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Qualitative Research Interviews: an Update

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21 Qualitative research interviews

An update

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In this chapter, we briefly review the complexity of the qualitative interviewing process used by psychotherapy researchers, and update some of the major ideas that psychotherapy researchers using such interviews must consider as they engage in the interview process. We then offer our current thinking about additional research on the qualitative interview process that may help improve qualitative interviews themselves.

As articulated in our earlier publications (Burkard and Knox, 2012; Knox and Burkard, 2009), many qualitative psychotherapy researchers rely on oral interviews to collect detailed information regarding the phenomenon under examination (Polkinghorne, 2005). Because such an endeavor demands strong interviewing techniques, as well as the interpersonal skills employed when working with clients, interviewers face challenges in both realms: How do they conduct an interview that yields essential data, while also facilitating participants' sense of safety such that they are willing to explore, in depth and with a stranger, frequently difficult experiences?

Adding further complexity, qualitative psychotherapy researchers must attend to the ethics of interviewing (see also Haverkamp, 2005). Such researchers have often been trained to ameliorate others' distress. When engaged in research, however, they must negotiate a fine line between being an interviewer and a therapist, an ethical challenge not encountered by many other social science researchers (Haverkamp, 2005).

In this chapter, we review and update important considerations that psychotherapy researchers must address, both before and during the interview itself, as they collect their interview data. Where possible, we include empirical evidence and relevant theory, and close by suggesting possible research avenues for continuing to build our understanding of the qualitative interview process. As in the article on which this chapter is based, we acknowledge that our focus is not exhaustive: Other topics may well be worthy of consideration, but we include here those that have consistently been most relevant in our own research.

Pre-interview considerations

Interview protocol

Prior to conducting any interview, researchers must first consider the questions that will be asked, for "at the root of . . . interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1991, p. 3). The means to access those experiences vary greatly, from open-ended, unstructured approaches that may appear more a friendly conversation than a data-collection interview (Seidman, 1991), to formally structured protocols with standardized questions from which there is little variance.

At one end of this continuum, then, are comparatively unstructured approaches (e.g., ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology) that often rely on a fluid set of questions, such that later participants in a given study may respond to queries quite different from those to which earlier participants responded. As initial data are gathered and analyzed, the study's central focus is refined, and thus new questions emerge for participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Such an approach echoes Kvale's (1996) sentiments, who argued that the design of qualitative interview research is open-ended because of the value of being attuned to participants more than asking the same questions of all respondents. In ethnography, as an illustration, the interview is more a "friendly conversation into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond" (Spradley, 1979, pp. 58-59), and thus reflects an open framework with few, if any, preset queries. The basic topic areas central to the investigation are known ahead of time, but neither the content nor the order of the specific questions is set. As asserted by Kvale (1996), "Sometimes only a first, topic-introducing question is asked and the remainder of the interview proceeds as a follow-up and expansion on the interviewee's answer to the first questions" (p. 127). Unstructured interviews, while they may yield unanticipated responses (Kvale, 1996), also render comparison across cases difficult, since participants have not responded to the same questions.

Occupying a midpoint along the continuum are semi-structured interviews, in which a protocol consisting of open-ended questions reflecting the study's central focus is created prior to data collection to obtain specific information and facilitate comparison across cases; interviewers still remain open and flexible, however, so that they may probe more deeply into individual participants' stories (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The interviewer thus asks all questions of each respondent, but may ask more about particular ideas that emerge for each interviewee (Hill, Thompson, and Williams, 1997); interviewers may also alter the sequence in which questions are asked. The protocol in such semi-structured interviews functions as a guide (Flick, 2002), a foundation upon which the interview is built, but one that permits creativity and flexibility to ensure that each participant's story is examined thoroughly.

Finally, at the other end of the continuum are survey or standardized interviews, in which the aim is to provide each participant with exactly the same interview stimulus (Fontana and Frey, 2005); thus, any differences are assumed to arise from

variations among participants rather than from differences in the interview process itself (Singleton and Straits, 2002). Such interviews therefore follow a highly structured protocol frequently consisting of closed questions (those that seek a definitive one- to two-word answer such as "yes" or "no" and are often used to ascertain facts) presented to respondents in the same order. Additionally, the interview process itself is well regulated (e.g., questions are read precisely as written, standard probes are used, no interviewer disclosure is to occur), such that researchers remain neutral and consistent during all interviews (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Here, then, "the goal is nothing less than the elimination of the interviewer as a source of measurement error" (Groves, 1989, p. 358). Such highly standardized interviews indeed foster greater uniformity across respondents, but may limit researchers' ability to uncover participants' rich and unique experiences, especially those that lie outside the bounds of the interview questions themselves.

Phone vs. in-person interviews

Another decision faced by qualitative interviewers focuses on the mechanism of completing the interview: Should they interview participants by phone or in person (i.e., face to face)? Minimal research has examined the relative benefits of these data collection methods, perhaps because, according to Shuy (2003), such studies are costly, hard to execute, and few are motivated to investigate the merits of the different approaches. Two studies that have examined phone vs. in-person formats reported a slight advantage for the latter in yielding higher-quality data (de Leeuw and van der Zouwen, 1988; Jordan, Marcus, and Reeder, 1980). In a third publication, a meta-analysis investigating participants' responses to sensitive topics in surveys, Tourangeau and Yan (2007) found that interviewers contribute to participants' misreporting because respondents must share their answers with another person (vs. with a computer or only with themselves (as in a written survey)), and that social desirability bias is worse in phone than in face-to-face interviews.

Despite the potential for such bias, phone interviews are widely used. First, they permit researchers to include participants from any geographic region because they require no travel (Musselwhite, Cuff, McGregor, King, 2006). The ability to cast this broader net is attractive to researchers seeking an economical way to capture the experiences of non-local participants. Furthermore, phone interviews may also give participants greater anonymity, for they may use a pseudonym and thus not fully identify themselves (Hill et al., 1997) as they describe sometimes profound experiences (Hiller and DiLuzio, 2004; Kvale, 1996; Lowes and Gill, 2006). Musselwhite et al. (2006) described several additional advantages of telephone interviews: They minimize some of the disadvantages of in-person interviews (e.g., researchers can take detailed notes of an interview without making participants feel uncomfortable; response bias may be reduced in the absence of facial expressions); they allow research-appropriate relationships to develop between interviewer and interviewee; and they improve the quality of data collection (e.g., enable more supervision and support of interviewers; allow those with reading/writing difficulties to participate in research). Relatedly, Brannen (1988) argued that participants will

have less fear and will be more forthcoming if they believe that they will never cross paths with the interviewer after completing the research. Thus, phone interviews may be particularly well-suited when the research focuses on potentially sensitive topics (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson, and Wilkes, 2011). Shuy (2003) also noted the advantages of phone interviews, asserting that they reduce interviewer effects, allow more interviewer uniformity in delivery and increased standardization of questions, enhance researcher safety and cost-efficiency, and facilitate faster results. Interestingly, Siemiatycki (1979) reported that the quality of the data obtained in phone versus in-person interviews was comparable and thus the added costs of in-person interviews were unjustified. Finally, having access to nonverbal data (via an in-person interview) may introduce the potential for response bias, for participants may "read" interviewers' reactions to participant responses and alter their replies accordingly (Marcus and Crane, 1986; Musselwhite et al., 2006).

Face-to-face interviews, on the other hand, allow the observation of both verbal and nonverbal data (Hiller and DiLuzio, 2004). When in the same room, participant and interviewer see facial expressions, gestures, and other paraverbal communications that may enrich the meaning of the spoken words (Carr and Worth, 2001) and enhance the rapport, thus enabling participants to freely disclose their experiences more effectively than might occur in phone interviews (Shuy, 2003). Furthermore, Polkinghorne (1994) stated that in-person interviews yield authentic and deep descriptions of phenomena via the interviewer's ability to facilitate trust and openness in the interviewee, which then lessens the interviewee's need for impression management and fosters the examination of her/his private experiences. Musselwhite et al. (2006) also described benefits of in-person interviews, for they may a) help maintain participant involvement more successfully than phone interviews (e.g., fewer drop-outs), and b) clarify the information being communicated (e.g., those with hearing difficulties, or for whom English is not their first language, may encounter fewer difficulties in face-to-face interviews; messages being conveyed nonverbally are available to the researcher).

There may well be, then, no definitive position regarding which data collection approach is preferable; furthermore, the ideal approach may vary from study to study (Shuy, 2003). Researchers should select the method that best serves the investigation and will yield the richest data, for both approaches can be effective. In deciding whether to use phone or in-person interviews, researchers should consider both financial and time resources, as well as participant accessibility, all of which may differ quite dramatically between these two methods. If possible, perhaps participants could even be permitted to choose how their interview is conducted, in the hope that they would be more forthcoming if they felt more comfortable. Were such an approach taken, and thus some participants completed phone and others in-person interviews, researchers should be sensitive to any differences in the data gathered via these two approaches, attempt to render the quality and quantity of these data as comparable as possible, and address any related concerns in their manuscript.

Across the hundreds of phone interviews we have completed, we have encountered very few participants who seemed hesitant to talk about their

experiences. Most, in fact, appreciated the opportunity to share their story, freely described their perspectives, and reported that doing so was beneficial for it allowed them to verbalize profound personal experiences, a phenomenon also noted by Hiller and DiLuzio (2004). For the more reticent few, our sense was that a face-to-face interview would have been even less comfortable for participants, for the phone at least afforded them physical and psychological space from the interviewer (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004).

Number of interviews per participant

Differences of opinion also exist regarding how many interviews each participant should complete. Some qualitative researchers or methods rely on a single interview, whereas others use multiple interview contacts (May, 1991).

Single interviews, according to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) the most common approach, are preferred when access to participants is difficult or when the topic can be effectively examined in one interaction (May, 1991). Such interviews, however, run the risk of missing important information. One meeting with a participant with whom the researcher has never met or spoken may not elicit the vital contextual information that would more likely emerge across multiple interviews (Mishler, 1986) and without which the experiences described in an interview may be devoid of their meaning (Patton, 1989).

Multiple interviews, on the other hand, may facilitate a stronger relationship between researcher and participant, enabling the latter to feel more comfortable describing difficult experiences to someone with whom s/he has had prior contact and established at least some degree of trust (Adler and Adler, 2002; Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, and Steinmetz, 1991; Laslett and Rapoport, 1975; McCracken, 1988; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1994; Seidman, 1991). As an illustration of a multiple-interview approach (e.g., in-depth phenomenological interviewing), Seidman (1991) described a series of three interviews: The first interview (focused life history) allows participants to tell as much as possible about themselves in the context of the research topic; the second interview (the details of experience) focuses on the specific details of participants' experiences in the topic area; the final interview (reflection on the meaning) enables participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences in this area. The multiple-interview approach also permits researchers and participants to explore additional thoughts and feelings about, or reactions to, the first interview(s) in a later contact(s) (May, 1991). Furthermore, if either party left an earlier interview feeling confused or concerned about some of its content, a later interview provides an opportunity for clarification.

When making decisions about the number of interviews, researchers should examine the costs and benefits. The greater the number of interviews, the greater the costs of the interviewing process, certainly in time and also perhaps in money. Researchers thus need to assess whether those costs will be balanced by improved data, an area about which there is no extant literature. In addition, although more contact between researcher and participant may help establish a stronger relationship, one that may facilitate greater participant disclosure, such extended

contact may also blur the boundaries between researcher and participant, especially if the researcher is her/himself a therapist (Haverkamp, 2005). Therapist researchers engage in such relationships as researchers, yet participants may have a different understanding of the nature of their time together. With especially sensitive research topics, these researchers may find themselves struggling to maintain their primary role as researcher, while also ensuring that their humane and compassionate responses do not transform research into therapy (Haverkamp, 2005).

In our own experiences, we have typically used two interviews, for the reasons described above: Doing so increases our chance of understanding the context, and thus the meaning, of participants' experiences; helps participants feel safe with the interviewer; allows examination of additional content that may have been stimulated by the first interview; and permits either party to clarify any confusing elements of a first interview. Rarely have we encountered participants who refused a second interview; many, in fact, have felt it an equally valuable component of their participation in the study as the first interview.

Nevertheless, after noting that the data usually obtained in a second interview are sparse, we are considering either dropping the second interview, or altering its purpose. Second interviews indeed have the potential, as noted above, to provide context and greater meaning, to increase participant safety, and to examine additional content evoked by the first interview. In our experience, however, second interviews yield little useful additional data, and thus we question their utility. If there is substance to a second interview (e.g., in the first interview, participants describe a helpful supervision experience, and in the second they describe a harmful supervision experience), then we fully endorse their usefulness. Similarly, if, prior to a second interview, researchers thoroughly review the contents of the first interview to ascertain what areas remain unclear or need further examination, second interviews can indeed be fruitful. If, however, second interviews are perfunctory and insubstantial (e.g., a very brief conversation in which researchers ask no additional questions, or in which participants state that the first interview stimulated no additional thoughts or feelings), they may not be worth researchers' or participants' time and effort.

Considerations during the interview

The strength of the interviewer-participant relationship is a vitally important aspect of a qualitative research project, for it is through this relationship that data are collected and their trustworthiness strengthened (Adler and Adler, 2002; Kvale, 1996). In addition, this relationship's quality likely affects the depth of the information that participants share with researchers. Consider, for example, participants who were asked to discuss how their interactions as supervisees with supervisors employing questionable supervisory techniques led to quite troubling supervisory relationships (Burkard, Knox, Clarke, Phelps, and Inman, *in press*). During these interviews, participants often expressed feeling guarded while sharing their experiences. Had they not felt at least some sense of safety with the

interviewer, they may not have been forthcoming in discussing these difficult events (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). Given the importance of the interview relationship, then, in the following section we consider factors that influence the development and maintenance of relationships with participants during qualitative interviews.

Qualitative method

All research methods rest on philosophical beliefs about the acquisition and interpretation of data, beliefs that then inform qualitative researchers' interview approach. For instance, early qualitative interview research in psychology, such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), frequently reflected the philosophical tenets of positivism and postpositivism (Charmaz, 2005). During interviews, grounded theory researchers often held predetermined hypotheses based on theory or prior research, and used the research interview to assess the validity of these hypotheses. Additionally, researchers endeavored to be objective observers as interviewers, seeking to maintain an appropriate professional distance from participants. More recently, however, many qualitative researchers have moved to postmodern paradigms that emphasize constructivist–interpretivist perspectives (Charmaz, 2005) in which the “truth” of an experience is co-constructed between researcher and participant. Such researchers are often more directly involved with participants in attempting to more fully understand their experiences. For instance, researchers may work collaboratively with participants to understand the phenomenon under investigation, and use interviews as a stimulus for conversations with participants about the meaning of their experiences (Schwandt, 2000). Thus, researchers' philosophical beliefs have implications for the interview structure, and researchers are encouraged to understand how their beliefs about the nature of the research endeavor influence their interview methods.

Participant characteristics and processes

While an interviewer's choice of research method may indeed shape her/his approach to and the structure of an interview, participant characteristics also affect the interview process and relationship. Participants' motivations for taking part in a study are one such factor. For instance, many participants agree to be interviewed because they anticipate some type of benefit from the experience (Bloom, 1996), perhaps finding the interview interesting and rewarding (Berg, 2001; Hill, Knox, and Hess, 2012), validating of their own experiences (Hiller and DiLuzio, 2004), or enabling them to help others (Hill et al., 2012; Lowes and Gill, 2006). Given that participants may be motivated to participate for such reasons, researchers likely expect them to be forthcoming when describing their experiences. Although many participants are indeed quite disclosing, some may nevertheless withhold information if the interviewer is not responsive during the interview (Oakley, 1981), echoing the comments above regarding the importance of the research relationship, and also suggesting that the interviewer may need to be forthcoming and validating to facilitate participant disclosure. So, although participants may initially agree to

be interviewed for personal reasons, they may remain open and engaged in the interview only when they feel that their experiences are validated, supported, and when the interviewer is also open during the interview.

Participant disclosure may also be affected by the emotions evoked when recounting past events. The retelling of powerful experiences, for example, may elicit intense affect, which can influence participants' mood and emotional state during the interview (Adler and Adler, 2002). In even taking part in the interview, participants may be discussing experiences that they have disclosed to very few. Sharing such information, and specifically allowing interviewers to hear about participants' feelings of shame, embarrassment, fear, and anxiety, may thus increase participants' feelings of vulnerability (Birch and Miller, 2000; Sinding and Aronson, 2003). Such vulnerability may be intensified if participants feel that interviewers are evaluating them (Adler and Adler, 2002). Research suggests that impression management strategies may be heightened in such circumstances (Dingwall, 1997; Shiner and Newburn, 1997), and participants may manage their feelings of vulnerability in multiple ways: They may respond minimally, provide vague or unclear information, or shift the focus of the interview (Hutchinson and Wilson, 1992).

Finally, participants' cultural background and values also influence the interview relationship. Theorists and researchers have noted the influence of cultural differences in communication styles (e.g., high-low context communication, kinesics, paralanguage, proxemics), particularly in terms of how information is shared with others (Hall, 1998; Sue and Sue, 2008). As an example, some cultural groups (e.g., Africans, African Americans, Arabs, Latin Americans) prefer physical closeness when communicating with others, while other cultural groups (e.g., European Americans, Germans, Scandinavians) seek more physical distance. Specific to qualitative interview research, interviewers are encouraged to understand nonverbal communication (Hall, 1998; von Raffler-Engel, 1998), as well as how cultural differences in communication styles may influence participant-researcher rapport (Kvale, 1996).

Furthermore, interview participants of some cultural groups may expect a collaborative relationship with researchers, one that extends beyond the research study itself (Ryen, 2002). In fact, individuals from some cultural groups may only collaborate with researchers who are willing to establish long-term partnerships that address mutually identified goals, including giving back to the community from which the researcher collected data (Norton and Manson, 1996). Thus, rather than merely collecting data and leaving the community, the researcher may also be expected to help design and implement interventions that improve the community from which the data were collected.

Interviewer characteristics and processes

Similar to the influence of participant characteristics, interviewer characteristics also have an important effect on the interview relationship. As earlier acknowledged, psychotherapy researchers enter interview relationships with clinical skills,

and often also have competence in the subject matter or populations of interest (Haverkamp, 2005). Participants may thus expect that psychotherapy researchers will respond supportively to their emotions, and interviewers' doing so may be critical to developing a strong interview relationship (Gottlieb and Lasser, 2001). However, interviewers often find emotionally charged qualitative interviews distressing (Beale, Cole, Hillege, McMaster, and Nagy, 2004), which can create confusion when responding to participants. For example, researchers may minimize participant feelings, fail to respond to intense emotions, or even shift topics to avoid addressing participants' heightened affect. Some participants may then withhold information if they feel that their distress remains unacknowledged (Oakley, 1981). To preserve the interview's integrity as a research rather than a clinical interview (Hunt, Chan, and Mehta, 2011), interviewers must manage their own reactions to participants' distress and respond supportively to participants in order to maintain the interview relationship and facilitate participant disclosure.

On the other hand, and borne of their clinical training, psychotherapy researchers may be tempted to respond to participants with therapeutic skills, particularly when participants evince strong emotional reactions. Researchers are warned not to respond therapeutically for two reasons. First, such responses can create role confusion for participants, leaving them uncertain whether they are engaged in a therapeutic or a research interview. Interviewers must therefore ensure that they keep the boundaries of their role as researcher and clinician clear for participants, and thus manage any ethical dilemmas (Haverkamp, 2005). Second, some researchers (e.g., Rennie, 1995; Seidman, 1991) assert that therapeutic responses influence participants' interpretations of such events, thereby compromising the integrity of the data collected during the interview. Thus, interviewers should nurture participant elaboration (Seidman, 1991), but should minimize therapeutic responses to reduce the possibility of unduly influencing participants' responses. Relatedly, and as further protection against interviewer responses distorting the data or the findings, Chenail (2011) suggested an "interview the investigator" approach, in which the researcher completes the interview protocol as if s/he were an actual participant. In so doing, the investigator becomes more aware of her/his biases, and thus more able to monitor their possible impact on the research.

To prevent many of these concerns from arising, interviewer training is crucial, as are pilot interviews, to prepare interviewers to manage participants' diverse and potentially intense responses to the interview stimulus (Fassinger, 2005). Although many psychotherapy researchers have received extensive therapeutic training, the skills acquired in this training do not necessarily translate directly to research interviewing. Additionally, few qualitative methods provide guidelines for conducting qualitative interviews (Fassinger, 2005). For our own research teams, we follow several training methods to develop interviewer skills and readiness (i.e., reviewing the research protocol, practicing the interview process through role-plays, conducting practice and pilot interviews under supervision, listening to recordings of more experienced interviewers, debriefing after actual interviews; also see Fassinger, 2005 for additional ideas).

Improving qualitative research interviews

Having examined the literature and discussed topics important to qualitative interviews both before and during the actual interview process, we hope that such a review stimulates ideas about how psychotherapy researchers can improve upon this essential component of their method. In essence, we acknowledge that if we wish to improve qualitative interviews, we must actually engage in research on the process of these interviews, difficult though that research may be. In the following section, then, we provide some ideas to encourage continued examination of, and thus improvement in, qualitative interview research processes.

Operationalizing the interview

Interviews are such an essential tool to qualitative researchers that many methods rely heavily, if not solely, upon them as the primary means of collecting data. A few seminal books address the interview processes and strategies (e.g., Kvale, 1996; Seidman, 1991), but most qualitative methods provide minimal guidance regarding techniques appropriate for conducting effective qualitative research interviews (Fassinger, 2005). As an illustration, we reviewed 13 years (1999–2012) of qualitative studies published in *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *Psychotherapy Research*, and *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, and Training*. Of the 151 total qualitative studies therein, 84 used interviews as their primary means of data collection. Among the wide range of topics investigated were therapist compassion, managing difficulties in supervision, recognizing social class in the therapy relationship, and work experience of transgender individuals. Thirty-eight studies included the actual interview protocol and 35 offered a description of the protocol, but only 15 studies included a rationale for using interviews to collect their data. Moreover, only 20 studies described the interview techniques used, such as clarifying questions, interpretations, open- vs. closed-ended questions, paraphrasing, or restatements. Based on this survey of extant research, little transparency appears with regard to the rationale for choosing interviews as the data-gathering approach, or the actual interview techniques used in this research.

In addition, it remains surprisingly unclear from the literature what actually constitutes an interview, for its operational definition appears to vary by method. At one end of the spectrum, for instance, are ethnographic or participatory action researchers, who (as earlier noted) frequently immerse themselves in the community, context, and culture of participants. As such, the interview may not be a discrete event or even a planned conversation between participant and researcher. Instead, the interview process and the data collection may be continuous, and may arise from ongoing interactions between participant and researcher. Thus, the data emerge out of this ongoing relationship. In Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) interviews, on the other hand, the researcher uses a semi-structured protocol given to participants before the actual scheduled interview. Such interviews are largely planned conversations to collect data, and are carried out in a similar manner with all participants.

Despite these distinct interview approaches, few researchers offer a rationale for using interviews themselves to collect data, nor for the related decisions regarding the specific interview format. Before embarking on an investigation, researchers hopefully consider whether interviews are an appropriate mechanism to collect data about the phenomenon under examination. If researchers deem that interviews are indeed appropriate, some explanation is warranted to articulate this decision. We thus encourage greater transparency about the reasons for using interviews in research, as well as the decisions regarding the nature of the interview (e.g., telephone vs. in-person, single vs. multiple).

The interview protocol

The interview protocol itself certainly plays a central role in the data gathered and the results yielded, yet we know little about the potential influence of variations in these protocols. Different researchers (or even teams of researchers) could complete parallel studies, each using a protocol of different degrees of structure (e.g., low to high structure). The researchers could then compare across the studies to examine how the protocol structure influenced the data and findings. Relatedly, the results from a qualitative meta-study (see Timulak, 2007) may give useful information about the relative strengths and weaknesses of different protocol designs.

Also worthy of investigation are the effects of priming techniques. All potential participants must receive information sufficient for them to complete the required informed consent forms, but how does their receiving additional information affect the data they provide? For example, CQR researchers usually send potential participants a copy of the interview protocol prior to the interview so that they know what they will be asked, and ideally, so that they can reflect on their experiences and be prepared to discuss those experiences (Hill et al., 1997). To date, however, we have no empirical basis to support the assumption that doing so “primes the pumps” for richer data. Thus, researchers could provide different degrees of preparatory information to participants and compare the data yielded by participants who are more versus less “primed.”

Finally, whether potential participants receive an interview protocol well ahead of, or just prior to, the interview, they have some type of reaction to it (e.g., “Oh, that’s interesting, I’ve never considered that before,” “Hmm . . . this will be emotionally difficult to discuss,” “Oh no, I’m not sure that I am ready to talk about that.”). Some potential participants may, based on the protocol alone, decide not to participate in a study, especially if it asks about a particularly sensitive topic. Researchers could reach out to those who choose not to take part and ask them what contributed to that decision, and what might have allowed them to feel safe enough to join the research. Though such research may be difficult (if potential participants choose not to take part initially, will they be willing to discuss the reasons for doing so?), understanding such decisions may help researchers reduce the frequency of later refusals, and may also improve the preparation that future participants receive so that they feel safe engaging in the study, even when its topic may be challenging.

Phone vs. in-person interviews

Here, too, are opportunities to advance our understanding of the effects of the interview medium, and thereby aid researchers in selecting the most effective medium for their purposes. Two studies could be run concurrently on the same topic, for instance, with one using phone and the other in-person interviews. Data from each could then be examined with regard to completeness, depth, or richness.

Number of interviews per participant

In seeking to ascertain the most effective number of interviews, comparisons could be made between data and findings yielded by studies using single versus multiple interviews. One intriguing way such an examination could be accomplished is to run parallel studies of the same phenomenon, one using a single interview and the other using larger numbers of interviews. Do the data produced by the study(ies) using more interviews lead to richer findings?

Topic sensitivity

How do particularly sensitive topics influence the data collected? Furthermore, if researchers complete second interviews with participants who become noticeably upset, how do such additional contacts affect the data and the ensuing findings, as well as participants' experience of the interview? To investigate such questions, an independent team could examine the data arising from participants more vs. less affectively aroused in the interview to understand how emotionality may affect the process and outcomes of such research. For instance, do researchers hold back questions and probes to protect seemingly vulnerable participants, and if so, how do they foster an environment that enables them still to obtain rich data based on participants' ability to fully describe their experiences?

Cross-cultural concerns in interviewing

We are also curious about cross-cultural concerns in qualitative interviewing, especially the high vs. low context culture hypothesis (Hall, 1998). In working with participants from high-context cultures, does the researcher not only need to hear participants' verbal report, but also see their nonverbal communication to fully understand the meaning of the verbal data? Is researchers' understanding improved when they have access to both sources of data?

Effects of interviewer training

Finally, it would be helpful to examine how different types of interviewer training influence the data collected. Some trainers have new interviewers read articles on interviewing strategies, others have them listen to tapes of interviews, some have new interviewers engage in mock role plays of interviews, and some require that

neophyte interviewers complete pilot interviews before interacting with "real" participants. How do these different approaches affect the quantity and quality of data yielded by the interview, the confidence of the interviewer, and her/his relationship with the participant?

We offer these ideas, then, with the hope that psychotherapy researchers will use their empirical skills not only to investigate their particular phenomena of interest, but also to examine the very processes through which they explore these phenomena. Thus, we are certainly interested in what we learn from our research, and also in how we come to learn it, and how we might come to learn it more effectively.