National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper

How many qualitative interviews is enough?

Expert voices and early career reflections on sampling and cases in qualitative research

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Abstract

Students conducting a piece of qualitative research frequently ask 'how many interviews is enough?' Early career researchers and established academics also consider this question when designing research projects. In this NCRM Methods Review paper we gather and review responses to the question of 'how many' from 14 renowned social scientists and 5 early career researchers. The riposte to the question of 'how many' from most contributors is 'it depends'. In considering what 'it depends upon' however, the responses offer guidance on the epistemological, methodological and practical issues to take into account when conducting research projects. This includes advice about assessing research aims and objectives, validity within epistemic communities and available time and resources.

Introduction

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This NCRM Methods Review paper provides a series of brief but valuable answers, from seasoned methodologists and early career researchers, to the thorny question of 'how many interviews are enough?' in conducting a piece of qualitative research. Our intention is to provide a resource for undergraduate and postgraduate social science students undertaking their own research projects, and for lecturers teaching research methods and/or supervising student dissertations or theses. 'Later career' researchers may also find the contributions give them alternative perspectives to their usual practice.

We were moved to put the paper together because we have lost count of the number of times students have asked us the question of how many interviews they should do when they are conducting a piece of qualitative empirical research for their dissertation or thesis. We may even have pondered the dilemma ourselves in writing grant proposals for research funding. The issue of 'how many' is also a recurrent discussion thread in different guises on methods forums, such as http://methodspace.com , http://thecommunicationspace.com and http://www.postgraduateforum.com. Surprisingly there is a paucity of explicit discussion of this basic issue for qualitative researchers in general student text books. Where it is addressed, the issue may be buried away in chapters concerned with other topics. Is there a formula or way of calculating 'how many'? Or is 'how many' even an appropriate question for qualitative research? Is it appropriate epistemologically – does it depend on your theoretical perspective, academic discipline, or the social population or group or context that you are researching? Is it appropriate practically – does it depend on the time and resources that you have available, who is funding or supervising your research, or upgrade review board and research ethics committee requirements?

To help in teasing out answers to these questions, in the first part of this Methods Review we draw on the tacit knowledge of a series of renowned social scientists who come from a range of epistemological and disciplinary positions but who share an expertise in qualitative research. Most readers will recognize their names as authors of influential methods books and articles. The prominent methodologists we approached rarely turned down our request, and we very much appreciate their willingness to contribute to this resource despite their overcommitted writing schedules.

We asked each contributor to provide a short, to-the-point, piece responding to the key question: 'What advice would you give a student who asked you how many interviews they should carry out for their qualitative research project?' We refer to the series of pieces in the first part of this paper as our expert 'voices' because each of them is written in the style preferred by the particular author/s. Beyond putting the key 'how many' question to them we did not stipulate any format. Thus these contributions range from informal direct addresses to a more formal, referenced approach.

One of the pioneering qualitative researchers who we approached, Harry Wolcott, unfortunately was unable to send us an extended discussion, but provided a short answer to 'how many?' in the body of his email:

> That is, of course, a perennial question if not a great one. The answer, as with all things qualitative, is "it depends." It depends on your resources, how important the question is to the research, and even to how many respondents are enough to satisfy committee members for a dissertation. For many qualitative studies one respondent is all you need – your person of interest. But in general the old

rule seems to hold that you keep asking as long as you are getting different answers, and that is a reminder that with our little samples we can't establish frequencies but we should be able to find the RANGE of responses. Whatever the way the question is handled, the best answer is to report fully how it was resolved.

After this call for transparency, Harry then proceeded to turn the intellectual tables on us, to ask 'How many answers did you decide were enough?' With a sudden start, we realized that, effectively, we were in the process of – depending on your stance – gathering a 'sample' of experts or selecting cases. Indeed, the emailed responses to our question that we received could be conceived of as a form of interview conducted with these experts.

Harry's perceptive riposte deserved consideration, so we elaborated our rather instinctive procedure; a list of people, disciplines and institutional affiliations scribbled hastily on a piece of paper when we conceived the idea. We replied to Harry that we were working with an estimate of reaching data saturation, selecting on the basis of discipline, philosophy, substantive topic expertise and geographical locality, as well as the practicalities of space. 'Do try to supply the answer to how many respondents you sought for the question you asked' urged Harry in response, and we replied: 'The answer is 15'. In the event, however, the quota of expert voices ended up at 14.

In the second part of the paper we include some briefer contributions from early career researchers on the specific ways that they approached and handled the question of 'how many qualitative interviews is enough?' in particular projects. As with the experts, these pieces are from people rooted in different social science disciplines, albeit all drawn from the UK rather than internationally. We have termed the pieces 'reflections' since they represent considerations from people who have faced the dilemma of 'how many' without the resource of established reputation to rely on, and survived. The focus on completing specific projects means that many of the pieces document how sampling methodologies and methods change in line with practical considerations. In the process of finding academics with emerging rather than established careers we, like the early career researchers, also had to consider the practicalities of identifying and selecting respondents. Ultimately we relied on our own established networks and connections as well as groups such as the British Sociological Association Early Careers Forum. This has resulted in five contributions that draw upon a range of different experiences and are written from different methodological perspectives.

Whether or not we have reached 'saturation' of possible responses to the question of 'how many qualitative interviews is enough?' with our overall number of contributions – that is, 19 – is a moot point. But what we do have, we believe, is an excellent range of high quality pieces of advice that will serve as a valuable guide for qualitative researchers whatever their range of experience.

Advice Themes

The question of 'How many' is not exclusive to qualitative research, though its particular implications are. In their responses a number of contributors begin by reflecting on the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to the question. Patricia and Peter Adler start their piece by framing these differences in terms of research objectives. They contrast quantitative methods that objectively use correlations to describe and understand '*what* people do', with qualitative approaches that attempt to 'generate a subjective understanding of *how* and *why* people perceive, reflect, role-take, interpret, and interact'. They suggest that this difference in emphasis changes how research is undertaken and in what ways the question of 'how many' is approached. Adler and Adler write that quantitative researchers usually have an idea of how many cases they will need in order to test their hypotheses at the beginning of a project. In contrast because

qualitative research is exploratory by nature, qualitative researchers may not know how much data to gather in advance.

Charles Ragin also considers the specificities of qualitative research in his response. He compares a quantitative emphasis on statistical validity with a qualitative approach interested in the 'the core features of cases sharing a category or an outcome'. Ragin uses the example of a project based on the observation that all street vendors in a city are immigrants. A qualitative approach, he suggests, would usually be interested in identifying commonalities between types and then drawing out the implications of these commonalities to the larger whole. In the case of street vendors, the project might consider their activities in relation to other immigrants, as well as the implications for a city's political economy. The emphasis on commonality, Ragin suggests, means that once a qualitative researcher is conducting their research they may find that that the evidence is so repetitive that there is no need to continue. Thus for Ragin, Wolcott and many of the other experts, saturation is central to qualitative sampling.

As Alan Bryman writes in his response however, researching until saturation is achieved is a challenging approach because 'it forces the researcher to combine sampling, data collection, and data analysis, rather than treating them as separate stages in a linear process'. It also means that it is impossible to specify the number of qualitative interviews necessary to complete a project at its inception. This is a problem particularly when most project proposals require researchers to state a number. Thus while many experts agree that saturation is ideal, some give numerical guidance. For example, Adler and Adler advise graduate students to sample between 12 and 60, with 30 being the mean; and Ragin suggests that a glib answer is '20 for an M.A. thesis and 50 for a Ph.D. dissertation'.

However as these experts and others are keen to highlight, answers are dependent upon one's methodological and epistemological perspective. These sorts of distinctions of approach may be signaled in methodologists' use, respectively, of the term sample or case. For example, both Louisa Passerini and Linda Sandino write about the ways in which one interview is valid within oral history and how single qualitative interviews can produce rich accounts of subjectivity. Other authors also acknowledged a number of other reasons for using a single account. For Julia Brannen a single case may be sufficient if it is unique and not comparable to other cases, and for Howard Becker a single interview is adequate in order to establish if something is possible. Becker goes on to suggest that it may also only take a few interviews to demonstrate that a phenomenon is more complex or varied than previously thought. Both Brannen and Becker also write that a small number of interviews may not enable researchers to compare particular groups or to consider frequency distribution. Thus in order to decide how many qualitative interviews is enough the researcher must interrogate the purpose of their research.

In her response Jennifer Mason provides a number of questions to help the researcher to do this. For example, she advises researchers to consider whether a greater or fewer number of interviews would produce the desired outcome. In her advice on how to approach the question Mason writes that it is often a 'knee-jerk' response for the inexperienced researcher to want to conduct more interviews because this is somehow seen as 'better'. This is an issue that Tracey Jensen identifies as causing anxiety in the completion of her doctoral thesis. Jensen writes about how, with the help of her supervisor, she came to realize that it was the quality of the analysis and the dignity, care and time taken to analyse interviews, rather than quantity, that she valued in the work of others. She then put this realization into practice in her own project. Like Jenson, Mason also identifies the need within qualitative research to build a convincing analytical narrative based on 'richness, complexity and detail' rather than on statistical logic.

It is the analysis of interview accounts that a number of other authors ask the researcher to consider when attempting to answer the question of 'how many'. Drawing on Psathas' discussion of conversational analysis,

Norman Denzin suggests that an interview can be treated as a number of instances and analysed in great depth. He writes that a 'method of instances' takes 'each instance of a phenomenon, for example an interview, as an occurrence which evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available for use by cultural members'. From this perspective the answer to the question of 'how many' is 'one'.

Les Back also urges the researcher to think about analysis, particularly about the ways in which interviews are performative interventions that create, as well as reflect, the 'real' world. Referencing Skeggs *et al.* (2008), he suggests that in the process of analysis researchers can and should 'identify the social resources, judgments and tools used to "make society" as they attempt to make sense of their place within it'. In a similar way to Passerini, Back highlights how interviews are a process of creation and thus that researchers should analyse and make clear their own practice, aims and intentions. For Back this also means reflecting on the usefulness of the qualitative interview because he argues that the capacity to record can make a researcher less observant and less involved in the social world.

For different reasons, Daniel Miller and Paul ten Have also question if the qualitative interview is the best way to gather data. In both their responses the authors query whether an 'artificial procedure' or 'forced situation' is the best way to acquire information and observe social life. While they suggest that interviews are useful as part of ethnographic studies, they are both wary of using answers to interview questions as evidence.

These varied methodological and epistemological approaches to the question of 'how many' in part derive from the range of disciplinary backgrounds of the authors included in this Review paper. In this regard, Andrea Doucet and Kathy Charmaz each suggest that students and researchers need to become familiar with their epistemic communities to successfully answer the question of 'how many'. Doucet writes that researchers need to be aware of what type of evidence will satisfy their mentors, peers and readers and then make decisions regarding size, diversity and analysis. In a similar vein, Charmaz also advises researchers to learn 'what constitutes excellence rather than adequacy in your field' and conduct as many interviews needed to achieve it. Becker also advises researchers and students to think about how they would convince the most ardent critics of their research and to gather enough evidence to forestall their criticisms.

However as Uwe Flick makes clear in his response, there are a number of other, outside determinants that influence the answer to 'how many'. These include the time given to complete a research project, finding and keeping in contact with participants, and the institutional demands of ethics committees. Flick acknowledges that while the inside determinants of projects (methodological and epistemological considerations) should be more important in answering the question of 'how many', it is often the outside factors that play a more central role. This is clear in the responses of the early career researchers, particularly Ben Baumberg, Mark Doige and Bindi Shah. Baumberg writes of the difficulties in accessing participants when institutions such as the NHS are involved; Doige of the problems of completing interviews in different national contexts; and Shah of some of the demands of funded projects. In all the early career responses the ways that research projects change from day to day is clear. This confirms Becker's suggestion that the number of interviews that are needed will change as researchers learn more and revise their ideas. To address this, Becker advises students and researchers to start making their analysis and state their conclusions early on in the research process in order to start thinking about what evidence they will need to convince a skeptic. Of course, how many pieces of evidence this will require depends on your research project.

Thus, to end this Introduction as we began, the answer to 'How many qualitative interviews is enough' is 'it depends'. However, we believe that the usefulness of the following contributions is that they offer readers guidance as to what the answer depends upon.

Expert voices

Patricia and Peter Adler
Les Back
Howard S. Becker
Julia Brannen
Alan Bryman
Kathy Charmaz
Norman Denzin
Uwe Flick
Jennifer Mason
Daniel Miller
Luisa Passerini
Charles C. Ragin
Paul ten Have

Patricia A. Adler, University of Colorado
and Peter Adler, University of Denver

Having conducted, written about, and taught qualitative research methods at the graduate and undergraduate levels for 30 years, having lectured on the topic at conferences and workshops all over the world, and having edited the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* for nearly a decade, we feel comfortable weighing in on a discussion of how many qualitative interviews is enough. In thinking about this question, there are several issues to consider.

The Epistemology of Numbers

Qualitative research methods differ from quantitative approaches in many important respects, not the least of which is the latter's emphasis on numbers. Quantitative researchers capture a shallow band of information from a wide swath of people and seek to objectively use their correlations to understand, predict, or influence *what* people do. Qualitative researchers generally study many fewer people, but delve more deeply into those individuals, settings, subcultures, and scenes, hoping to generate a subjective understanding of *how* and *why* people perceive, reflect, role-take, interpret, and interact. Both research strategies offer possibilities for generalization, but about different things, and both approaches are theoretically valuable.

A key difference involves the hypothetico-deductive approach that guides quantitative research versus the inductive paradigm framing qualitative research. In trying to verify hypotheses, quantitative researchers have finite ideas, prior to starting research, about the scope and aims of their projects. Qualitative researchers, working in the context of discovery, are more open-ended, and often follow emergent empirical and conceptual findings in unexpected ways. Thus, they may not know, in advance, how much data they need to gather. The best answer is simply to gather data until empirical saturation is reached; however this is not always possible or practical.

Types of Sample Pool Sizes

A variety of factors can influence the amount of data qualitative researchers gather, and this is not measured only by numbers of interviews, but also by the presence of participant-observation, where applicable.

At the low end of the "how many" question, numerous well-respected and even classic studies have been produced using the single case study. Criminology, in particular, has generated many of these including, Sutherland's *The Professional Thief*, Shaw's *The Jack-Roller*, Steffensmeier's *The Fence*, and Klockars' *The Professional Fence*. So intriguing and useful were some of these that they elicited follow-up casestudies (i.e., Snodgrass' *The Jack-Roller at 70*, Steffensmeier and Ulmer's *Confessions of a Dying Thief*). A wealth of epistemological writings have made the argument for the single case approach (see Feagin,Orum and Sjoberg's, *A Case for the Case Study* and Ragin and Becker's, *What is a Case?*). Although these studies cannot claim the scope of those using more subjects, the deep and profound relationship often established between the researcher and respondent can often make up for lack of varieties of people.

Moving up, a small number of cases, or subjects, may be extremely valuable and represent adequate numbers for a research project. This is especially true for studying hidden or hard to access populations such as deviants or elites. Here, a relatively few people, such as between six and a dozen, may offer us insights into such things as the stratification hierarchy of a drug-producing subculture (i.e., methamphetamine), an outlaw motorcycle gang, or a corporate boardroom. It may simply be that is as many people to which one can gain access among these types of groups.

In advising graduate students we often suggest aiming for a sample of loosely around 30. This medium size subject pool offers the advantage of penetrating beyond a very small number of people without imposing the hardship of endless data gathering, especially when researchers are faced with time constraints. This is a good round number, particularly if interviews are supplemented with participant-observation. But what may be deemed appropriate by a graduate committee composed of qualitative research faculty may not seem adequate to one populated by quantitative researchers. Concerned with issues of representativeness, objectivity, validity, reliability, and other hypothetico-deductive epistemological factors, such committee members may press graduate students for a larger subject pool as well as a more formal definition of concepts, a more elaborate articulation of pre-conceived research questions, and raise challenges about the subjective nature of the researcher's relationship to the topic or subjects. These criticisms, however, often show a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of inductive research and are wrongheaded in their insistence on larger numbers or ideas that cannot be known before entering the field (or even while in it).

There are some types of research where larger numbers of subjects may be easier to get, more advisable to obtain, or more commonly sought. Let us briefly mention three. First, when subjects are easy to find and plentiful, researchers may gather interviews from more of them. Such would be the case with research conducted on college campuses, a built-in and easily approachable group for most scholars. Modern technologies now also facilitate access to much larger numbers of hidden populations than used to be available. Thus, for example, in conducting our research on self-injurers (Adler and Adler 2011), a population we thought would be difficult to find, we ended up having such a wealth of willing participants, many of them students on our campuses, that we had to turn people away who wanted to be interviewed, especially after we turned to the Internet as a method of subject recruitment.

Under conditions of plentiful subjects, researchers may even use data-gathering techniques such as focus groups, as Peek (2010) did in her study of Muslim college students after the attacks on 9/11. These have the disadvantage of using up multiple subjects at one time and preventing researchers from delving into each person's thoughts and history in as much depth, but are balanced by the ability to get subjects to tackle problematic or difficult issues with each other, raising opposing viewpoints and resolving conflicting perceptions. Large numbers of subjects may often accrue as researchers expand their focus over the lifespan of a project, delving first into one dimension of a group and then another, leading them to conduct new sets of interviews as new foci and questions emerge. We did this in our study of preadolescent children, *Peer Power*, where for many years after the principal participation-observation research was done we returned to the classrooms of several of the teachers to conduct interviews with the newer cohorts of children in this age range.

Second, it may be advisable to seek out a larger subject pool when groups or subpopulations are discernable within the setting and it is likely that members of these groups have varied perceptions, roles, statuses, problems with, or decisions about the scene. For example, in Vecitis' (2011) research on drugs and eating disorders, she found four types of instrumental drug users (conventional over-conformists, scroungers, journeyers, and opportunists), each of which had different outlooks and experiences. This also often arises where researchers uncover a stratification hierarchy in their setting, creating a need to include adequate numbers of participants from each stratum. This type of subject recruitment is called theoretical sampling, where researchers purposely seek to interview participants who occupy particular niches in their analysis.

Third, larger numbers of subjects are more commonly sought in certain circumstances. Funded research, for example, which is often evaluated by the logic of hypothetico-deductive standards, may require an "n" of 100, such as in Murphy and Rosenbaum's (1998) study of pregnant women on drugs, where they conducted 120 interviews. People conducting funded research also may generate larger samples because they have money

to hire interviewers and pay subjects. Comparative or multi-site projects may involve larger numbers of subjects as well, since they require gathering subjects in different venues (such as Fine's 1998 study of restaurants).And sometimes projects relying entirely on qualitative interviews, that lack a participant-observation component, use larger subject pools to help deepen their data by probing subjects more closely as the project evolves.

Limitations to Sample Pools

The size of the sample pool may be limited by researchers' time available for data-gathering. Undergraduates usually have the smallest window, since they have one or two semesters to gather their data, conduct ongoing analysis, and write a paper. When teaching undergraduate research courses we typically limit students' projects in three ways.

First, we tell them it is not feasible to study anything unknown to them. To have any chance of getting through the process in the time they have, they must choose a setting where they are already members, know the people, and have a good familiarity with the scene. Riemer (1977) termed this "opportunistic" research and we (Adler and Adler 1987) have coined the term "member-researcher" (peripheral, active, and complete) to describe this situation.

Second, due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) obstacles, we advise students to steer clear of anything illegal, deviant, capturing vulnerable populations, or involving power issues or status differences between subjects and themselves. These can pose red flags for such boards, and every piece of undergraduate research conducted in twenty-first century America has to be reviewed and approved according to a bureaucratic maze of guidelines.

Third, we suggest that they should shoot for a sample of 12. This number gives them the experience of planning and structuring interviews, conducting and partially transcribing these, and generating quotes for their papers. More than this number seems to be impractical within their customary time constraints. For a longer project (an honors thesis, a two-semester course) they might extend that slightly, but rarely to more than 20.

Ironically, it has been our experience that some IRBs have the effect of limiting sample pools for graduate students as well as professionals. In applying for initial research clearance, applicants are required to state the number of interviews they will conduct. Yet due to the emergent nature of inductive research, when projects extend or take new twists and turns, researchers may want to conduct more interviews than originally estimated. Research review boards often make it difficult for scholars to renew their protocols in such cases, and arguments have arisen. Although qualitative researchers believe that their expertise should prevail in these conflicts, review boards often take hard line positions.

In sum, the number of people required to make an adequate sample for a qualitative research project can vary from one to a hundred or more. However, when considering the length of time this type of research often takes, the difficulty of gaining entrée to even the most mundane group or setting, the difficulty in transcribing thousands of hours of interviews, and the "publish or perish" world in which we live, our best bet is to advise in the broad range of between a dozen and 60, with 30 being the mean.

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Les Back, Goldsmiths, University of London

Being satisfied with provisional answers is an occupation hazard for any young scholar. Every Monday night I teach a course on core qualitative methods attended by seventy PhD students. I find myself responding to their specific queries about analysing interviews or using ethnographic observations with "well… it depends!" I know they are unsatisfied with this lame response. It is the only honest one I can give because the answer to a question like 'how much data is enough' is never simply a procedural matter. Rather, it can only be answered by examining how the interview data connects with the analytical framework of the project and the 'truth telling' status we confer on the interviews.

In 1956 Everett Hughes wrote: "Sociology has become the science of the interview" (Hughes 1971: 507). The interview had become the favoured digging tool for mining into people's lives and the tape-recorders in the sociologist's bag evidence of a vocational disposition akin to the place of the stethoscope in the professional persona of a medical doctor (Rice 2010, 2008). The tape-recorder provided the means to "collect voices" then transcribe and re-circulate them. For example, in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution C Wright Mills wrote *Listen, Yankee* (1960) – a million-selling popular book – that was written in the voice of a young Cuban revolutionary. Dan Wakefield wrote that in August 1960 Mills went to Cuba: "equipped with his latest beloved gadget, a tape-recorder; on his return, working with furious energy, he wrote *Listen, Yankee* in six weeks' time" (Wakefield 2000: 12-13).

Mills' example is a cautionary tale. The desire to "give voice" is a lasting impetus for sociologists as they reach for the tape-recorder. Mills interviewed Che Guevara and Fidel Castro and the popularity of the book also brought public pressure - in many respects Mills' tape-recorder was the source of his undoing. *Listen, Yankee* had the kind of public impact so much sought after today in the discussion of public sociology and research relevance (Burawoy 2005, Grant *et al* 2009). In Mills' case though that impact was fatal. Mills was scheduled in December 1960 to debate the Cuban Revolution with a major liberal figure, A. A. Berle Jr, on national television. The night before the debate Mills suffered a heart attack. In January 1961 a libel lawsuit was filed against Mills and the publisher of *Listen, Yankee* for $25 million damages. The pressure was fatal and a little over a year later Mills died after his second heart attack. His friend Harvey Swados wrote after his death: "In his last months Mills was torn between defending *Listen, Yankee* as a good and honest book, and acknowledging publicly for the first time in his life that he had been terribly wrong" (Swados 1967: 207). The danger – a mortal one in Mills' case – is of reproducing the voices of respondents as if they simply correspond to a truth beyond the telling. As Atkinson and Silverman assert: "We take at face value the image of the self-revealing speaking subject at our peril" (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 322).

There is also a sleight of hand in the claim that the authenticity of a person can be rendered through a faithful transcription of their voice. It also confers on the person coming to the interview a self that is as much a historical product as it is an authentic biography to be disclosed in the telling. For Atkinson and Silverman the speaking self emerges within what they call the "interview society" - a stylised and particular mode of narrating life. It requires: "first, the emergence of the self as a proper object of narration. Second, the technology of the confessional – the friend not only of the policeman but of the priest, the teacher, and the 'psy' professional. Third, mass media technologies give a new twist to the perennial polarities of the private and the public, the routine and the sensational" (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 315). They suggest that the well-intentioned desire to give voice to our subjects and pervasiveness the interview amongst qualitative researchers draws us into the structure of the "interview society". The error is that we mistake the socially shaped account for the authentic voice of truth.

Roland Barthes in a wonderful collection of his interviews called *The Grain of the Voice* commented in his introduction on precisely what's at stake in the interview situation:

> "We talk, a tape recording is made, diligent secretaries listen to our words to refine, transcribe, and punctuate them, producing a first draft that we can tidy up afresh before it goes on to publication, the book, eternity. Haven't we just gone through the 'toilette of the dead'? We have embalmed our speech like a mummy, to preserve it forever. Because we really must last a bit longer than our voices; we must, through the comedy of writing, inscribe ourselves somewhere. This inscription, what does it cost us? What do we lose? What do we win?"
> (Barthes, 1985: 3)

Barthes alerts us here to the issue of what the interview costs. Do we create society in our accounts of it rather than reflect it (Osbourne and Rose 1999)? If we lose, or let go of the idea, that we can access the intimate interior of a person through the interview perhaps we gain other ways of thinking about what might be precious and valuable in what interviews produce or contain (Rapley 2004). Silverman argues that even "manufactured" interview data can be useful if understood as an "*activity* awaiting analysis and not as a picture awaiting a commentary" (Silverman 2007: 56). In other words, we should see the interview as a place where social forms are staged rather than a resource to understand the nature of society beyond. For example, in Beverley Skeggs, Helen Wood and Nancy Thumim's study of class and audience understandings of reality TV, interviews provided a "mode of articulation" infused with classed and racialised moral judgments rather than "observable realities". In a sense, reality TV provided the object on and through which modes of class judgment, distinction and taste were rehearsed. They conclude: "Research practices do not simply 'capture' or reveal the world out there; they generate the conditions of possibility that frame the object of analysis" (Skeggs *et al* 2008: 20).

Interviews may well 'manufacture' data but the point that Skeggs and her colleagues point out is that we can identify the social resources, judgments and tools used to 'make society' as they attempt to make sense of their place within it. As Howard Becker has commented, all representations – including those offered in an interview - are perfect... for something (Becker 2007). The first step in establishing what the account perfectly reveals is to think through the analytical status conferred on the account itself. These questions are settled not in terms of asking 'how many interviews are enough' but decided theoretically in the analytical framework conferred on what is caught on the digital voice recorder.

If you are a Freudian psychoanalysis listening for hidden meanings and the contours of the subconscious one interview might be enough for an entire thesis. What we are listening for is decided through our analytical framework and the books and ideas we use to furnish out imaginations. A phenomenologist inspired by Merleau-Ponty would be attentive to how the speaker's lifeworld was expressed, while a Foucauldian poststructuralist may not be interested in the specific interviewee as a subject at all but rather take note of the discourses and forms of power that shape the words articulated.

Sociological craft is not just a matter of technique or extracting the right quantum of data. We need always to think about what we are trying to produce through our ideas, theoretical fascinations and sociological sociability. Interview data provides our basic raw material but how much we need depends on what we want to make with it. Also, our addiction to interviews has limited our attentiveness to the world. This in part is because the presumption is that if it is not on tape or the digital sound file then it does not exist. In 1967 Ned Polsky in his classic collection *Hustlers, Beats and Other* anticipated these limitations:

"Successful field research depends on the investigator's trained abilities to look at people, listen to them, think and feel with them, talk with them rather than at them. It does *not* depend fundamentally on some impersonal apparatus, such as a camera or tape-recorder..." (Polsky 1998 [1967]: 119)

We don't have to share Polsky's antipathy to gadgets to acknowledge that the reliance on sound recorders has confined our attentiveness to the mere transcription of voices from tape to text. The tacit belief that the researcher needed merely to attend to what was said has limited the forms of empirical documentation.

Perhaps as researchers today we need to lessen our dependence on the interview itself. I would go as far to argue that the capacity to record voices accurately meant that researchers became less observant and actually less involved in the social world. It was on tape so we could stop watching and listening. As Harvey Sacks warned in a lecture give in the spring of 1965: "The tape-recorder is important, but a lot of this [observational study] can be done without a tape-recorder" (Sacks 1992: 28). Strangely I think this has made social researchers less well equipped to achieve vivid descriptions in their writing. We have an opportunity today to think about how to develop new ways of training our sociological attention, our understanding of qualitative data beyond text to include image, sound and sensuous life that will also enhance our representations of the social world.

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Howard S. Becker, author of *Tricks of the Trade*

How many qualitative interviews is enough? Every experienced researcher knows this question has no reasonable answer, no magic number you can do and then you're out of danger. The only possible answer is to have enough interviews to say what you think is true and not to say things you don't have that number for. The kinds of things you might want to say take a lot of forms and so require varying numbers of interviews.

For instance, one interview is sometimes quite sufficient to establish that something is possible, which may be all you need as evidence in support of a particular point, such as "When X says that it is impossible that such a thing can happen, he's wrong, here is the evidence that in at least one case it has happened."

Likewise, it may not take many interviews to show that something people have not thought about as taking a variety of forms in fact does take such a variety of forms. I can interview three physicians and demonstrate that there are three kinds of medical careers in a given community. I won't be able to say what proportion of the town's doctors have each kind of career and shouldn't try to hint at that. But my analysis may not require that kind of conclusion.

Many studies based on interviews and observation try to demonstrate something quite different from that kind of variation or frequency distribution: that a particular organization (a community, an institution, a factory, a colleague group, etc.) works in a certain way, or that the kinds of events your analysis deals with occur as the result of a particular process. No rules tell you how much evidence is enough for a conclusion of that kind.

Instead you have to think in a different way, asking how you can convince skeptics—people who will not want to accept that what you say is how things works is how they actually do work—that you're right and they have to accept it. Many people will be eager to show that you're wrong: doctors in the town you studied may think you have given an unfavorable picture of how they work and will search for any weak spots in your argument. You can deal with this by being there before them. Imagine just what the most fervent critic of your conclusion would say to prove that you were wrong and then ask yourself what you could do to forestall that criticism— and do it. If you can't think of how to get that result, don't say what you can't demonstrate convincingly enough to shut critics up.

Among other things, this means that you can't know at any point in your research what evidence you'll need, and certainly not at the beginning. You can only know that when you state some kind of conclusion. Which in turn means that you have to start making your analysis and stating conclusions early on, starting with the first day: writing what you think may be true and then seeing what evidence (what interviews, what observations) you will need to be able to convince a hardened skeptic.

So the number of interviews you need will change from day to day as you learn more and revise your ideas. Since there is no universal "right place" to stop your research, where you decide to stop will be somewhat arbitrary, probably more the result of running out of time or money or some similar mundane consideration than of some logical analytic procedure. You will just want to be sure that when you do stop, the interviews and observations you have and what you want to say coincide, your data supporting your conclusions and your conclusions not going beyond what your data can support.

That's the short version. The long version takes years of experience which you will eventually have.

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How many qualitative interviews is enough? The answer is that there is no rule of thumb. In my own work the number of cases I have studied has ranged from twenty-two married couples (Brannen and Collard 1982), twelve four generation families (71 persons interviewed) (Brannen et al. 2004) to a longitudinal study in which around 260 mothers and their children were followed up over several years (Brannen and Moss 1994). When I first started in qualitative research it seemed to me common among those carrying out qualitative interviews for their doctoral research for sample size to be around 40 persons. Since then the number seems to have shrunk, for a variety of reasons I suspect. In assessing success in sample recruitment I always found it comforting to recall the advice that it was not sample size *per se* that mattered nor even that the distribution of numbers of persons within a group that was so was critical but rather the inclusion of a particular case. In such an event the case might one that was difficult to locate or a person or organisation from whom it was difficult to secure agreement. Such a case can turn out, often for theoretical reasons, to be central to the analysis.

For me, the most important issue in deciding how many qualitative interviews are enough concerns the purpose of the research – the type of research question to be addressed and the methodology it is proposed to adopt. If a decision is made to focus on one case, then so be it. It may be that this is sufficient as the case is unique and it is not comparable with other cases. A complex case may indeed take all the resources available.

If however we want to study many cases and to select purposively so that we can compare particular groups, we may have to spread the net more widely. In *The Edwardians*, Paul Thompson (1977) set out to establish the key dimensions of social change in the early twentieth century and the contributions that ordinary people made to change in their everyday life. He devised a quota sample drawn from the 1911 census totalling 444 persons, representing six major occupational groups, though in practice the sample exceeded this number. He was able in this research to draw upon the resources of a large team of interviewers to assist him. But in the main resources for in depth qualitative research are much more limited, even for funded research teams.

If a case study design is chosen for a study the case may include many persons. Here cases must be *systematically* selected based upon a sociological logic (see Brannen and Nilsen 2011). Cases are not only selected for the purposes of interview but also, most importantly, for the purposes of comparison in the analysis. We must find the 'right persons' to study in terms of our 'theory'. We must select cases which are not only relevant to specific research questions but should seek out those cases that are likely to prove our assumptions wrong in the analysis. Moreover, as many textbooks on qualitative research remind us, collecting more data becomes unnecessary when 'saturation' is reached in terms of the identification of new themes. In addition, it is worth bearing in mind that not all cases can be presented in the final presentation of the work. Here transparency and rigour are equally important, as in the recruitment of the sample and in carrying out analysis. While on the one hand, more cases to analyse and choose from may be preferable, this is counterbalanced by the sheer size of the task. In addition, the process of increasing the size of the sample may not increase the opportunity for addressing biases in the sample, for example the methods may not succeed in targeting the difficult to reach.

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Like the editors, I have been asked this question countless times. It reflects the fact that there is little definitive and unambiguous guidance in the qualitative research community regarding how large a sample should be. In both my book on social research methods (Bryman 2012) and in offering guidance to students, I tend to prefer to point to a number of factors they should consider (see also Morse 2000). I know this tactic is sometimes disappointing to students, but given the lack of agreement on this issue among practitioners and methodologists, it is the only responsible guidance that can be supplied. In this short note, I will refer to five factors.

First, there is the issue of *saturation*. As is well known, the notion of theoretical saturation derives from Glaser and Strauss's (1967) influential account of grounded theory. There, theoretical saturation is described as a process in which the researcher continues to sample relevant cases until no new theoretical insights are being gleaned from the data. Once saturation is achieved, the researcher would move on to a research question arising from the data collected and then sampling theoretically in relation to that question. As such, the answer to the question 'How large should my sample be?' would be a glib and unhelpful 'Whatever it takes [to saturate your theoretical categories]'. Such an approach to sampling is very demanding because it forces the researcher to combine sampling, data collection, and data analysis, rather than treating them as separate stages in a linear process. It also means that the researcher cannot possibly know at the outset how many cases he or she will need to collect data from, which causes problems when trying to formulate a research proposal or plan or when creating a budget. It is probably this pressure on the researcher that results in the common observation that saturation is often claimed when there is little evidence that it has been employed as a criterion for deciding when to stop sampling (Bryman 2012; Guest et al. 2006; O'Reilly and Parker in press). Guest et al. (2006) conducted an experiment on a corpus of transcripts from interviews with women in two West African countries and found that saturation was attained after twelve interviews. This might appear quite a low figure but the sample was quite homogeneous (women at high risk of HIV) and the research was tightly focused on how the women discussed sex. Further, there have been few guidelines on how to establish whether one has in fact achieved saturation. Bowen et al. (2010) have provided some useful guidance in this regard. They propose two stages which they employed in relation to two health-related projects: an initial sample of around ten cases followed by a further three cases to determine if any new themes emerge. This criterion is consistent with the findings of Guest et al.

A second factor is that it is sometimes suggested that there are *minimum requirements* for sample size in qualitative studies. For example, in *Social Research Methods*, I cite Warren's (2002) suggestion that the minimum number of interviews needs to be between twenty and thirty for an interview-based qualitative study to be published (Bryman 2012: 425). However, I also cite Gerson and Horowitz (2002: 223) as suggesting that 'fewer than 60 interviews cannot support convincing conclusions and more than 150 produce too much material to analyse effectively and expeditiously'. Contrasting these figures (20-30 versus 60-150) strongly suggests that there is quite a lot of variety in what is believed to be the minimum requirement, so that it is unsurprising to find that actual sample sizes vary considerable in qualitative research. For example, Mason (2010) reports that when he looked at the abstracts of doctoral thesis abstracts relating to interview-based qualitative studies in Great Britain and Ireland, he found that the range was 1 to 95 (the mean was 31 and the median 28). Mason also refers to an online article (the link no longer works and I was unable to track it down) which examined 50 articles based on grounded theory and found sample sizes to vary between 5 and 350 (see Bryman 2012 for more information).

Moreover, it is likely that what these figures conceal is that sample sizes will be significantly influenced by a third influence on sample size – the *style or theoretical underpinnings* of the study. Life story research or a study based on Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is likely to entail a much smaller sample size because of the fine-grained analysis that is often involved. It is simply not necessary to generate a large

corpus of data for such research (much the same applies to conversation analysis – O'Reilly and Parker, in press). Thus, on the one hand, researchers need to be aware that there is a view that there are expectations about minimum sample size in order to be able to publish one's results; on the other hand, there is very little agreement about what that minimum sample size is! What is almost certainly crucial is that the researcher must be prepared to justify the sample size with which he or she has ended up. One of the advantages of the saturation concept is that it can be used to justify the size of one's sample.

A fourth factor that is likely to influence sample size is the *heterogeneity of the population* from which the sample is drawn. For some research questions, the population may be quite heterogeneous with a good deal of sub-group variability. It is possible, if not likely, that a researcher will want to capture at least some of this variability in view of the likelihood that it will be associated with significant variability in experiences and world views of participants.

Fifth and finally, the *breadth and scope of research questions* vary quite a lot in qualitative research and this too is likely to influence sample size. A fairly narrow research focus like the one involved in the research by Guest et al. (2006: 62) – 'how women talk about sex and their perceptions of self-report accuracy' in Nigeria and Ghana – can be contrasted with that of Butler and Robson (2001: 2146) – 'the pattern of gentrification in inner London and in particular…the variability of the process'. However, breadth and scope are not entirely objective attributes of a research focus, so there is likely to be some disagreement about appropriate sample sizes along this dimension.

In this brief commentary, I have tried to sketch some considerations that might be taken into account when contemplating sample size for a qualitative study. I am aware that for some readers it may be a frustrating account, but it is better to give a candid point of view than provide numerical or other guidelines which are contentious and therefore likely to be misleading. As I have said, the most crucial thing is to be prepared to justify your sample size and in this briefing I've tried to suggest some reflections in this regard. The five factors that I have mentioned can be used to springboards for thinking about and justifying sample size. The other crucial issue to bear in mind is not to make inappropriate inferences from the kind and size of sample you end up with (Bryman 2012: 426-7; Onwugbuzie and Leech 2010).

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When novices ask, "How many interviews do I need?" their question likely rests on three presuppositions. First, the question presupposes that the number of interviews answers a researcher's concern about performance, whether this concern is about meeting barely adequate, credible, or exemplary standards. Second, the question presupposes that experts can specify a concrete number of interviews and third, that they would agree on the same concrete number. All three presuppositions are problematic.

Forming any answer to the question is more complex than it seems and raises a series of related questions. An answer based primarily on the topic, research purpose, disciplinary traditions, institutional human subjects' reviews, or the researcher's professional goals does not suffice, although such concerns figure in planning an interview research project. Fundamental questions about epistemology must be addressed. What do you seek to know? What do you need to learn? How can interviews inform these questions? A paradox arises: you may not know what you need to find out until you grapple with analyzing your data. Most qualitative interview research is an emergent process of learning about and interpreting research participants' views of their experience. Important foci often remain implicit. Planning solid interview studies entails allowing for following emergent ideas and directions.

A standard answer to the question of how many interviews is that it depends on your research purpose. Might you have multiple purposes that complement or supersede your research purpose? Do you intend to meet a course or doctoral requirement and later present and publish papers from your study? What are the norms of your discipline? Are you aiming for credibility within or across disciplines and professions?

The number of interviews depends on the analytic level to which the researcher aspires as well as these purposes. When researchers pursue straightforward research questions to resolve problems in local practice in applied fields, a small number of interviews may be enough. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) attempted to answer the question about how many interviews researchers (particularly those in applied fields) needed by conducting an experiment using their codebooks from an earlier qualitative interview study. They aimed to discover the point in data collection and analysis when new data does not alter themes in the code book. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson argue that twelve interviews suffice for most researchers when they aim to discern themes concerning common views and experiences among relatively homogeneous people. Twelve interviews may generate themes but not command respect.

Numerous thematic studies involve synthesizing data and sorting them into recognizable general categories. Subsequently such studies remain descriptive. Heterogeneity among the research participants, variation of experience and circumstance, comparative analytic methods, and development of an abstract conceptual analysis of the data all point to expanding the number of interviews. The nature of the research topic can also foster increasing the number of interviews. Opening secrets, silences, and liminal spaces likely increase the number of interviews needed, as does studying an area which does not come equipped with a widely-shared language.

Researchers sometimes claim that their method of choice such as discourse analysis or narrative inquiry leads to a small number of interviews. They reason that the intense scrutiny entailed in using this method precludes conducting a large number of interviews. Rationalization may serve as reason here. Similarly, some researchers mistake the efficiency of grounded theory as reason to shortcut data collection. Grounded theory is efficient but that does not mean a handful of interviews produces a respectable study. Conversely, having a substantial amount of data does not guarantee an original contribution.

Often the question of how many interviews assumes that conducting single interviews is the only method of gathering data. Is it? Not always. Sometimes researchers do not give themselves credit for observational, archival, and documentary research that they have done. Mixed qualitative methods can strengthen a study with a small number of interviews.

A very small sample can produce a study with depth and significance depending on the initial and emergent research questions and how the researcher conducted the study and constructed the analysis. In his classic study, Edward Speedling (1981) studied eight married men who had had heart attacks. The small sample belies a large effort. Speedling observed on the cardiac wards for several months, visited patients, talked with their family members, and subsequently interviewed the men and their wives during the hospital stays, after the husband's arrival at home, and remained involved in their lives for over three to four more months.
If you conduct a study that relies only on interviews, the following guidelines may help. Increase your number of interviews when you: 1) pursue a controversial topic, 2) anticipate or discover surprising or provocative findings, 3) construct complex conceptual analyses, and 4) seek professional credibility. In short, my advice is to learn what constitutes excellence rather than adequacy in your field—and beyond, if your project portends of having larger import—and conduct as many interviews as needed to achieve it.

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How many interviews? The answer to this question, following Psathas (1995, p. 50; also Denzin, 1999; Fiske, 1994), is given in the use of the "method of instances." This method takes each instance of a phenomenon, for example an interview, as an occurrence which evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available for use by cultural members. How many interviews are enough? ONE.

An analogy may help. In discourse analysis "no utterance is representative of other utterances, though of course it shares structural features with them; a discourse analyst studies utterances in order to understand how the potential of the linguistic system can be activated when it intersects at its moment of use with a social system" (Fiske, 1994, p. 195). This is the argument for the method of instances. The analyst examines those moments when an utterance intersects with another utterance, giving rise to an instance of the system in action.

Psathas clarifies the meaning of an instance, "An instance of something is an occurrence ... an event whose features and structures can be examined to discover how it is organized" (1995, p. 50). An occurrence is evidence that "the machinery for its production is culturally available ... [for example] the machinery of turn-taking in conversation" (pp. 50-51).

The analyst's task is to understand how this instance and its intersections works, to show what rules of interpretation are operating, to map and illuminate the structure of the interpretive event itself. The analyst inspects the actual course of the interaction "by observing what happens first, second, next, etc., by noticing what preceded it; and by examining what is actually done and said by the participants" (Psathas, 1995, p. 51). Questions of meaning are referred back to the actual course of interaction, where it can shown how a given utterance is acted upon and hence given meaning. The pragmatic maxim obtains here (Peirce, 1905). The meaning of an action is given in the consequences that are produced by it, including the ability to explain past experience, and predict future consequences. In the arena of an interview meaning is given in the responses one speaker-writer makes to another.

Interpretation moves through two stages. In stage one the analyst examines how these meaningful utterances are directly and indirectly connected to one another as interactional accomplishments within a particular interpretive frame. Here the focus is on the form, not the content of the event, for example the use of turn-taking, compliments and responses, greeting exchanges, closings, and so on. In stage two, the content of the event, as it operates within the interpretive frame is examined, for example a request for help within the frame of a face-to-face interview. There is an attempt to show how these occurrences in this context articulate matters of power, biography, self, gender, race, class and ethnicity.

Whether the particular utterance occurs again is irrelevant. The question of sampling from a population is also not an issue, for it is never possible to say in advance what an instance is a sample of (Psathas, 1995, p. 50). Indeed, collections of instances "cannot be assembled in advance of an analysis of at least one, because it cannot be known in advance what features delineate each case as a 'next one like the last'" (Psathas,1995, p. 50). Thus large samples are of little use until the analyst has exhausted the method of instances.

This means there is little concern for empirical generalization. Psathas is clear on this point. The goal is not an abstract, or empirical generalization, rather the aim is "concerned with providing analyses that meet the criteria of unique adequacy" (p. 50). Each analysis must be fitted to the case at hand, each "must be studied to provide an analysis uniquely adequate for that particular phenomenon" (p. 51, stress in original).

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My short answer to the question "how many qualitative interviews is enough" is: *it depends*.

It depends on how you theoretically and practically define a broad range of methodological and epistemological issues such as, for example, reliability and replicability, generalization, validity and verisimilitude, saturation, and sampling. More specifically, it depends on how your 'epistemic community' views and evaluates all of these matters.

This term, 'epistemic community', is rooted in the Foucauldian concept of 'episteme'; it was, in fact, first coined by the international relations scholar John Ruggie who employed it "to refer to dominant ways of looking at a social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations..." (Ruggie 1975, p. 558). Philosopher Catherine Elgin (1999) is also a useful guide to understanding this concept as she describes the 'rules' and 'criteria' that govern epistemic communities and the 'evidence' they produce. According to Elgin, it is these communities who make and "enforce" judgments, "rules and criteria" about what "counts" both as empirical evidence and as "reasonable" ways of arriving at that knowledge (1999, 2).

As a student and/or researcher, you are part of one or more epistemic communities. You need to be clear on what kind of evidence will satisfy your scholarly mentors, your colleagues, intellectual peers, and the readers who will evaluate your work. From there, you can make specific decisions about how to access, create, or shape your evidence. This includes decisions on the appropriate number of interviews, as well as the best types of interviews, the size and diversity of the sample to provide interview data, and the ways in which you will extract meaning from and analyze those interviews (e.g. are they viewed as discourses, narratives, subjectivities, as case studies of larger structures?).

Granted, our decisions at all stages of our research, including 'how many qualitative interviews is enough,' will not be judged by assumptions that are set in stone. As Elgin notes, the "standards and criteria to assess our efforts" and "the conditions under which justification is obtained" must be viewed as "*reasonable, revisable, and subject to evaluation*" (2001, 14; emphasis added).

My personal and scholarly experience across two decades validates the point about constantly shifting "standards and criteria", as I have answered the 'how many?' question in different ways over time; I have done this because I have arrived at different conclusions over time, and at different times, about my knowledge construction processes, and resulting knowledge(s), that would meet the requirements of the particular epistemic communities who judge and evaluate my research. I also had to balance such decisions with time and available resources, appropriate project design, the level of diversity needed within my research sample, and estimated "outputs" aimed at diverse audiences.

As a graduate student at the University in Cambridge in the early 1990s, I did ask the 'how many interviews?' question for my doctoral dissertation on (heterosexual) couples trying to share childcare and housework. My response: 69 interviews with 23 couples (which were carried out via 46 individual interviews, followed by 23 couple interviews). That number was 'reasonable' given the time and resources at my disposal and the fact that, according to the conventions of that time, PhD students were expected to make a small contribution to existing knowledge.

More recently, in my research project on primary caregiving fathers, I sought a fairly large and diverse sample of fathers. Initially, I thought I would include about 50 men, but I soon realized that this number did not give me the breadth I needed, so I increased it to the round number of 100.

I could do this because I had the privilege of a research grant which provided some research assistance (for scheduling interviews and transcription costs). Also, as an early career scholar, I aimed to make a more substantial contribution to the field and felt that I needed a larger range of data and evidence to do that. The 'how many interviews?' query was further complicated by my desire to glean a sense of change over time; I also wanted to interview fathers in groups, on their own, as well as with their wives/partners, as I was aware that different settings might produce different stories. I thus took a multi-layered approach to the 'how many?' question, thinking also of 'what type' and 'what sample' were best.

As I detail in my book, *Do Men Mother?* from the 101 fathers in the sample, the answer to the "how many?' question looked something like this:

- 62 in-depth face-to-face interviews;
- 27 telephone interviews;
- 3 focus groups with 12 fathers; and
- 14 couple interviews (with heterosexual couples).
- Importantly, 28 of the men were interviewed 2-3 times using different kinds of interviews (couple, individual, and focus groups).

In sum, my response to the question 'how many qualitative interviews is enough?' is that a "reasonable" answer depends on many factors. These include your institutional and disciplinary location, your career stage (and associated resources), and the epistemic communities who will evaluate your overall methodological approach in relation to your overall research problematic.

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Uwe Flick, Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin

How many qualitative interviews is enough? This is indeed a question that is asked so often that a standard response could seem attractive. However, in my experience there are a number of possible answers, so that the only standard response can be: 'it depends'. But on what does it depend? A starting point is the research question: Is it a question asking for comparative answers with individuals or groups to be compared? Or is the focus on a singular experience or expertise? Then a case study based on one interview can be the best way, in particular if this interview is embedded in other sorts of data about the single case. However, that may be a particular example. If the interest is In comparing participants' views or experiences, the question of the number of interviews to plan for becomes more relevant. In my experience from supervision of students' research and from consulting for research projects, the number can be defined from the inside of the study and from the outside. From the *inside* of the study, it should be clarified, which dimensions are the basis for the intended comparison – gender, age, profession … – what else? My suggestion is to reflect on which of these (or other) dimensions should be included in the comparative structure of the study and in the sample – and which can be left out. The next step is to clarify how many cases for each dimension should be included. In my experience it is always easier to make comparisons when you have more than one case in every cell of a grid: Female and male participants in three biographical phases would mean to have six interviewees, but it would be better to have two interviews in every subgroup so that we end up with twelve interviews.

The *outside* determinants for defining the number of interviews are sometimes more important than those from the inside (although the latter should be): How much time is given for the project? In particular student theses for obtaining a bachelor degree have often to be completed in six weeks. This time limit defines the restriction of how many interviews in such research are possible. More than four to eight interviews then are unrealistic, if the interviews are not only to be organized and done, but also transcribed and analyzed in sufficiently systematic and comprehensive way. Other determinants are experience with qualitative research, with finding interview partners, with transcription and with analyzing the material in the end.

In general, the answer to the above question depends on several issues, which have to be balanced in finding the answer: The research question is one aspect, the accessibility of potential interviewees another and resources maybe a major aspect. And finally the availability of potential interviewees is another context aspect. In particular when expert interviews are planned, the number of experts in the field may be very limited, so that is sometimes difficult to think of more than ten interviews.

Finally, the aspect of resources becomes relevant again, when participants are intended to be interviewed repeatedly (in a longitudinal study) or not only to be interviewed (in a triangulation design). Both will produce limitations on the number of interview(ee)s that can be reasonably managed in one study.

All in all, the answer to our question is a matter of designing research. As I tried to unfold in more details elsewhere (Flick 2008, 2011), research designing comprises more than sampling and methods. It has to do with research planning, on the level of available resources and with respect to overall ambitions with the research. So the answer can only be: Reflect what you intend to find out and show with your interviews, put it in the context of which resources you have available for doing your research and how your interviews are embedded in the fuller outline of your study.

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Jennifer Mason, University of Manchester

How many qualitative interviews is enough. The answer, of course, is it depends! 'How many interviews should I do?' is an appropriate question for a qualitative researcher to ask themselves though, because it encourages them to engage with some important epistemological issues about which decisions have to be made. Researchers simply need to think carefully and critically about what the best options are in relation to specific projects and pieces of research. They should regard with utmost suspicion anyone who says that there is a formula for working out the answer (based on 'population size' and 'number of variables' for example) or that the answer is a straightforward number. The answer is that you need to *think*, to ask yourself difficult questions, and to *work out* what to do. It is possible, though, to identify some of the things that it depends upon, and hence what might need to be thought about and worked through. Here are some:

What are you trying to get at?
What kinds of phenomena are you exploring? What are your research questions? Sometimes, any number of interviews won't be 'enough', because you will need other kinds of methods to 'get at' whatever it is you are researching. So you need to think through carefully what interviews would be capable of revealing about the phenomena you are interested in.

What would a greater or fewer number of interviews tell you about what you are trying to get at?
It is worth thinking quite hard about this. Sometimes, it is a knee-jerk reaction to simply want to do 'more interviews' because that must somehow be 'better'. But how many more depends on the logic by which each one adds to your understanding of the phenomenon you are investigating. Does the phenomenon, for example, require that you factor in a number of different perspectives or sets of experiences before you can understand it fully? Does understanding the phenomenon depend upon exploring how processes can operate under different sets of circumstances? Does it require that you explore things in considerable depth in each 'case', or that you examine how things work and change over time? Does it require that you observe broad patterns of behaviour, for example, at a 'population level'?

What would a greater or fewer number of interviews do for the quality or strength of the explanation you will be able to offer? How will your decision underpin the kinds of claims you can make?
Obviously, the content of the interviews, the quality of the data they yield, and your skill and inventiveness in analysing them, are all vital to the decision about how many you need. You could do 500 interviews that were all too superficial to yield much of use. You could tease out incisive flashes of insight from only a few.

But also you need to consider your view of the mechanism through which an explanation becomes strong, convincing or of high quality. If you want to argue that the strength of your explanation comes from the representativeness of your sample, and the social patterning of responses gleaned in interviews, then you will need to use a statistical logic in working out how many interviews are needed, with how many interviewees, and with what characteristics.

But in qualitative work it is much more likely that you will build an explanation through a deep exploration of how processes work in particular contexts, under certain sets of circumstances, and in particular sets of social relations. Here you will need a more interpretive and investigative logic, so that you build a convincing analytical narrative based on the argument that you have explored the process in its richness, complexity and detail, and that you have understood the contingency of different contexts.

The former, is more of a nomethetic approach, where you build a broader argument on the basis of the analysis of general patterns. The latter is more of an idiographic approach, where you build a broader argument from an understanding of particularity. You are unlikely, if following this approach, to regard different 'types' of interviewee (e.g. based on 'variables' like gender or age) to be representative of those 'types' in the broader population. You are more likely, instead, to seek to understand how gender or age, or other sets of experiences, can work in particular situations, based on analysis of cases where those elements are involved. This means that you will want to build in enough variations of circumstance in your interviews and interviewees to be able to explore different workings of processes in different situations. But you will not argue that your interviewees 'represent' similar categories of people in the wider population.

Ideographic or nomethetic approaches point in very different directions in terms of how many interviews, as well as whom to interview, in what level of depth, how to analyse the interviews.

What resources do you have? How much time? What is the scale of your project? What do your funders expect or require?
All researchers have to scale their plans and expectations to the realities of their time and resources. Sometimes this involves educating funders about what is possible, and what kinds of questions qualitative research can answer. Qualitative research (interview based and otherwise) and analysis are very time consuming, and given the high premium placed on the quality of interpretation and the importance of researcher inventiveness, it is vital to factor in enough time to make the best use of the data generated. Usually, it is better to have a smaller number of interviews, creatively and interpretively analysed, than a larger number where the researcher runs out of time to do them justice analytically. It is better to aim to offer sound qualitative insights, than try to mimic a quantitative 'representative' logic.

Daniel Miller, University College London

How many qualitative interviews is enough? As an anthropologist I come from the least quantitative branch of social science. Working in material culture studies I am also amongst the least sympathetic to language as the medium for evidence. Mostly what people say is the legitimation of what they do, not the explanation or the description. So my ideal number might be 0. The primary method of ethnography is participant observation. It is better to be immersed in people's everyday life and also listen in to the conversations they have with the people they live with, rather than carrying out the artificial procedure that we call an interview. In my more ethnographic works I look more to people's interactions with things, and the evidence for what they actually do. On the other hand how people legitimate their actions is significant, which suggests that placed alongside direct observation the interview may have a role to play. We should be careful about language as evidence but I am not suggesting that we ignore it entirely.

In practice apart from when researching their PhD, few professional anthropologists gain more than very occasional opportunity, money and time to carry out this kind of full ethnography. So clearly we need to be pragmatic and recognise that often circumstances dictate a reliance upon interview data. I find that interviews are also valuable just to appreciate that informants may see connections with your topic that are entirely different from those you envisaged. I often start any project with very general interviews piloted on around a dozen people just to see where they lead. But I use these more to change my research topic to make it more relevant to that cultural context than as primary data.

Given the constraints of time and money I also carry out projects based in some measure on interviews. Typically I find that as I start the research each interview seems so special and unique I can't even imagine being able to generalise. But after a while certain patterns and repetitions arise, that give me the sense that I can make claims about what people have said. So the quantitative criteria in practice is not an absolute number, but refers to that point at which you sense you have encountered the amount of repetition that gives you the confidence to write and make analytical generalisations. In my experience this is unlikely to be less than 70 encounters/interviews, but in practice I just carry on until that point seems to have been reached. The complication, which this short address cannot deal with, is the problem of how far one is generalising the people being interviewed themselves as some category of persons, but again the degree of repetition may be the key to this. Because at the least repetition demonstrates the existence of a given discourse about that topic.

Most students are not carrying out an ethnography, but are working for MA or BA dissertations. Even then I try and encourage these students not to just use interviews. I hope that there will be at least three or four people the student can get to know and spend some time with, so they can contextualise this topic in their more general knowledge of those individuals. But if pushed to give a minimum number for formal interviews I may say six to ten for more general discussions. In addition there may be simply points of detail that then arise from the interviews, such as - when was the last time an activity took place, or whether the individual possesses an object. These can be addressed with a short questionnaire applied to 20 more individuals to help generalise from those interviews. So for a small student dissertation the six to ten interviews are seen as situated between the few people you get to know more deeply and the larger group used for basic questions. But my particular contribution to this question is this - however many interviews, and whatever the topic, don't ever just rely on the interview or on language, and don't believe that an interview tells you what people actually do.

Luisa Passerini, Università di Torino

There is no one number that can define successful qualitative interviews. There are wonderful works based on a long interview with on one person, which have become classics in the field of cultural biography. I will mention just one example, *Venus on Wheels* (2000) by anthropologist Gelya Frank. Focusing on the story of one severely disabled woman, Frank has narrated in this book how her own relationship with Diane DeVries developed over twenty years, since they met in 1976. The book has become a major contribution on intersubjectivity as the constitutive element of qualitative interviewing. In fact it is not only about Diane, but also largely about Gelya, who thus succeeds in turning upside down the traditional anthropological approach of participant observation. She proposes an example of observant participation, which means a constant reflection on the author's methodology, her reactions and failures in the relationship, and on the contributions of both subjects of the story to the creation of the final product.

The same criteria can be applied to any number of qualitative testimonies. First of all, we should always make explicit – in written form if our product is a publication, in audiovisual form if using other media – that the interview was created by the encounter between two or more persons, and the effects of their intersubjectivity should be pointed out. Certain questions were asked, and not other ones; certain replies were given, and on other points there was silence. In the case of life-story interviews, the aims and interventions of the researcher should be made clear and their influence analysed.

A second criterion should be constantly applied: everyone is situated within a certain discipline, although s/he might draw inspirations, techniques and methods from other ones. I have been an oral historian for many years, and I have nourished my research with contributions from anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and literary and visual studies. However, I don't believe that one can situate oneself in a no man's land, in a literally inter-disciplinary space. The space one occupies is really trans-disciplinary, in the sense of transposing elements from one or more disciplines to the other. The advantage of this approach is that it allows us to challenge the epistemological status of the discipline we inhabit, although living on its margins and stirring disagreement and criticism among more traditional scholars. The value of personal documents, whether written or oral or visual, has always been not at all to let us listen to voices of the past - which is an absurdity in historical terms – but rather to push further the borders of socio-historical disciplines, introducing new categories such as the individual, the changing connection between the public and the private, the relevance of emotions, and so on.

I have myself worked on single individuals, but I have also done research on the basis of up to more than one hundred interviews. My experience has been that one can never make her/his group of interviewees representative in the sense of quantitative sociology. For one thing, there is the problem of differential mortality. But this is not the main obstacle. The question is that the individual is more than the collective and the collective or the social is more than the individual. There is always a tension between the two, and we should be able to express this tension in our research. This means that we should not make a general assertion and then bring an excerpt from an interview as a confirmatory example; rather, we should try as hard as we can to make clear the comparison between the universe of interviews we have constructed and the socio-historical context to which it refers, such as for example the working class in a certain place and time: of what is our universe representative and of what is it not? This means also keeping the two voices, ours and the interviewee's, evident in the text we produce. And finally, it means recognizing, through the information we give about the interviewees, their subjectivity and individuality.

It is also possible to work on collective memory. By this term I do not indicate any psychological reality, but a textual one. In a body of one hundred interviews, the researcher can discern recurrent themes, which construct a collective text that can be studied and located in its historical context. Sometimes, what is recurrent is a mistake, of either date or information, and this mistake must be explained in its functionality to the narration. Or it may be a silence, and interpretative hypotheses must be proposed about silences as well. But there is no absolutely defined silence. Silence is always relative, in the sense that it is such in relation to a context or to other sources or to our expectations. These relations must be identified as clearly as possible.

As an exercise to think over all this, I suggest to have oneself interviewed, in order to reflect on both the experience of being transformed into a witness and the discrepancy between history and narration.

Charles C. Ragin, University of Arizona

The question "How many cases?" has many answers. A common, but glib, graduate student answer is 20 for an M.A. thesis and 50 for a Ph.D. dissertation. While the "How many cases?" question has parallels in quantitative research, the similarities are not even skin deep. In quantitative research, the issue is how many cases are needed to secure statistically significant findings or, more broadly, to secure assurance that an observed pattern is not mere happenstance. Often, it does not matter that the observed pattern is substantively weak; the key question is whether the researcher has enough cases to produce a statistic that is greater than some critical value based on notions of randomness. In qualitative research, by contrast, researchers often observe very strong connections. In fact, the most common observation in qualitative research is a perfect or near-perfect subset relation. For example, a qualitative researcher might observe that all the street vendors in a city are recent immigrants, which in turn offers important clues about the city's political economy. (The guiding question is "What kind of whole has a part like this?") Unlike the quantitative researcher, who may need to boost her number of cases in order to beat the critical value in a statistical table, the qualitative researcher may have observed the universe of relevant cases (e.g., all the street vendors) or may find the evidence so repetitive that there is no need to add more cases.

The set theoretic foundations of qualitative research are not well understood or even well recognized. Qualitative researchers who collect data on multiple cases often begin their research focusing on a specific outcome (e.g., people who became political activists) or a specific category (e.g., street vendors—how they get by). The usual goal is to identify commonalities or, if commonalities are elusive, to elucidate types and then to identify commonalties within each type. These commonalties are best understood as subset relations (e.g., street vendors constitute a consistent subset of recent immigrants). In research of this type there is no "dependent variable" per se because cases are selected on the basis of their shared membership in a set, which is a constant. This is not to say that qualitative researchers are uninterested in correlations across cases (e.g., correlations between characteristics of street vendors), but simply that the core focus is on constituting the core features of cases sharing a category or an outcome and then drawing out the implications of their commonalties for the larger whole (e.g., a city's political economy).

Thus from a qualitative perspective, the question that is central to quantitative research, "Is it mere happenstance?" is not relevant in most research situations. Typically, the observed commonalities are overwhelming, and the qualitative research connects different patterns together in order to constitute a portrait of the whole. The key issues for the qualitative researcher are (1) the degree of researcher confidence in the commonalities identified (i.e., the subset relations) and (2) the triangulation of a given pattern with what else is known about the category or outcome and also with what else is known about the larger case or whole. Thus, in qualitative research the answer to the question "How many cases?" is that "it depends." Paraphrasing my former colleague Howard Becker, "You should stop adding cases when you are no longer learning anything new."

Paul ten Have, University of Amsterdam

How many qualitative interviews is enough? If I would be confronted with a student's question like this, I would probably answer: 'That depends'. And I would continue with quite a lengthy explanation about the research question, the theoretical framework in which it should be embedded, practical considerations, etc. ending in the recommendation to reconsider the use of interviews as such.

Using (qualitative) interviews in research implies a 'theory', even if it remains oblique. A theory about (the study of) human (inter-)action and social life. For the study of many aspects of social life, interviews may *not* be the best way to gather data. What you get in that way is limited to what people are willing and able to say in a rather forced situation, as 'answers' to a stranger's 'questions'. You can of course use interviews if you want to study interviews, for instance to study 'accounting practices'. But then it would be best to get interviews held by other researchers. And you could talk to people as part of an ethnographic inquiry, which would *also* include other kinds of data, such as observations or recordings of 'naturally occurring' activities, to assist in your understanding of those activities.

Most qualitative researchers, however, use interviews as their *main data* and that is, in my opinion often deeply problematic. The answers in interviews are inevitably an interactional product, in that the interviewee reacts to the interviewer's questions, facial expressions, earlier uptakes, etc. So if you take the answers as somehow a 'picture of the interviewee's mind', his or her attitudes, opinions, plans, fears, whatever, you ignore the effects of the interactive process. Quite often interviewers are trying to act in a 'neutral' fashion, but this is, of course, a rather artificial way compared to ordinary conversation. On the other hand, we live in what has been called an 'interview society', in the sense that interviews of various kinds are a common occurrence, an accepted format. Therefore, a research interview may be associated with one or another kind of interview, such as a conversation with a celebrity in the media, a talk with a physician or a police interrogation. In short, answers in research interviews are situated actions in a rather unusual setting, and should be analysed as such.

So before even starting to react to the 'How many' question, I would send the student away to do some reading and thinking about interviews, in general and in relation to the topic at hand.

Read, as a major expression of the kind of arguments mentioned above the chapter on interviews in David Silverman's *Interpreting qualitative data* (Silverman, 2006: 109-52), and other useful chapters in that book. I might also suggest a reading of the interview chapter in my own book, *Understanding qualitative research and ethnomethodology* (Ten Have, 2004: 56–870), or Silverman's small book of reflections on qualitative research in general (Silverman, 2007). I would also require the student to write a text specifying the research questions and the presupposition underlying those questions. And finally I would invite him or her to think about the practicalities of the research project. Whatever the student might decide to do, after such a reflective interlude, would require a reasoned account of the decisions made, including the decisions what *not* to do, such as doing observations, using recordings or studying existing materials (texts, internet exchanges, whatever).

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Early career reflections

Ben Baumberg
Mark Doige
Tracey Jensen
Linda Sandino
Bindi Shah

Ben Baumberg, University of Kent at Canterbury

If you ever have the misfortune to need to get interviewees via the NHS Research Ethics Service, then there are two things to bear in mind: first, that you should brace yourself for an endurance test in bureaucracy; and second, that all of those plans that impressed your supervisor/upgrade panel need to be thrown in the bin. You may want to conduct that textbook grounded theory study, where your sampling is an iterative, complex process. However, after a full year's delay from when you first tried to get permission to speak to people, and having already tested the patience of all the GPs who kindly agreed to let you research their patients, you have to do your research in the fastest and most hassle-free way possible. Goodbye iterative sampling...

Most qualitative researchers aim to keep getting data until they have saturation, which I take to mean *sufficient depth* on the *full range* of the phenomenon they're interested in (see Mario Luis Small's, 2009, excellent paper to read more). The trouble is that before starting your research, you know neither how many interviews you need to get 'sufficient depth', nor what the scope of the 'full range' of variation is. Various scrutiny panels will still require you to make a guess; my estimate of 35-40 interviews was based on limits of time/resources than anything more substantive.

My particular phenomenon of interest was how different working conditions led different people to stay in work vs. claiming incapacity benefits. I was sampling via GPs because I wanted to capture as broad a range of people as possible, doing telephone screening to ensure that I only arranged interviews that fitted a pre-defined, theoretically-informed quota (see NatCen's *Qualitative Research Practice* (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) for guidance). Halfway through I realised that I wasn't getting enough benefit claimants, so I supplemented this sample via a helpful welfare-to-work provider. I ended up with 42 interviews that I collected in a hurry. It seemed to me that the full range of health and work was enormously wide, and saturation was just an aspiration. What I was instead expecting was a 'thick' account that showed various processes at work, but without being able to be easily generalised to a broadly-applicable theory. Surprisingly, though, after about 25 interviews I found myself coming across the same phenomena again and again – the variation in health and work *was* wide, but the processes affecting the phenomenon were fortunately fewer. I therefore sub-sampled from the remaining transcripts to only analyse those people who showed new aspects of the phenomena, rather than going back over the saturated aspects again. This unusual tactic was suggested by a senior colleague, and helped me finish my PhD in a reasonable time, particularly as this qualitative research was only one chapter of the wider thesis. Ultimately only 32 of my 42 interviews were analysed – fewer than my initial aim, and far fewer than I realistically thought would be necessary for saturation – yet I still feel confident that I captured sufficient depth to enable me to generalise to a theory of working conditions and health. Perhaps the lesson is: in the battle of the desirable and the possible, the possible always wins. But luckily the possible sometimes turns out to be more desirable than you thought.

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Mark Doidge, University of Exeter

The early evening chatter filled the air of the bar as I tried to set up the netbook and microphone. After the waitress served our drinks, we finally settled down to the interview. Getting a convenient time, place and participant had been arduous, but finally we were ready to go. It had taken a lot of time, organisation and stress to arrive at this point and it felt like a real accomplishment. Yet asking for interviews seemed so simple; I asked and they replied "yes". However the mechanics were much more complicated.

My research was undertaken in Italy with a wide variety of groups and individuals. I was welcomed by all of the groups and individuals involved in my ethnographic study of football fans in an Italian city. They happily shared their thoughts, memories and ideas with the strange Englishman who was taking an interest in their city and club.

The participant observation went smoothly until it came to the interviews. My plan had been to perform the ethnography over a period of six months, gathering data and using this to inform the questions used in interviews at the end of the process. However, the course of the ethnographic process rarely runs according to plan. With the onset of summer, my subjects had new foci and habits changed.

Suddenly the plan to interview all my respondents at the end of the process seemed foolish. I had amassed only ten interviews on my hard-drive, and not all of these were of sufficient quality. As subjects faced new pressures on their time, being able to pinpoint specific dates for interview times provided difficult. Although they always seemed happy to do consent to interviews, this was always "next week", or "when I am free". Despite the pressure of acquiring an endless supply of interview respondents, I failed to schedule specific times to interview them. As I undertook a six month concentrated period of participant observation, it was not easy to return and undertake interviews, especially as I had separated from my respondents. The context had changed with a number of groups, especially as the football season had ended.

As Hegel observed, the owl of Minerva flies at dusk. Wisdom comes after the event. It was only after my PhD that I realised that I had interviewed many different people. It's just that these interviews were not committed to a hard-drive. Obviously it is good to have a permanent record of an interview so that it can be analysed in depth. But it should also not be forgotten that many other aspects of fieldwork involves interrogating people for their understandings of social situations. Provided that these are recorded in other formats, then these are equally valid and reiterate your understanding of them at the time.

Even better is to commence recorded interviews early in your fieldwork in order to ensure that you have a sufficient stock of data and minimal stress later in the process. When the initial meeting is arranged, ask if you can record it. You can always try and schedule follow up interviews as the fieldwork progresses. If in doubt, interview.

Tracey Jenson, Newcastle University

When I think about how many interviews I conducted for my doctoral research – or rather, how *few* – I always feel an urge to qualify it somehow. For example: I used other methods alongside interviews; many of those interviews were group interviews; some of the scheduled ones didn't work out. Even now, I worry that I did not do enough interviews and I dread being asked the 'how many' question. It is difficult to remain positive about your research when (as they invariably do) participants change their minds, stop answering emails or quite literally leave you on the doorstep, and if (or rather when) your respondent pool shrinks, the 'how many' question can start to loom quite large.

At a point during my data collection (which should have been a quite natural break from the interviews) and after a few such cancellations and lonely doorsteps, I started planning another list of possible respondents for a further batch of interviews. My supervisor gently asked why: wasn't this enough? I realised that I had internalised all the implicit messages about numbers and value that circulate throughout research, how we talk about research and how others talk about our research – that 'more' always means 'better', 'more valid' and 'more robust'. One phrase in particular that I often heard in appraisals of other research was "of course, with a bigger dataset" and I had swallowed that phrase wholesale, presuming that my doctoral research would never be 'enough' to satisfy the critical readers of the final thesis. I realised that by seeking more interviews, I was really indulging in a magical ritual, pre-emptively trying to ward off an imagined criticism I had not yet even heard of my research – that it was not 'objective'.

When I think about the pieces of research that have inspired *me*, very few involve massive datasets. The interviews contained within are valuable because they are written up with dignity and care for the respondents; and because the researcher has *taken their time.* It takes time to process what respondents are getting at, concealing and skipping past when they say what they do, to find the best words to explain what progress of a conversation and its undercurrents, to do justice to the (often) emotionally messy politics of an interview. It also takes time to process your own feelings as an interviewer and to find a path through the doubts, enthusiasms and projections that pervade every social encounter, including qualitative interviews.

My expectations about needing to secure more interviews were also (in part) a product of my uncertainties and anxieties about how to proceed with the analysis of what I already had. Just as we can postpone writing our literature review by insisting on reading 'one more book', I was postponing the next stage with my quest for 'one more interview'. I still don't think that there is a magic number to aim for when conducting qualitative interviews. I also think that it is perfectly normal to feel that you never have 'enough' interviews to make the research claims you want to make. Rather than asking the question 'how many qualitative interviews *should* I do', my advice would be to ask instead: why do I feel like these are not enough? Once my supervisor asked me this question, she gave me permission to stop, to process and to take the time necessary to develop what I had into a project that I feel enormously proud of.

Linda Sandino, CCW Graduate School, University of the Arts/Victoria & Albert Museum

I first began to use interviews about twenty years ago when I was researching the history of a magazine for my MA in the history of design. As there was no archive beyond the magazine itself, oral history became a tool for examining the publication as field of cultural production. My list of must-do interviewees included three editors, five art directors, and two photographers for a dissertation of about 21,000 words. One of the art directors was constantly away. How would I have been able to write up a history of the magazine if I had not been able to record every one of its 'authors'? Does history demand completeness? This was a question I returned to in my PhD.

About ten years ago I began to undertake interviews for national and university archives focusing on life histories in the visual arts and design. Doing this kind of work makes you acutely aware of the partiality and contingency of all interviews, even those that have a thematic focus. No one interview, it seems, will ever be enough. Each interview generates others and so the archive grows. Who will listen to these interviews? What will they mean to those who 'overhear' them? Will they be of any use? I raise these questions because they reflect my preoccupations as an interviewer as well as a researcher who draws on interview based material. The question: 'how many interviews are enough?' is as relevant to archived interviews, as it is to ones we feel we need to conduct ourselves.

Nevertheless, the paradoxical condition of interviews, like that of most archive material, as both 'too much' information and 'too little', is, in my view, not a weakness but an opportunity. The role of historians, literary scholars, and narrative researchers (where I locate my work), is an interpretive one: what do these interviews represent? What do they mean? Depending on my research focus, one interview may suffice. For instance, using only one recording as a case study has served as a discussion for the different kinds of evidence an interview can produce; current research on museum curators as a group explores their individual, collective and institutional narrative identities. Poised at the intersection of auto/biography and history, each interview represents its own worldview that, nevertheless, contributes to the panorama of cultural institutions, art and design history. However, any one of these life histories could have formed a research project in itself, but as my work is about the history of the museum, one worldview is not enough. So, my answer to the question 'how many qualitative interviews is enough?' is that it all depends on the project and the discipline in which one might wish to situate the research.

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Recently I completed a qualitative research project, funded by the ESRC, which examined the role of religion and religious institutions in shaping identity, belonging and citizenship among second-generation Jains in the UK and USA. Since there is no social scientific literature on this group living in the 'west', this was an exploratory study aimed at uncovering the meaning of religion in the lives of non-Christian and non-Muslim young people in the two countries. Decisions about the type of methodological approach to adopt were guided by the following research questions: What makes a person Jain in the UK and USA? What notions of community are produced in the process of reconstructing Jainism? How are Jain religious identities further shaped by class, caste, gender, and migration histories? Does the Jain ethic of non-violence encourage involvement in concerns related to peace, justice and the environment in the wider society and promote a shared sense of citizenship? Given these broad interests, and individual and group level focus, I chose to conduct a multi-method qualitative research design that, nevertheless, was guided by the goal of generating rich and complex data that would illuminate important themes about the role of religion in the lives of young people in late modern societies. These methods included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with second-generation Jains, interviews with lay Jain leaders, observations of bi-annual conventions in each country as well as other small-scale social and religious events, and content analysis of magazines, newsletters, Internet sites and course/workshop materials produced and consumed by young Jains.

Within this multi-method and cross-cultural qualitative project, I decided to include interviews not only because they can add depth of understanding generated by the other methods but also to access young Jains' own views and meanings of their religious identities, practices and beliefs. Decisions about how many respondents to interview were guided by these concerns as well as by more pragmatic questions of time and funding and availability of sampling frame. I initially decided that twenty-five interviews in each country would be sufficient. As there are no established databases of Jain communities in either country I employed a mix of purposive and snowball sampling to select interviewees. Obviously, samples of interview subjects were not representative of Jain communities in both countries, however, I attempted to recruit a sample that was stratified in terms of gender and region of residence, and as far as was possible, of Jain sects. In the United States I had budgeted one-month of research time for conducting twenty-five interviews and participant-observations at a religious convention. This time frame demanded a very hectic schedule and enabled me to only find interviewees from the dominant Jain sects in three cities where there are large numbers of Jains, one on the west coast, one of the east coast and one in the mid-west. In the UK I had more time flexibility as I live in London and the majority of Jains in the UK also live in London. However, my time was divided between this project and other research commitments and so I was only able to locate a few interviewees outside of London. However, in both countries I was able to carry out an equal number of interviews with young Jain women and men. While this number of interviews may not support convincing conclusions on their own, I believed that this number was practical to conduct within given time and financial constraints. Additionally, given the exploratory nature of this research and the multi-scalar focus, the interview data generated illuminated important theoretical and substantive themes about the role and meaning of religion among young Jains as well as supplement data generated by the other qualitative methods employed. In the end I had the opportunity to conduct a total of thirty interviews in each country, but any more than that would have produced too much data to analyse adequately within the given time frames.

Conclusion

Our intention in putting this NCRM Methods Review together has been to answer the question 'How many qualitative interviews is enough?' To this end, we have gathered together a set of succinct 'expert voice' contributions from 14 prominent qualitative methodologists and five 'early career reflections' from those embarking on academic careers. These pieces range across epistemological and disciplinary positions, and across conversational and academic styles.

As we pointed out in our Introduction, the recurring answer to the question 'how many' is 'it depends'. The usefulness of this resource for students, lecturers and researchers rests on the guidance offered by our contributors as to what it depends upon. These include epistemological and methodological questions about the nature and purpose of the research: whether the focus of the objectives and of analysis is on commonality or difference or uniqueness or complexity or comparison or instances, Practical issues to take into account include the level of degree, the time available, institutional committee requirements And both philosophically and pragmatically, the judgment of the epistemic community in which a student or researcher wishes to be or is located, is another key consideration.

Whether or not we have 'saturated' the possible epistemological, methodological and pragmatic responses to the question of 'how many qualitative interviews is enough?' – the range of issues on which the answer 'depends' – is yet another question. What we have provided in this resource, though, is a very good starting point for anyone conducting qualitative research who is in need of advice and guidance on what to think about when it comes to 'how many' in sampling and case selection.