Why Interview Research?

Today's young men are delaying their entry into adulthood. That's a nice way of saying they are "totally confused"; "cannot commit to their relationships, work, or lives"; and are "obsessed with never wanting to grow up."These quotes come from a summary of reviews on the website dedicated to Kimmel's book, *Guyland*: http://www.guyland.net. But don't take my word for it. Take sociologist Michael Kimmel's word. He interviewed 400 young men, ages 16 to 26, over the course of 4 years across the United States to learn how they made the transition from adolescence into adulthood. Since the results of Kimmel's research were published in 2008,Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. his book has made quite a splash. Featured in news reports, on blogs, and in many book reviews, some claim Kimmel's research "could save the humanity of many young men,"This quote from Gloria Steinem is provided on the website dedicated to Kimmel's book, *Guyland*: http://www.guyland.net. while others suggest that its conclusions can only be applied to "fraternity guys and jocks."This quote comes from "Thomas," who wrote a review of Kimmel's book on the following site: http://yesmeansyesblog.wordpress.com/2010/03/12/review-guyland. Whatever your take on Kimmel's research, one thing remains true: We surely would not know nearly as much as we now do about the lives of many young American men were it not for interview research.

9.1 Interview Research: What Is It and When Should It Be Used?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Define interviews from the social scientific perspective.
2. Identify when it is appropriate to employ interviews as a data-collection strategy.

Knowing how to create and conduct a good interview is one of those skills you just can't go wrong having. Interviews are used by market researchers to learn how to sell their products, journalists use interviews to get information from a whole host of people from VIPs to random people on the street. Regis Philbin (a sociology major in collegeThis information comes from the following list of famous sociology majors provided by the American Sociological Association on their website: http://www.asanet.org/students/famous.cfm.) used interviews to help television viewers get to know guests on his show, employers use them to make decisions about job offers, and even Ruth Westheimer (the famous sex doctor who has an MA in sociologyRead more about Dr. Ruth, her background, and her credentials at her website: http://www.drruth.com.) used interviews to elicit details from call-in participants on her radio show.Interested in hearing Dr. Ruth's interview style? There are a number of audio clips

from her radio show, *Sexually Speaking*, linked from the following site: http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~chuck/ruthpg. Warning: some of the images and audio clips on this page may be offensive to some readers. It seems everyone who's anyone knows how to conduct an interview.

From the social scientific perspective, **interviews** are a method of data collection that involves two or more people exchanging information through a series of questions and answers. The questions are designed by a researcher to elicit information from interview participant(s) on a specific topic or set of topics. Typically interviews involve an in-person meeting between two people, an interviewer and an interviewee. But as you'll discover in this chapter, interviews need not be limited to two people, nor must they occur in person.

The question of *when* to conduct an interview might be on your mind. Interviews are an excellent way to gather detailed information. They also have an advantage over surveys; with a survey, if a participant's response sparks some follow-up question in your mind, you generally don't have an opportunity to ask for more information. What you get is what you get. In an interview, however, because you are actually talking with your study participants in real time, you *can* ask that follow-up question. Thus interviews are a useful method to use when you want to know the story behind responses you might receive in a written survey.

Interviews are also useful when the topic you are studying is rather complex, when whatever you plan to ask requires lengthy explanation, or when your topic or answers to your questions may not be immediately clear to participants who may need some time or dialogue with others in order to work through their responses to your questions. Also, if your research topic is one about which people will likely have a lot to say or will want to provide some explanation or describe some process, interviews may be the best method for you. For example, I used interviews to gather data about how people reach the decision not to have children and how others in their lives have responded to that decision. To understand these "how's" I needed to have some back-and-forth dialogue with respondents. When they begin to tell me their story, inevitably new questions that hadn't occurred to me from prior interviews come up because each person's story is unique. Also, because the process of choosing not to have children is complex for many people, describing that process by responding to closed-ended questions on a survey wouldn't work particularly well.

In sum, interview research is especially useful when the following are true:

1. You wish to gather very detailed information
2. You anticipate wanting to ask respondents for more information about their responses
3. You plan to ask questions that require lengthy explanation
4. The topic you are studying is complex or may be confusing to respondents
5. Your topic involves studying processes

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Understanding how to design and conduct interview research is a useful skill to have.
- In a social scientific interview, two or more people exchange information through a series of questions and answers.
- Interview research is often used when detailed information is required and when a researcher wishes to examine processes.

EXERCISE

1. Think about a topic about which you might wish to collect data by conducting interviews. What makes this topic suitable for interview research?

9.2 Qualitative Interview Techniques and Considerations

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the primary aim of in-depth interviews.
2. Describe what makes qualitative interview techniques unique.
3. Define the term *interview guide* and describe how to construct an interview guide.
4. Outline the guidelines for constructing good qualitative interview questions.
5. Define the term *focus group* and identify one benefit of focus groups.
6. Identify and describe the various stages of qualitative interview data analysis.
7. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative interviews.

Qualitative interviews are sometimes called intensive or **in-depth interviews**. These interviews are semistructured; the researcher has a particular topic about which he or she would like to hear from the respondent, but questions are open ended and may not be asked in exactly the same way or in exactly the same order to each and every respondent. In in-depth interviews, the primary aim is to hear from respondents about what *they* think is important about the topic at hand and to hear it in their own words. In this section, we'll take a look at how to conduct interviews that are specifically qualitative in nature, analyze qualitative interview data, and use some of the strengths and weaknesses of this method. In Section 9.4 "Issues to Consider for All Interview Types", we return to several considerations that are relevant to both qualitative and quantitative interviewing.

Conducting Qualitative Interviews

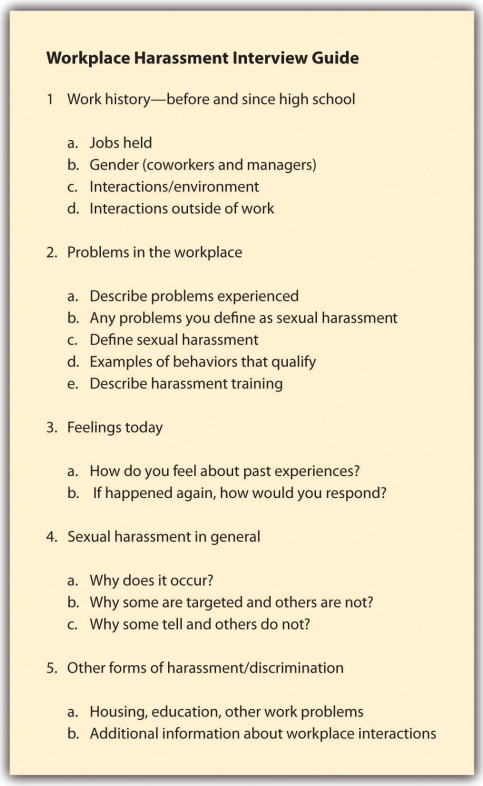
Qualitative interviews might feel more like a conversation than an interview to respondents, but the researcher is in fact usually guiding the conversation with the goal in mind of gathering information from a respondent. A key difference between qualitative and quantitative interviewing is that qualitative interviews contain **open-ended questions**. The meaning of this term is of course implied by its name, but just so that we're sure to be on the same page, I'll tell you that open-ended questions are questions that a researcher poses but does *not* provide answer options for. Open-ended questions are more demanding of participants than closed-ended questions, for they require participants to come up with their own words, phrases, or sentences to respond.

In a qualitative interview, the researcher usually develops a guide in advance that he or she then refers to during the interview (or memorizes in advance of the interview). An **interview guide** is a list of topics or questions that the interviewer hopes to cover during the course of an interview. It is called a guide because it is simply that—it is used to guide the interviewer, but it is not set in stone. Think of an interview guide like your agenda for the day or your to-do list—both probably contain all the items you hope to check off or accomplish, though it probably won't be the end of the world if you don't accomplish everything on the list or if you don't accomplish it in the exact order that you have it written down. Perhaps new events will come up that cause you to rearrange your schedule just a bit, or perhaps you simply won't get to everything on the list.

Interview guides should outline issues that a researcher feels are likely to be important, but because participants are asked to provide answers in their own words, and to raise points that they believe are important, each interview is likely to flow a little differently. While the opening question in an in-depth interview may be the same across all interviews, from that point on what the participant says will shape how the interview proceeds. This, I believe, is what makes in-depth interviewing so exciting. It is also what makes in-depth interviewing rather challenging to conduct. It takes a skilled interviewer to be able to ask questions; actually *listen* to respondents; and pick up on cues about when to follow up, when to move on, and when to simply let the participant speak without guidance or interruption.

I've said that interview guides can list topics or questions. The specific format of an interview guide might depend on your style, experience, and comfort level as an interviewer or with your topic. I have conducted interviews using different kinds of guides. In my interviews of young people about their experiences with workplace sexual harassment, the guide I used was topic based. There were few specific questions contained in the guide. Instead, I had an outline of topics that I hoped to cover, listed in an order that I thought it might make sense to cover them, noted on a sheet of paper. That guide can be seen in Figure 9.4 "Interview Guide Displaying Topics Rather Than Questions".

Figure 9.4 *Interview Guide Displaying Topics Rather Than Questions*



Workplace Harassment Interview Guide

1 Work history—before and since high school

a. Jobs held
b. Gender (coworkers and managers)
c. Interactions/environment
d. Interactions outside of work

2. Problems in the workplace

a. Describe problems experienced
b. Any problems you define as sexual harassment
c. Define sexual harassment
d. Examples of behaviors that qualify
e. Describe harassment training

3. Feelings today

a. How do you feel about past experiences?
b. If happened again, how would you respond?

4. Sexual harassment in general

a. Why does it occur?
b. Why some are targeted and others are not?
c. Why some tell and others do not?

5. Other forms of harassment/discrimination

a. Housing, education, other work problems
b. Additional information about workplace interactions

In my interviews with child-free adults, the interview guide contained questions rather than brief topics. One reason I took this approach is that this was a topic with which I had less familiarity than workplace sexual harassment. I'd been studying harassment for some time before I began those interviews, and I had already analyzed much quantitative survey data on the topic. When I began the child-free interviews, I was embarking on a research topic that was entirely new for me. I was also studying a topic about which I have strong personal feelings, and I wanted to be sure that I phrased my questions in a way that didn't appear biased to respondents. To help ward off that possibility, I wrote down specific question wording in my interview guide. As I conducted more and more interviews, and read more and more of the literature on child-free adults, I became more confident about my ability to ask open-ended, nonbiased questions about the topic without the guide, but having some specific questions written down at the start of the data collection process certainly helped. The interview guide I used for the child-free project is displayed in Figure 9.5 "Interview Guide Displaying Questions Rather Than Topics".

Figure 9.5 *Interview Guide Displaying Questions Rather Than Topics*

Childfree Interview Guide

Your Decision: How did you decide to remain childfree?

- When/how did you first know?
- Why did you make the decision to remain childfree?
- Did you have any model couples or individuals who shaped your decision (people whose lives you either wanted to emulate or avoid)?
- Have you considered what your life would be like with children?
- What aspects of your life now do you think would be different?
- Do you have nieces, nephews, or others kids in your life with whom you have a relationship? Describe.
- How about pets? Describe.
- What do you most enjoy about your childfree lifestyle?
- What are some of the drawbacks of your childfree lifestyle?
- What role does your gender play in your decision?
- What role does your relationship status (married, partnered, single) play in your decision?
- What role does your sexual identity (heterosexual, G/L/B) play in your decision?

Response From Others: How have others responded to your decision?

- Did you discuss your decision with others before/while you made it?
- Do people ever assume that you will have children at some point? If yes, how do you respond?
- Have you lost any friends as a result of your decision?
- Have you made any friends as a result of your decision?
- Who, if anyone, pressures you to change your mind? How do you typically respond?
- Is there anyone in your life who has been especially supportive of your decision?
- Have you ever considered changing your mind as a result of others' reactions?
- What role does your gender play in people's responses?
- What role does your relationship status (married, partnered, single) play in people's responses?
- What role does your sexual identity (heterosexual, G/L/B) play in people's responses?
- How do you feel about others' reactions to your decision?

Reflections: How do you feel about your decision to remain childfree?

- How significant a role does the decision play in defining who you are?
- Do you have any guilt or regret about your decision? Explain.
- Do you have any concern about later guilt or regret? Explain.
- What does the word "family" mean to you?
- What would you like people to know about you and others who choose a childfree lifestyle?
- What else do you think I should know about your decision and others' responses?

As you might have guessed, interview guides do not appear out of thin air. They are the result of thoughtful and careful work on the part of a researcher. As you can see in both of the preceding guides, the topics and questions have been organized thematically and in the order in which they are likely to proceed (though keep in mind that the flow of a qualitative interview is in part determined by what a respondent has to say). Sometimes qualitative interviewers may create two versions of the interview guide: one version contains a very brief outline of the interview, perhaps with just topic headings, and another version contains detailed questions underneath each topic heading. In this case, the researcher might use the very detailed guide to prepare and practice in advance of actually conducting interviews and then just bring the brief outline to the interview. Bringing an outline, as opposed to a very long list of detailed questions, to an interview encourages the researcher to actually listen to what a participant is telling her. An overly detailed interview guide will be difficult to navigate through during an interview and could give respondents the misimpression that the interviewer is more interested in her questions than in the participant's answers.

When beginning to construct an interview guide, brainstorming is usually the first step. There are no rules at the brainstorming stage—simply list all the topics and questions that come to mind when you think about your research question. Once you've got a pretty good list, you can begin to pare it down by cutting questions and topics that seem redundant and group like questions and topics together. If you haven't done so yet, you may also want to come up with question and topic headings for your grouped categories. You should also consult the scholarly literature to find out what kinds of questions other interviewers have asked in studies of similar topics. As with quantitative survey research, it is best not to place very sensitive or potentially controversial questions at the very beginning of

your qualitative interview guide. You need to give participants the opportunity to warm up to the interview and to feel comfortable talking with you. Finally, get some feedback on your interview guide. Ask your friends, family members, and your professors for some guidance and suggestions once you've come up with what you think is a pretty strong guide. Chances are they'll catch a few things you hadn't noticed.

In terms of the specific questions you include on your guide, there are a few guidelines worth noting. First, try to avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no, or if you do choose to include such questions, be sure to include follow-up questions. Remember, one of the benefits of qualitative interviews is that you *can* ask participants for more information—be sure to do so. While it is a good idea to ask follow-up questions, try to avoid asking "why" as your follow-up question, as this particular question can come off as confrontational, even if that is not how you intend it. Often people won't know how to respond to "why," perhaps because they don't even know why themselves. Instead of "why," I recommend that you say something like, "Could you tell me a little more about that?" This allows participants to explain themselves further without feeling that they're being doubted or questioned in a hostile way.

Also, try to avoid phrasing your questions in a leading way. For example, rather than asking, "Don't you think that most people who don't want kids are selfish?" you could ask, "What comes to mind for you when you hear that someone doesn't want kids?" Or rather than asking, "What do you think about juvenile delinquents who drink and drive?" you could ask, "How do you feel about underage drinking?" or "What do you think about drinking and driving?" Finally, as noted earlier in this section, remember to keep most, if not all, of your questions open ended. The key to a successful qualitative interview is giving participants the opportunity to share information in their own words and in their own way.

Even after the interview guide is constructed, the interviewer is not yet ready to begin conducting interviews. The researcher next has to decide how to collect and maintain the information that is provided by participants. It is probably most common for qualitative interviewers to take audio recordings of the interviews they conduct.

Recording interviews allows the researcher to focus on her or his interaction with the interview participant rather than being distracted by trying to take notes. Of course, not all participants will feel comfortable being recorded and sometimes even the interviewer may feel that the subject is so sensitive that recording would be inappropriate. If this is the case, it is up to the researcher to balance excellent note-taking with exceptional question asking and even better listening. I don't think I can understate the difficulty of managing all these feats simultaneously. Whether you will be recording your interviews or not (and *especially* if not), practicing the interview in advance is crucial. Ideally, you'll find a friend or two willing to participate in a couple of trial runs with you. Even better, you'll find a friend or two who are similar in at least some ways to your sample. They can give you the best feedback on your questions and your interview demeanor.

All interviewers should be aware of, give some thought to, and plan for several additional factors, such as where to conduct an interview and how to make participants as comfortable as possible during an interview. Because these factors should be considered by both qualitative and quantitative interviewers, we will return to them in Section 9.4 "Issues to Consider for All Interview Types" after we've had a chance to look at some of the unique features of each approach to interviewing.

Although our focus here has been on interviews for which there is one interviewer and one respondent, this is certainly not the only way to conduct a qualitative interview. Sometimes there may be multiple respondents present, and occasionally more than one interviewer may be present as well. When multiple respondents participate in an interview at the same time, this is referred to as a **focus group**. Focus groups can be an excellent way to gather information because topics or questions that hadn't occurred to the researcher may be brought up by other participants in the group. Having respondents talk with and ask questions of one another can be an excellent way of learning about a topic; not only might respondents ask questions that hadn't occurred to the researcher, but the researcher can also learn from respondents' body language around and interactions with one another. Of course, there are some unique ethical concerns associated with collecting data in a group setting. We'll take a closer look at how focus groups work and describe some potential ethical concerns associated with them in Chapter 12 "Other Methods of Data Collection and Analysis".