However you structure your interview protocol, the final segment benefits from and builds on the data emerging from earlier questions in the interview (see figure 2-3). As the interview progresses, you are increasingly engaging in meaning making with your participants. How is the lived experience as narrated by your participants informing your phenomenon under study? Is there a story, metaphor, or a particular phrase pregnant with meaning within the interview that needs further exploration? Are there contradictions in the participant's narrative that might be raised with care? As elsewhere in the interview, you proceed in a manner that invites depth but attends to indications on the part of the participant that the topic has been exhausted, is inaccessible, or is off-limits. This can be difficult to ascertain. It relies on your ability to probe and open up areas the participant may not have directly considered while also reading body language, facial expression, and tone of voice to determine a participant's desire to move on to the next question. A useful way to gauge the situation is to close out each major area of questioning by asking, "Anything else?"

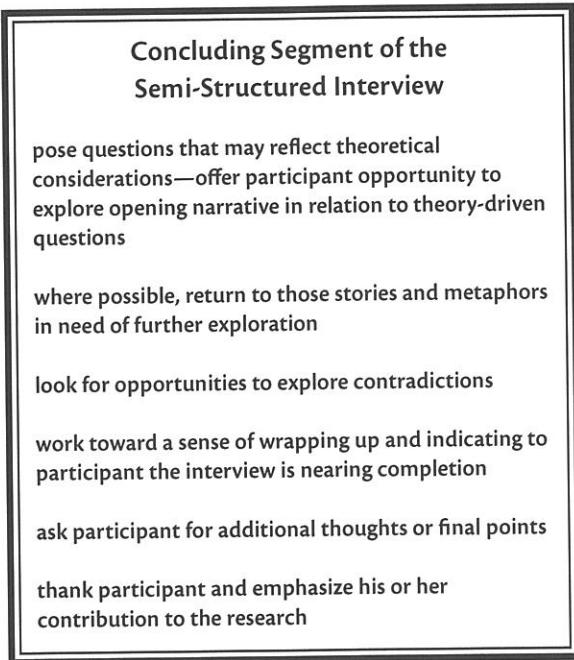


Figure 2-3. Concluding segment

As you approach the conclusion of your interview, your protocol should be structured to allow for closure. Design your questions toward the end of the protocol to allow for a kind of wrapping up. As you end the interview, your focus should be lighter and less intense. Always conclude by asking the participant if he or she has anything further to add. There may be something your participant has to say and this is the space for her or him to formulate final thoughts. Finally, indicate to your participant the value of his or her contribution to the research.

In the next section, I discuss the ways in which the interview protocol was developed for the desegregation study. The use of three segments attended to the development of a narrative that was sufficiently open-ended, with shifts toward specificity in the second segment, followed by an opportunity to explore the data grounded in lived experience, as it emerged in the first segment, in relation to questions of theoretical significance. This section includes a discussion of my planning

for the protocol, but it also highlights examples from actual interviews to underscore the ways in which the sets of questions and probes were useful in eliciting meaningful data and ways in which they were problematic. The types of questions and the use of supportive tools are intended to illustrate the versatility of the semi-structured interview, and the continuum of structure that is possible in designing a protocol closely aligned to your research question. A sample interview protocol from the desegregation study is located in appendix A.

#### *Creating an Opening: Constructing the First Segment for the Desegregation Study Interview Protocol*

In constructing the first segment of the interview, I sought an opening through which I could invite the participant to narrate his or her years of schooling in the district. This narrative would become the material the participant and I would work with as we moved into the more theoretically driven questions. There would be periodic opportunities farther into the interview to loop back and draw on instances within the participant's narrative that might be relevant to the question at hand. Thus, the semi-structured interview would be progressive in the way that the second and third segments built on the first. It would be grounded in the empirical data—the lived experience as narrated by the participant—and increasingly engaged with theoretically driven questions and prompts toward generating meaning. Additionally, the interview would draw not only on the data elicited during the interview but also on archival and oral history data already collected in the study.

Well-versed in district history, my objective was to develop a protocol that would give sufficient depth and complexity to individual lives within this district at particular junctures in its history. This necessitated a protocol that effectively invited participants to speak about their schooling trajectory. In the case of student participants, I sought to elicit their stories of favorite teachers, opportunities they accessed and those they did not, meaningful learning experiences, adult and peer relationships that facilitated their academic success, and those relationships and educational policies and practices that constrained educational opportunity.

Anne: Before we begin, I wonder how you would describe the community of Shaker Heights to someone who doesn't live here?

Nika: I would say it's pretty cosmopolitan, . . . but then at the same time it's kind of segregated, . . . certain areas, I mean, I can see why they are the way that they are, you know, the more affluent areas are predominantly—white, and the middle-class areas are pretty mixed. Some are more black or more white than others, but I don't know—I don't know why that is. Maybe I'm too young to know why or maybe people just prefer . . . There's mostly African Americans, . . . one block up and one block, you know, behind my street, but then like two blocks up, it gets—it starts getting more mixed.

Anne: And that's really a historical neighborhood, I mean, that's a neighborhood that . . . has a tremendous history as being one of the first areas in Shaker Heights that was integrated.

Nika: 'Cause my mom grew up [there] . . .

Anne: Uh-huh, wow, OK. All right. Elementary schools. Where did you go?

Nika: I went to Shaker K through 12 . . .

Figure 2-4. Early excerpt from interview with Nika

In the dialogue box (see figure 2-4) is an excerpt from my interview with Nika, a young woman who is African American and who attended the high school in the mid-1990s. This first segment with Nika illustrates an open style of questioning, designed to encourage the participant to speak from her experience. Also evident here is my insertion of comments as they relate to her narrative. While such comments may yield relevant data, they also run the risk of producing few connections or of actually distracting the participant from her narrative. In the case above, my comment regarding the integration history of the Ludlow neighborhood, where Nika resides, was productive. Nika then linked her mom to the history of Ludlow, where some of the earliest efforts at changing real estate and mortgage-lending practices occurred to facilitate racial integration in housing. This was an important moment, and I tucked it away to return to it later in the interview. We pressed forward, as I asked Nika to talk about her elementary school experience.

As you can see in the exchange, the first segment was designed to elicit a narrative concerning Nika's experience of schooling. It began most broadly, getting some background information, and I then asked her to describe the community of Shaker Heights. The protocol then moved into Nika's experience of the school system. This next section was also open-ended, and it allowed Nika to narrate her educational trajectory, from kindergarten through high school graduation. This section focused on her experience of the schools attended within the system.

While the high school experience was the primary focus, the accumulation of experiences leading up to high school was a necessary backdrop for understanding what contributed to the high school experience. Many probes were provided to explore fully each "leg" of the journey. Probes attended to structural dimensions (educational programming, including gifted/enrichment, tutoring, special education, and remedial programs; educational policies and practices; co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities) as well as relational considerations (relationships with educators; relationship with peers; the nature of friendships after leaving elementary for upper elementary and middle school; relational experiences within the course-level system).

To illustrate the way in which this open-ended segment of the interview was designed to capture dimensions of schooling to which I might return in later segments, I draw again from my interview with Nika. She had narrated her experience in Ludlow School where she had participated in the district's gifted program, which was open to Ludlow students and which served as a magnet school for students across the district. This arrangement was established in the early 1980s as part of the district's ongoing two-way desegregation plan, which allowed for transfer across schools in order to reduce racial imbalance, particularly at the elementary school level but later including the junior high schools (reflecting the grade configuration before the district reorganized in 1987). Nika talked about her elementary school experience, telling me, nearly five pages into the transcribed text, "My whole schooling was pretty advanced. I was always on like an accelerated track . . . I never really had classes with many African American students." Nika spoke about how much she gained academically from the gifted program and later, in 7th through 12th grade, from the advanced courses. However, there is a juncture in her narrative during which she situates the racial

... it's like they [the students removed from the advanced course] were, like de-tracked. ... They never took AP. ... There was one black boy ... [tap, tap, tap], ... but the rest of the kids, they just stayed in that [regular] class. ... It was from that point, ... that's when I saw, like, the light, I saw really what was going on in that whole school system. It's, like, they showed their face pretty much, and, I mean, if you don't really, if you don't get hit like that, then you're naïve, you don't even know, and you just let it go. You don't do anything because you think there's nothing to do. You think you're in the right place and you're not.

Figure 2-5. Data emerging early in interview and revisited later in interview

isolation in the district's advanced courses as systemically problematic and, consequently, a cause of shock to her. This juncture was communicated through her narrative of an experience in her early adolescence, which appears 20 pages into the transcribed text of the interview.

Nika told me that early in the school year she was removed from an advanced course with several other students by a school administrator who announced "we were in the wrong class, that we were supposed to be in the other [course] . . . and the other kids in the class knew that wasn't the enriched class." All of the removed students were African American. Nika defined this juncture in her years in the district as a moment when she "saw the light" in terms of racial inequality in the district. The narrative of "shock" as a result of one experience or an accumulation of experiences of exclusion in the school system emerged in my analysis as a pattern evident in a number of black students' experiences. This thematic pattern ultimately informed my analysis. Nika's narrative is included here in the dialogue box (figure 2-5) to convey her view of what transpired in this experience, particularly for the black students who did not assert their proper placement in the advanced course. Nika's narrative underscores how data emerged in the first segment of the interview, through the participants' narrative of their schooling experience, to which I could later return within the

interview for further exploration. The point at which I would return to such data often took place in the third segment, which was more explicitly focused on participants' conceptualization of racial equality.

#### *The Use of Tools to Further Explore the Narrative*

In the desegregation study, I also used tools in the first segment of the interview to facilitate the participants' narration of their high school experiences through their creation of a relational map. Through the use of simple, almost crudely prepared materials, representing social groups within the high school, I asked participants to map out the social landscape. A large oval-shaped piece of paper board allowed for a physical representation of the social landscape. Small circles were used to symbolize social groups that made up the student body. Participants were asked to identify these groups according to their own labels and descriptions.

This form of relational mapping, the naming of groups and positioning them in approximation to one another, created a space for participants in which to narrate their thoughts on their high school experiences, and it produced openings through which additional questions could be asked. The mapping tool led to greater thought and explication on the part of the participants than if they had simply been asked to respond to a question about the social groups within their high school. Additionally, it provided more background information and participant commentary to be drawn on later in the interview, as questions became increasingly abstract. This enabled me to reach back into the narrative elicited through the mapping and make connections, ask additional questions, seek clarification, and note contradictions.

In using the mapping, my hope was to produce some concrete rendering of the high school social landscape. Ultimately, I sought to recreate as much as possible the way in which the participants viewed self and other within the high school. I prompted participants to think about clubs, classes, social cliques, and other group formations. I began this section with the following questions:

Could you use some of these materials to provide a sort of map of the social landscape of the high school? You'll notice I have a big circle to

represent the high school, and then many smaller circles to represent groups that were a part of the high school. Could you use these smaller circles here to show the various groups of students that you think made up your high school?

Following this, I asked participants to position these groups in relation to one another. Sufficient time and probing were provided to explore the extent of connection or distance among social groups in the high school, as well as the perceptions and experience of participants toward these groups. As participants created their relational maps, they talked about the groups and relationships they were representing with the circles. I also asked what particular classes or extracurricular activities brought groups of students together and what set the groups apart.

During their creation of the relational map, I asked participants to locate themselves on the map. They did this by placing a small rectangular sticky note that read “self” close to or at a distance from the designated groups, depending on the relationship of each group with the student being interviewed. Students were then asked to indicate which groups had the greatest influence on the social landscape. The depiction of these groups was framed with two different colored pipe cleaners that represented strength of voice and opinion at two levels: (1) influence of a group on adults making decisions about policies and activities in the school, and (2) influence of a group among peers. Toward the end of this part of the interview, participants were asked to identify the racial composition of the groups. Small rectangular stickers were applied to groups as designated by the students. The options were predominantly black/African American; predominantly white/European American; racially mixed. The location of self in relation to the groups and the participation of these groups in the social landscape of the school informed my use of probes in the later interview segments. Additionally, the participants’ view of their relationships with the groups they identified and the racial composition of these groups also provided useful data. A portion of a white student’s map, Mark, who was attending high school at the time of his interview with me in the early 2000s, is provided in figure 2-6.

To illustrate the way in which the mapping revealed students’ relational experiences, I highlight here an excerpt from an interview with

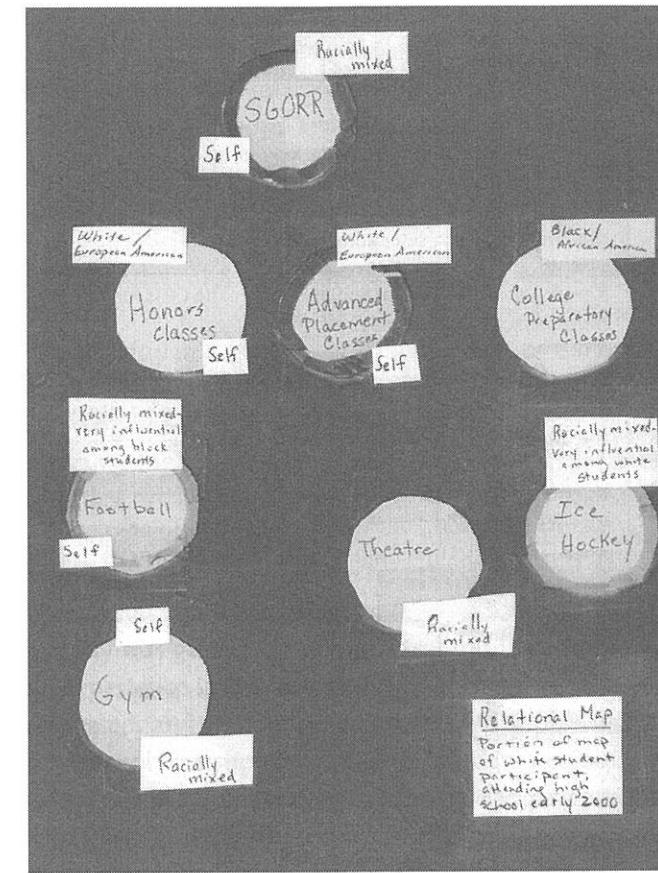


Figure 2-6. Relational map from interview with Mark

Karan. Karan is a white student who attended the high school in early 2000. While her strength was in the arts, Karan struggled academically and was provided with a tutor during high school. She was also often one of a few white students in the college preparatory courses in high school. In the excerpt in the dialogue box (see figure 2-7), I asked Karan about what draws groups together and what keeps them apart. In speaking about what influences separation, Karan referred to the course levels and her experience in the majority black college preparatory courses. Her perfunctory response reveals how normative the racial composition of the course levels was for her. While she notes the impact of the course levels in separating groups of students, she also

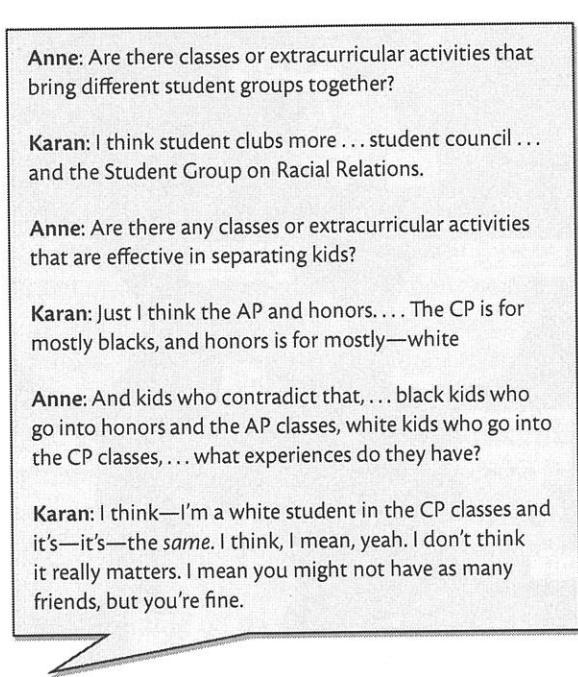


Figure 2-7. Relational map question: What draws groups together? What keeps them apart?

assures me, in a manner reflecting considerable ambivalence, that being one of a few white students in one's classes is "fine."

Informed by the critical theory tradition, I understood that social relationships are often shaped by a combination of structural conditions and individual agency, and by the intersection of group memberships that inform one's sense of self in relation to others (Collins, 1998). By looking at groups identified by the participants and their relationships to these groups, I hoped to come closer to an understanding of participants' experiences of racial equality. There was not a direct line available in this analysis. Instead, the use of the mapping provided a relational context from which I might draw as we moved through the rest of the protocol into later, more specific questions asked of participants regarding their experiences and understanding of racial equality. Additionally, the *talk* that emerged as participants named and placed groups on the map, along with positioning their "self" sticker, revealed important understandings on the part of the participants about their

high school experiences. The data from this *talk*—mine and theirs—were often unanticipated, highly complex, and rich in material that the participants and I would return to throughout the interview.

#### *The Middle Segment within the Desegregation Study Protocol: Toward Greater Specificity*

In the desegregation study, the middle segment was designed to further explore my research question on the *experience and views of racial equality* among students, parents, and educators over the nearly 40-year period of the district's desegregation. To do this, I used questions that responded to my theoretically driven definition of racial equality, which included facilitating equal educational opportunity, producing equal academic outcomes, and engendering equal relations of power between students of color and white students. It was necessary to ask participants about their experiences and to find the right questions to encourage them to be specific.

As my study was guided by an analytical framework that positioned individual experience in relation to the educational structures in which they participated, and in relation to broader sociopolitical trends, the interview protocol was supposed to elicit the data necessary to inform those levels. This middle segment was designed to provide greater clarity on participants' high school experiences, informed by their opening narratives. It also asked them directly about three key areas related to realizing the full benefits of the school system: expectations, opportunity, and access to information. These data would then be compared and contrasted by race largely, but also by other dimensions. In this way, the questions in this middle segment provided material to discuss high school experiences in greater specificity. It also would inform the third segment of the protocol, designed to explore the participants' views on racial equality in the school system.

The research also necessitated that students self-identify by race, because my analysis would compare student experience by race. In this segment, I began with the question, "Could you tell me what racial group you identify yourself as belonging to?" Additionally, to learn how closely students felt connected with students in their racial group, I used Linda R. Tropp and Stephen C. Wright's Inclusion of Ingroup

in the Self (IIS) scale (Tropp & Wright, 2001). This scale measures the degree of connection participants feel toward those who share the same racial backgrounds (their racial ingroup) and toward those who do not (their racial outgroup). The IIS scale consists of seven pairs of circles, initially at a distance from each other and then increasingly closer and overlapping, with the final pair nearly fully overlapping. Participants were asked first about the strength of their connections with their racial ingroup: "What set of circles would you select that best represents the strength of your own sense of connection with this group?" If the student self-identified as black, he or she would be given a set of circles representing "self" and "other black/African American students." Participants were then asked the same question with another scale that is similar except it reflects their sense of connection with their racial outgroup. For the student self-identifying as black, she or he would be given a set of circles representing "self" and "other white/European American students." My use of the IIS scale was not intended for quantitative analysis. Rather, it engendered useful discussion on the part of the participants about their racial identity and relationship with others within and across race.

It is helpful to look more closely here at my rationale for including the IIS. As I have noted, it was not for the purpose of quantitative analysis. I selected the scale because it would help me understand the degree of connections students felt toward each other in terms of race. In particular, the IIS arrangement of circles in varying degrees of relationship to each other, a continuum moving from separate to overlapping, was effective as a visual for getting participants to talk about their relational experiences by race within a desegregated high school. A replication of the IIS scale is located in appendix A within the desegregation study interview protocol.

Early on while conducting interviews, I followed the IIS scales with a question about where these ingroup and outgroup connections were strongest: at school, at home, or within certain community spaces. After my interview with Keith, a black student attending the high school in early 2000, I realized if I asked the question somewhat differently, I would get more information at the school level. I revised the question to ask about where *in school* the connections to one's racial ingroup and outgroup were strongest. Keith's focus on where in school

Anne: [after Keith selects the highest level of connection with black students on the IIS scale] Any place in particular in school where you feel most connected?

Keith: Gym [he laughs a little] and then—maybe some of my classes.

Anne: OK. [slight pause] What classes? Any in particular?

Keith: History.

Anne: And why is that?

Keith: Most of the black kids are in my class, . . . and English, there is—only one white kid in that class.

Figure 2-8. Question following the inclusion of Ingroup in the Self (IIS) scale (Tropp & Wright, 2001)

his sense of connections were strongest for black students underscored the value of this narrower question solely about school both for ingroup and outgroup connections. My earlier interviews had yielded data on relationships in school but not as efficiently, because this revised question focused more specifically on the school experience. In figure 2-8 is a portion of my interview with Keith.

By phrasing the question as to where in school the sense of connection was strongest to a participant's racial ingroup and outgroup, I could elicit data on activities, classes, and spaces in the high school that brought African American and European American students together, those that kept them apart, and those that students viewed as spaces for ingroup gathering and cohesion. In this way, the IIS also collected data on students' experiences with their racial outgroup, such as the extent to which they felt they had contact and social affiliation, where that contact and social affiliation took place, and what it meant to them. This provided additional data on participants' school experiences as well as data on relational and structural arrangements within the high school that produced a social psychological space of sameness or difference.

[interview with white teacher]

Anne: I've been asking the people I interview what racial group do they identify themselves as being a member of?

[pause]

Ted: What a silly question.

[speaking at the same time]

Anne: White, European American; black, African American.

Ted: What a silly question.... There is no such thing as a racial group. People culturally are reflective of a background. And I think that's one of the tragedies at Shaker, that a number of African American kids are culturally—who use the power language, and culturally accept certain value patterns—are referred to as "white." There is no such thing as a racial group. There is your background, where you come from, what your value system is....

Anne: Um-hmm. OK, well then, then you might find this useless but, um, this is a set of Venn diagrams to give me a sense of your connections....

Figure 2-9. Ted's response to question on racial identity

The responses among some students, parents, and educators to the racial identity question were informative and provided additional data on participants' experiences and perspectives. Ted, a white educator in the district for many years, critiqued the utility of a question about participants' racial identification, as indicated in the excerpt of my interview with him in figure 2-9. A number of parents, African American and European American, also declined to self-identify by race. Their reasoning came from the feeling that individual differences defied any kind of categorization, a response that was more common among white and black parents who had children in the system in the late

1960s through the 1970s, with three parents (two white and one black) declining to make choices. A fourth parent, who was African American and whose child attended school in the early 1980s, also chose not to respond. This parent pressed me to think further about the way in which categories of "white" and "black" are social constructions, and she pointed to the "limited and constraining effect" of these constructions. At the same time, she felt that there were discrepant experiences for white and black students in the school system, but she noted that focusing on "race" had detrimental consequences as well. Instead, she stressed a wider analysis of "structural domination arising from the constraints of the prevalent social, economic, and political context."

These responses among participants produced useful and humbling moments, and they appropriately underscored the manner in which race is socially constructed. At the same time, I felt that the question concerning how one identified by race remained sufficiently connected to my research question. I also found the use of the IIS scale to be purposeful. While it inserted itself uncomfortably into the interview, it nonetheless created a pause in the narration and yielded considerable moments of questioning, degrees of resistance, and launching points from which experiences that spoke to racial identity could be accessed. Particularly for students, it opened up the space for them to narrate their understandings of self and others and to explore relationships across and within race and to locate spaces and experiences in the high school where racial group membership was salient. While I was conflicted about reinforcing an essentialized view of race, the social and material consequences of its construction were evident in the interview, archival, and oral history data, warranting my continued use of this question about racial identity and my use of the IIS scale.

My deliberation over whether or not to include these questions is illustrative of many moments during the research where I felt torn over issues of theoretical imposition, researcher bias, and other ethical and methodological dilemmas. These junctures within the research are important to note. As you move along in your research you are likely to experience concerns about your use of a protocol question, a particular prompt, or some other decision made during your research. These moments should be documented and studied, a process known as reflexivity that is central to qualitative research. Reflexivity allows you

to look back at what happened and to consider the ways in which the research may be influenced by actions you have taken or assumptions you have made. Reflexivity may also inform your analysis and reveal additional considerations as you carry out your research. Chapter 3 highlights the ways in which reflexivity strengthens qualitative research in exploring these types of uncertainties.

Also within the middle segment, I included six closed-response questions, accompanied by Likert-scale responses. Likert scales provide participants with a set of 4 or 5 responses reflecting degrees of agreement or disagreement, from which they select one response. Included among these were questions about the extent to which the following was achieved: the high school shared similar *expectations* for students as their parents; students benefited from educational *opportunities*; and *information* concerning those opportunities was available. The question on opportunity is highlighted in figure 2-10.

Like the IIS scale, these Likert-scale questions were not intended for quantitative analysis. Instead, they helped to clarify and elaborate further the students' experiences by creating a situation in which they had to select a specific measure for each of these areas of schooling.

In this middle segment, the last in this series of Likert-scale questions packaged "experience" together and asked participants to compare their experiences with those within and outside their racial ingroup. This question, highlighted in figure 2-11, was placed strategically after the other closed-ended questions. It benefited from the accumulation

I want to ask you about educational opportunities for you in the high school.

*Educational opportunities provide students with the kind of teaching, courses, and opportunities to study and discuss academic work with their peers that are necessary to prepare them, academically and socially, for college and a career. Educational opportunities include academic classes and extracurricular activities.*

How much did you benefit from the opportunities available in school?

a great deal    a good amount    some    a little    none

Figure 2-10. Question on educational opportunity

### Comparison of Self to Ingroup

How *similar* or *dissimilar* would you say your experience as a student in the high school was to the experience of other [indicate person's *self-identified race here*] students?

very similar    somewhat similar    similar    somewhat dissimilar  
 very dissimilar

### Comparison of Self to Outgroup

What about [indicate other major racial group (white or African American or biracial) here] students? How *similar* or *dissimilar* would you say your experience was to their experience?

very similar    somewhat similar    similar    somewhat dissimilar  
 very dissimilar

Figure 2-11. Questions on comparison of experience of self to ingroup and outgroup: Likert-scale response

Kate was initially uncertain how to respond to the question on her experience of educational opportunity compared with African American students. She said she was "not sure" and asked me to repeat the question. Then she said, "very similar," then "well, wait a minute," and then "yes, because they had the same opportunities I did." In her comparison of the self to her outgroup, then, Kate viewed her experience as "very similar" to black students as a result of the opportunities she viewed as equally available.

Figure 2-12. Kate's response to question comparing student's experience to that of racial outgroup

of responses thus far. It also provided material to which I might return when I asked participants about their views on racial equality.

To illustrate the complexity of these data, I have included in figure 2-12 my notes from a telephone interview with Kate, a white student who had attended the school in the early 1980s. As with other study participants, Kate's discussion of "opportunity" lent itself well to the next

set of questions within the concluding segment. Because my question on views of racial equality was the most abstract and most informed by theory, it came in the final segment.

*Situating Lived Experience within Abstract Notions of Equality:  
The Third Segment of the Desegregation Study Interview Protocol*

In the desegregation study, the final segment included open-ended questions pertaining to students' conceptualizations and experiences of racial equality. I opened this portion of the interview by reading aloud a statement reminding the participant of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. I included this background information in order to impose some degree of theoretical orientation, including historical decisions impacting racial equality in education. The text I used is provided below:

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court ruled that public schools that were racially segregated and operated under a "separate but equal" premise were unconstitutional and "had no place in public education." (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954)

Following the *Brown* prompt, I asked participants to talk about what racial equality in public education meant *to them*. In this way, the primary variable of study was initially explored through the participants' definition. However, the insertion of the reference to *Brown* situated this segment of the interview in a history of legal and social contexts relating to school desegregation. Next, I asked participants to talk about a personal experience or observation they had of racial equality or inequality in the district. In my use of this third segment, I found that the participants' selection of an example of racial equality or inequality, or an indication that they had no example, provided crucial data. Often at this point I might reference an experience narrated earlier in the study, and I would ask if that experience offered insights into racial equality in the school system.

The elicitation of grounded data as they related to the participants' views of racial equality in the school system was then followed by a theoretically driven set of questions, guided by a definition of racial

equality as facilitating equal educational opportunity, equal academic outcomes, and equal relations of power. By including these questions, the protocol allowed for insight into the participants' views of equality *directly narrated by them* as well as their responses to *a view shaped by the study's theoretical variables*. It also created space for the possibility that the definition of racial equality as theorized in the research design *may or may not correspond* with what the participant offered as the meaning she or he gave to racial equality.

My protocol branched in different directions after the question on racial equality. For parents and educators, I delved into equality of outcomes. I provided a "snapshot" of national data trends over 30 years, a visual that charted the narrowing and widening of the gap in test scores between black and white students from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). To situate the discussion more locally, I provided two more visuals. The first of these compared test results for Shaker Heights students with a national norm for the Stanford Achievement Test for 1991–1992 (Stupay, 1993). The second chart used the Stanford Achievement Test results for the same year, but it compared the performance of white students to black students in the district. I asked participants to talk about what they thought about the data, what concerned them, and what questions were raised in viewing these data. My intent was to move the conversation about racial equality beyond opportunity and toward a consideration of outcomes.

In developing my interview protocol for *students and alumni*, however, I did *not* include the NAEP outcome data. While the gap in standardized test scores between white and black students offered an opportunity to discuss inequality of outcomes, it also had the potential to leave unanswered many questions about factors contributing to the gap. In my reading through archival materials and talking with parents and educators, I was aware of several intense periods of conflict when data on "the black-white achievement gap" were presented with little depth or with no emphasis to communicate that individuals in both racial groups defy group patterns. I felt conflicted about presenting these data, *particularly to high school students and recent graduates*, in the last section of a one- to two-hour interview. In such a situation, I knew I would not be able to assist the youth in the necessary scrutinizing of stereotypes about achievement and motivation that often emerge

in participants' encounter with these data. I never felt completely satisfied with this decision. Nonetheless, I was unwilling to present the set of charts depicting the gap in a strictly one-dimensional manner in my concluding segment with white and black high school students or recent graduates.

In addition to opportunity and outcomes, I also sought to draw the participants—students, parents, and educators—into a conversation about how equal relations of power might facilitate equality. In a statement that referenced the historical advantage whites have had in education, I asked the following: “In what way would you say the school system has made efforts to create more of a balance between blacks and whites in terms of social influence or power?”

My question here was deeply theoretical, informed by my review of the literature and the analytical framework that emerged from that review. When participants indicated there were efforts within the district to reduce the historical advantage of whites, or a failure to do so, I asked them to talk further about this. Again, this question was sufficiently abstract and relied on my ability to draw on participants' narratives for possible examples of the disruption of privilege. In case an example was not evident, I also included some points in the district history to which I could refer, should there be little to draw from in a participant's narrative. Additionally, *the question left open the possibility that the participant might reject the premise of the question entirely and would believe that racial equality in the district had been achieved.* As such, this question was best positioned in this last segment of the interview, during which the participant and I had hopefully achieved a level of comfort with each other and a sufficient narrative had been produced for the participant to articulate his or her view on racial equality as different from that which I was offering.

This final segment was particularly informed by my use of the critical theory interpretive tradition. It created what the critical theorists Phil Carspecken and Michael Apple (1992) and others refer to as dialogical data generation, which involves “data generation that proceeds through establishing an intensive dialogue between the researchers and those researched” (p. 548). The questions in this final segment, then, facilitated an exploration of the participants' definitions of racial equality

*not only* as informed by particular experiences in the school district *but also* in relation to a particular theoretical frame concerning racial equality as it relates to public education. This segment represented the greatest infusion of theoretical influence. Deliberately placed well after the first two segments, which focused on eliciting data grounded in the participants' experiences of the school system, this final segment was designed to interject existing theory on this topic. In this way, I sought to engage participants in ideas that may or may not have been aligned with the meaning they had given to their experience and their views on racial equality.

In other interpretive traditions, the inclusion of questions so draped in theory would be viewed as influencing the participant in a manner that compromised the authenticity of the data. Introducing a particular view of racial equality within a protocol specifically designed to study lived experience seems counterintuitive and certainly problematic. However, as constructed within the semi-structured interview, this last section was conceived as an opportunity to understand better the extent of “fit” between the data elicited in the interview and the existing theory guiding the research question as well as the analytical framework of the study. Through the insertion of this dialectical process, I would ultimately be prepared to modify existing theory or to build new theory.

From this discussion of how I conducted semi-structured interviews as part of the desegregation study, we can consider some general tips that may apply in planning your interview protocol. These include structuring the interview early on with ample room for participants to narrate their experiences. From this opening narrative you can move into more specific questions, following up on the narrative and/or introducing questions guided by *a priori* theoretical considerations. It is helpful to view the interview as organized into segments, moving toward more abstract or theoretical questions as the interview progresses, while creating space to loop back into material narrated earlier on. Some researchers opt to conduct their interviews across several days, allowing time for the researcher to study the data and develop additional questions. This also allows the participant time to respond with more deliberation and depth.

## Summary

We have discussed the development of a protocol for a semi-structured interview and have underscored the versatility of this method. The semi-structured interview offers researchers a way to attend to lived experience and pursue questions from extant theory. As noted earlier, the questions in your interview protocol are shaped by your research question, analytical framework, and interpretive tradition. Your protocol may involve the use of supportive tools to further elicit ideas, perspectives, and experiences that may not be immediately accessible to the participant. The inclusion of images, artifacts, or opportunities for the participant to create a representation or a relational map may generate additional dimensions of lived experience.

The structure of your protocol need not be divided into sections but it generally benefits from generous space early on for the participant to construct his or her narrative, increased specificity toward clarification and meaning making as it relates to your research question, and progressive movement toward more abstract and theory-laden questions later in the interview. These latter questions, asked too early, before the researcher and participant have explored dimensions of participant experience and gained some trust, may shut down the flow of responses during the interview or result in superficial responses. Moving toward closure in the interview, the research should invite the participant to add any final thoughts and should wrap up the interview by reminding the participant of the value of her or his contribution to the research.

As with qualitative research in general, the semi-structured interview protocol is designed to be cumulative and iterative. It creates the space for a continuum of structure. What the participant narrates and how that narrative unfolds inform the remaining segments of the interview. The questions you prepare should progressively lead the participant into a full consideration of your variables of interest. How you guide your participant through the protocol is another crucial aspect within qualitative research. In the next chapter, consideration is given to your role in carrying out the interview.

## SECTION II

### The Semi-Structured Interview

#### *Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data*