CHAPTER 7

Qualitative Research II: Interviews and Focus Groups

Learning Objectives

- Be able to discuss why researchers use in-depth interviews and what types of research questions would most benefit from in-depth interviews
- Be able to comprehend the structure of in-depth interviews and design in-depth interviews
- Be able to discuss the importance of and identify the key points in interviewer training
- Be able to understand the use of specialized software in transcribing in-depth interviews and discuss the potential advantages and disadvantages
- Be able to identify the advantages and disadvantages of using in-depth interviews
- Be able to identify the purpose of focus groups and identify the conditions under which focus groups are the optimal research method
- Be able to design and identify the components of a focus group design
- Be able to identify advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups

IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

In Chapter 6, we discussed ethnographies. The rich observations collected during participant or nonparticipant observations are often supplemented with in-depth, qualitative interviews. The **in-depth interview** is a flexible, semi-structured, and conversational technique for asking mostly open-ended questions; it is used predominantly in qualitative research. Survey research typically uses more structured questions, with defined options; the difference is analogous to the difference between ethnographies and structured observations, such as W. Andrew Harrell's (2005) study of attractive children in shopping carts (as described in Chapter 6). Chapter 10 will discuss writing the questionnaires used in survey research.

The goals of the two types of interviews are very different. In survey research, the goal is to collect standardized responses from a large group of people; the aim of qualitative interviews is to get very detailed, in-depth information on a more limited, and probably not representative, group of people. Rather than ask about *what* people do or think, qualitative interviews tend to ask about the details of what happened, how it happened, and how the respondent felt throughout. This information allows researchers to form what Princeton University anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) called a "thick description" of experiences, processes, and events, which can allow researchers to capture certain social phenomena in ways that other techniques simply cannot.

Eran Shor and Dalit Simchai—Incest Avoidance in Kibbutzim (2009)

The examples in Chapter 6 generally tackle questions that couldn't be answered with other methods: surveys wouldn't tell researchers much about why students actually work in bad jobs because students generally just say that they work for the money. Similarly, Moffatt (1989) couldn't have answered his questions about the daily lives of students with any other method. However, qualitative research can also be used to supplement, or even challenge, the findings of other techniques. In their research on sexual relations within Israeli kibbutzim, Eran Shor, a sociologist at McGill University, and Dalit Simchai of the University of Haifa, challenged long-standing findings from quantitative analyses.

More than one hundred years ago, Finnish sociologist Edward Westermarck (1934) argued that incest avoidance—the aversion to sexual relationships with siblings—was a biological safeguard against the sorts of developmental defects that could arise from incest. He knew of cases where siblings who had been separated at birth married, so he argued that it must be a function of who the individuals live with in early childhood. He suggested that if two children are raised together for a significant period of time before about age eight, they would not experience any sexual attraction toward one another. This idea has faced some significant challenges over the past 120 years, most notably from Sigmund Freud's theories, which place a desire for incest at the heart of almost all family relations. For a Freudian, the avoidance of incest would have to be structural: people want to have sexual relations with their relatives, but society and the superego prevent them from doing so. As Freud's theories of human behavior began to lose their sway, sociologists began empirically testing whether people raised in close contact actually did avoid sexual contact.

Some of the strongest evidence in support of Westermarck's claims came from studies in the early 1970s of people raised in Israeli kibbutzim: collective farms in which children were raised communally. Children raised in these kibbutzim were educated along with other children of the same age throughout the day and would only see their parents for a few hours in the evening, even sleeping in the children's area with their peers. Anthropologist Joseph Shepher (1971) studied the married couples who met in the kibbutzim. Of nearly 3,000 couples from more than 200 kibbutzim (almost all of the couples who grew up in the communal arrangements), only 14 came from the same peer group, and none of those 14 had been in the same group for the first six years of their lives. Other work on arranged marriages in Taiwan, some of which involve the bride moving in with the future husband's family at a very young age, seemed to bear out these findings. The couples who lived together as children were more likely to get divorced and had fewer children.

However, as Shor and Simchai (2009) point out, the fact that people who live together as children are less likely to get married doesn't necessarily mean that there's a biological aversion mechanism at work. It could mean that the people are simply less sexually attracted to one another or even that there are structural barriers preventing them from getting married. Shor and Simchai began the process of actually interviewing people who had grown up in the kibbutzim to find out whether or not they were sexually attracted to others whom they had been raised with. The researchers carried out sixty interviews with people who had grown up in kibbutzim, with each interview lasting from one to two hours. The researchers made sure not to reveal the purpose of the study or their hypotheses to the participants until the end of the interviews to avoid contaminating the participants' answers. There is also the potential problem that the participants misremember, or even forget, some of the events that happened in their youth. (For some of the participants, the time in the kibbutz was fifty years before.) If that's the case, though, the participants would probably underreport socially undesirable behaviors, rather than overreport them. There were strict rules against sexual contact with other members of their peer groups, so participants would be more likely to lie about following the rules than breaking them. It makes sense to believe the people who say that they were sexually attracted to others in their peer group in the kibbutz, even knowing that some of the participants who were sexually attracted to their peers will deny it.

The researchers initially contacted the participants via telephone, then excluded anyone who had left the kibbutz for a long time during childhood. During the face-to-face interviews, the researchers asked general questions such as "What feelings did you have toward boys/girls within your group?" In response to these questions, Shor and Simchai (2009) say that participants talked at length about the other members of the group, including their sexual feelings toward them. In some of the interviews, the participants didn't give enough information for the researchers to determine if they had any sexual attraction to other members of their group or not. In those cases, the researchers pushed the participants a little more, though they were still careful not to reveal what their hypotheses were.

More than half of the participants (53 percent) reported either strong or moderate sexual attraction toward the others in their peer group, with 43 percent saying that they were indifferent toward them. The researchers illustrate this indifference by quoting one of their participants, who said, "It is very different from what I feel toward my brothers. With them the idea of sex clearly incites feelings of aversion. With my peers it was simply something that did not cross my mind." Many said that they were attracted to one of their peers and indifferent toward the rest. Others reported that they were initially attracted to one or more of their peers, with the attraction fading over time. As another participant said:

> "We didn't think, 'Just a minute, they are like our sisters.' It was part of the intimacy and closeness, and there was also sexual excitement involved, because it was convenient and we knew it was not going anywhere . . . There were half-incidental touches, and it was not a secret. It was in the open and with consent. But it was also clear to everyone that it is not going to be fully consummated." (Shor and Simchai 2009)

It seems that the people who grew up in the kibbutzim were attracted to each other, but sexual relationships were socially unacceptable; therefore, they didn't get married. Shor and Simchai (2009) illustrate this point by quoting another participant, who said,

> "I loved him very much, and was also very much attracted to him. We became a couple, but it was never consummated, because it was highly unorthodox at the time. I really wanted to consummate our love physically, and so did he, but I never let it happen. I was afraid that something awful is going to happen if we do." (Shor and Simchai 2009)

In addition, a number of participants reported that they suppressed the feelings because they were forbidden. The few participants who wound up dating someone from their group reported that outsiders thought it was strange that they would do so; they were told there was something wrong with it.

These findings have important implications for the study of incest avoidance. It doesn't seem as if there is an innate, biological aversion to sexual relationships, as Westermarck (1934) and many others have suggested. Rather, it seems that participants were sexually attracted to their peers (boys more than girls), and many consummated that relationship in secret. However, there was immense social pressure, especially on the girls, to avoid these relationships: a social, rather than a biological, explanation for the lack of marriages seems likely.

In this case, the hypotheses of past researchers were making claims about the internal states of the individuals in the kibbutzim—that they experienced aversion to sexual relationships with their peers—without really bothering to ask the individuals about their feelings. By asking people about their feelings, rather than just assuming, Shor and Simchai (2009) called into question the mechanism by which humans avoid incest. Once again, we see the importance of understanding the lived experience of the participants being studied. There are caveats here, of course. We know that people aren't very good about telling us why they chose to do, or not do, something. As such, the interviews Shor and Simchai carried out don't really tell us why the people growing up in the kibbutzim didn't marry their peers. We can, however, generally trust what they say about their behaviors: in this case, sexual relationships and feelings of attraction toward peers. While this doesn't fully answer the question of how incest avoidance among humans works, it does give us some clues, at least to how it *doesn't* work. Perhaps most important, this research improves our understanding of human families and sexuality, and the research simply could not have been conducted in any other way. Analysis of marriage rates, no matter how sophisticated, doesn't tell us why people do or do not get married. An ethnography of the kibbutzim wouldn't tell us much about people's inner states, even if such an ethnography were possible or ethical. By simply talking to people, Shor and Simchai were able to find out more than researchers using any other technique.

CAPTURING THE VOICES OF THE UNDERPRIVILEGED

Qualitative interviews are especially useful in capturing the perspectives and experiences of less privileged members of society. With most members of society, we can find out something about their experiences by looking at public records or media reports, but these sources don't cover everyone.

Eric Klinenberg—Heat Wave (2003)

In July 1995, Chicago experienced the worst heat wave in the city's recorded history, with temperatures of 106 degrees Fahrenheit and a heat index (a measure which takes humidity into account) of more than 125 degrees Fahrenheit. It was so hot that the streets buckled, and people opened more than 3,000 fire hydrants to try to cool down, causing a loss of water pressure for much of the city. It was so hot that fire departments hosed down children riding in school buses. You might think that air conditioning would help, but many of the city's poor simply didn't have air conditioners (ACs), and within a day or so, there weren't any ACs to buy. Even those who had ACs weren't necessarily better off. Since everyone was using them, power failures were rampant. Such intense heat causes vulnerable people's immune systems to shut down, leading to death. Hospitals—and morgues—were soon overwhelmed, and paramedics who found someone in need of medical help sometimes drove for hours looking for a hospital that could take the patient. The heat wave was only predicted to last for a few days, but it stretched on for a week. By the end of that week, more than 500 people—and perhaps as many as 700—had died as a result.

Klinenberg, a sociologist at NYU, used a combination of archival research and in-depth interviews to try and uncover why these deaths were spread so unevenly throughout the city. For instance, most of the victims were elderly, but men were far more likely to die than women, and African Americans were more likely to die than whites. Hispanics, while no better off financially than African Americans, and, on average, in worse health, were far less likely to die:

while Hispanics account for a quarter of Chicago's population, they were only 2 percent of deaths.

Eric Klinenberg's (2003) interviews reveal that the deaths weren't caused by the heat nearly as much as social isolation. Elderly women were less likely to die because they kept up social relationships: someone called, visited, got them to a cooling center or hospital, or invited them to an air-conditioned house. Elderly Hispanics were less likely to die because they lived in parts of Chicago with more of a street life (not because of tighter familial relationships, as many at the time suggested). If their apartments were too hot, they could walk somewhere close by. Elderly African Americans, on the other hand, tended to live in areas where the streets were deserted, where stores had given up. If no one came to get them, they had nowhere to go. Many of them died locked in their own apartments, afraid to go outside. The killer, Klinenberg argues, wasn't the weather; it was social and geographical isolation.

It's easy to think that today, with advanced telecommunication technologies, people's lives are basically open books, but Klinenberg (2003) shows that this really isn't the case. There were whole groups of people shut inside of their own apartments, dying in the heat, and the outside world had no way of knowing that they were even there. When researchers can't rely on official sources to give them insight into these marginalized members of society, in-depth interviews may be the best way to go.

STRUCTURING THE INTERVIEW

When carrying out surveys (as discussed in detail in Chapter 10), interviewers are supposed to stick to the wording of the script exactly and are provided with detailed directions to cover any contingencies. This is necessary since the aim of surveys is to get comparable information from a large number of different respondents. However, the aim of in-depth interviews is quite the opposite. Instead of gathering short but comparable information on a large body of respondents, in-depth interviews try to elicit detailed information from a few respondents. As such, in-depth interviews don't start with a set of carefully worded, closed-ended questions. Rather, they use a list of open-ended questions so respondents aren't constrained by the answers that the researcher is expecting. For instance, a political survey might ask respondents which issue in an upcoming election is most important to them and give a few options to choose from. A researcher in an in-depth interview might ask the same question, but rather than listing the options, the researcher would allow the respondents to give whatever responses they wanted. The point of an in-depth interview is to be as conversational as possible. Instead of having an interviewer and a respondent, qualitative interviews should be like two people taking and exploring a topic. Like participants in ethnographies, participants in interviews may initially be reluctant to open up. The more the interview seems like a conversation—and the more comfortable it is—the sooner the participants will open up.

For this purpose, interviewers employ two central tools: **probes** and **follow-up questions**. Probes are typically used to get the respondent to talk and elaborate a little more on the issue. In some cases, respondents may be shy or are not as talkative as the researcher would like. Probes can be used in those circumstances to get respondents to talk more and provide more data. Researchers commonly use probes such as:

Could you tell me more?
Would you give me an example?
Can you elaborate on that idea?
Would you explain what you mean by that?
Could you explain that? I don't think I understand what you mean by. . .
Could you talk some more about. . .

Probes can also be used to remedy the opposite problem. Sometimes respondents are very talkative and go off topic. Probes can be used to get these respondents back on track without offending them or introducing unneeded artificiality into the interview.

Could you come back to the point you mentioned about. . .
Could I stop you for a second?

In addition to probes, follow-up questions are essential when designing a qualitative interview. They are good alternatives to probes; interviewers ask respondents to share more information through a series of more specific questions. Especially when they follow "yes/no" questions, follow-up questions give respondents the opportunity to walk interviewers through a process or explain some points in greater detail.

The order of questions is also important to maintain the conversational tone of the interview. When ordering questions, researchers generally start with easier questions and build up to more difficult, personal questions. As the interview goes on, participants generally become more comfortable and should be more willing to answer questions about sensitive topics. In addition, asking people about sensitive topics at the beginning of an interview can lead them to quickly cancel the interview. Even if the interview is canceled once sensitive questions begin, it's better if it occurs at the end of the interview than at the beginning.

In terms of the phrasing of questions, many qualitative scholars agree that the wording and phrasing should not be completely rigid and predetermined. Researchers should feel free to change the way that a particular question is phrased in order to make it better fit the interview up to that point or the respondent. As long as the information elicited by the question is the same, it really doesn't matter how the question is asked. In contrast, it would be disastrous to adopt such an approach in survey research, where every respondent must get the same set of questions. In interviews, though, researchers can use guidelines when determining how to phrase their questions.

Most important, researchers should rely on concrete observations rather than vague generalizations. By doing so, researchers get responses that are both more accurate and more specific. A researcher could elicit responses that are more useful by asking, "What did you do last Saturday?" versus "What do you do in your leisure time?" In response to the leisure time question, respondents might give the researcher a socially desirable answer and say what they think will make them look good in the eyes of the interviewer. Even if they aren't intentionally lying, respondents may decide that what they did last weekend, or most weekends,

The following excerpt is from a study on retirement. The researcher shows how to concert a raw interview into a written report.

Interview

Interviewer: What are your days like?

Respondent: Very quiet and uneventful.

Interviewer: Like yesterday, what, how did yesterday work? Maybe start in the morning.

Respondent: Well, I, I got up, had some breakfast I went out, ah, went out for about three or four hours and did a bit of window shopping, a little Christmas shopping. I got back around noon time or so. Ah, I had lunch, watched the news then just puttered around the house. Then I usually go to bed around 9 or 10 o'clock. I had supper and watched television for a while and then I usually go to bed. But, like I said, very unexciting, very uneventful.

Interviewer: If you wanted to describe a really boring hour and get across what it felt like and what was going on.

Respondent: Well I don't have a problem with that. I, ah, I can sit down and do absolutely nothing for an hour. And it does not bother me. I enjoy a chance to relax and not have the pressure of having to do something.

Report

Puttering is a relaxed way of moving through a attract one's day. engaging in activities as they attract one's attention, undertaking nothing that demands energy and concentration. The dishes need doing, so why not do them now? It's nice out, so a bit of gardening might be enjoyable. It's noontime, it's time for a sandwich and the news on television. Later, the magazines need to be picked up and room straightened. There is time for a bit of reading. Email may be checked, or an hour taken to organize the attic. Nothing has special urgency.

Retirees seem not to be bored by puttering. There is always something to fill time with, and the puttering is regularly interrupted by an activity to attend to, a hobby to pursue, a walk or a bit of shopping or coffee with a friend. Mr. Oldsten was among the many respondents who liked taking it easy. He had been the purchasing director for a high tech company, job that was frequently stressful. His wife was still employed and so he spent most of the day alone.

Source: Weiss, Robert S. 2004. "In their Own Word: Making the Most of Qualitative Interviews." *Contexts. Vol.* 3. *No. 4: 44–51.*

isn't representative of what they "really" do. By asking about last Saturday instead, the researcher is likely to get closer to what the respondent really does over the weekend. If what they did last Saturday wasn't typical, the respondent will likely explain why it isn't. Asking specific, concrete questions gets the researchers closer to the lived experience of the respondent, which is, after all, the goal of qualitative research.

In the excerpt above, note how the interviewer goes from a relatively vague question—"What are your days like?" to a very specific one, "How did yesterday work? Start in the morning." The latter question elicits a much longer, more detailed answer—one that gets the researcher much closer to what the respondent's life is really like.

Also, bear in mind that interviews are not a substitute for the sort of ethnographic observations that were discussed in the last chapter. As in an ethnography, researchers carrying out interviews must make sure to use all of their senses, as well as their observations of their own feelings about the person being interviewed and the environment where the interview takes place. These informal fieldnotes are often just as important as the interviews, so researchers should try to take as many notes as possible. Some researchers are worried about taking too many notes; others worry about the opposite. When in doubt, more notes are always better than fewer notes. A researcher can always decide later not to use some of the notes, but he or she may not know until the end of the research what topics will, and will not, prove to be important. These fieldnotes are helpful in understanding and interpreting the interviews.

INTERVIEW LOGISTICS

Interviewer Training

It isn't always possible for a single researcher to carry out all of the interviews personally. There might be too many respondents for one person to deal with, or the interviewer might be worried about reactivity arising from the gender or race of the interviewer, necessitating interviewers from various backgrounds. The researcher might be interested in talking to respondents in different cities or different continents. Whatever the reason, researchers sometimes need to train others in how to conduct in-depth interviews. Since in-depth interviews are conversational in tone and more interactive, the training of interviewers is crucial. Also, the sort of training that interviewers need to successfully carry out in-depth interviews is the same that novice researchers need to carry out their own interviews.

The key skill interviewers need to carry out qualitative interviews is the ability to keep the conversation going, to ensure that the interview is able to hit all of the topics of interest. First, the role of the interviewer is to establish rapport with the participants. If the rapport is not strong, respondents won't be willing to divulge the sort of detailed or sensitive information that makes these interviews worthwhile. In addition, the interviewers should be trained to practice active listening to provide follow-up questions as well as probes to get the interview back on track, if necessary. Oftentimes in a conversation people are more focused on what they're going to say next than what the person in front of them is actually saying. Having an ordered list of topics and questions means that the interviewer doesn't have to worry about the next question and can engage fully in what's being said. This can be difficult, especially when the interview veers into controversial topics, but it is especially important when dealing with sensitive areas.

When doing these interviews, researchers can be tempted to express agreement with the respondent. This can help the conversational tone and build rapport, but, unfortunately, it can also introduce bias into the findings. Although disagreeing with respondents can lead to problems of reactivity in the findings, agreeing with them can be just as harmful.

The best way to train interviewers in these techniques is through practice. Mock interviews, often with people pretending to be uncooperative, can be useful. Other researchers monitor these interviews and offer pointers. It can also be helpful for novice interviewers to observe more experienced interviewers in the field and discuss their techniques before going into interviews alone.

Transcription Software

Once the interview process is complete, researchers need to transcribe the interviews. **Transcription** refers to the process of converting audio files to written ones. Though audio recording makes it easy to record interviews, transferring audio-recordings into written documents is often time consuming. Transcription can be done manually. There are also many companies that provide professional transcription services, often for a significant fee.

In recent years, computer-assisted transcription has become a useful tool for researchers as well. As recently as ten years ago, computer transcription was bad enough to be basically worthless for researchers, but some products (the best known of which is Nuance's Dragon) are now available for around $100 and can be of significant help in transcription. In some cases, they're even accompanied by smartphone apps, which can carry out many of the same functions anywhere there's a wireless connection. Such software isn't a panacea, though. Most are voice dependent, meaning that researchers often end up reading and recording the interviews again, in their own voices, before using the software. In addition, the software needs to be monitored during the transcription process so that the researcher can correct any errors the computer makes. Still, programs like these can significantly reduce the amount of time that it takes to transcribe interviews, for much less than it would take to hire an outside professional transcription service.

Coding

After the interviews are transcribed and are written in text form, the next step is coding. **Coding** refers to the systematic process of categorizing the findings. First, the researcher determines the **coding categories.** Coding categories are the words or concepts that the researcher is looking for in interviews. For example, in Besen-Cassino's (2014) in-depth interviews with young baristas, she wanted to find out why they worked, particularly their nonmonetary reasons for working. As such, some of the coding categories were money, discounts, meeting new people, seeing friends, and fashionability of the brands. The process for determining coding categories is much the same as the process for creating a dictionary in content analysis, as described in Chapter 8.

Researchers can also make use of software that automates this sort of coding. Packages such as Dedoose or MAXQDA can look for patterns in interviews and even link the interviews with other data that's been collected about respondents. For instance, they could tell a researcher if certain responses are more prevalent among women or if respondents who make one sort of response often make a related one as well. These packages have also become much less expensive in recent years. While they aren't a replacement for careful data analysis, they can make that analysis easier.

You can check out the Dedoose website to learn more about using software to organize and analyze qualitative data.
www.dedoose.com

You can check out MAXQDA and take free online tutorials to learn how to use the software to organize and tabulate qualitative data.
www.maxqda.com

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

In-depth interviews provide very rich, detailed information. Because they consist of open-ended questions, they allow researchers the chance to uncover information that doesn't fit into preconceived categories. These interviews are also the best way to understand the everyday experience of participants, especially individuals whose lives aren't included in public narratives.

As we saw in the kibbutz example, there are many research projects for which observational data just does not suffice. During in-depth interviews, participants can walk interviewers through their reasoning, describe a process, or elaborate further on a topic. Since the tone of the interview is conversational, the researcher can go back and ask for clarification. It is also advantageous because carrying out interviews is relatively inexpensive. While specialized software and equipment can be useful, it's far from necessary, and anyone with a recorder and a computer can do a good job of interviewing.

Unfortunately, getting detailed information is time consuming. In-depth interviews often take a very long time: several hours per interview. Also, since the tone of in-depth interviews is conversational, the interviews could easily get off topic, leaving the researcher with information he or she is not necessarily interested in.

The biggest challenge for researchers pursuing in-depth interviews is building rapport with participants so that participants feel comfortable enough to speak candidly. As such, in-depth interviews are used in conjunction with ethnographies. During an ethnography, researchers spend long hours with the participants; this establishes the rapport that allows them to effectively conduct the in-depth interviews.

Finally, in-depth interviews are not generally designed to be representative of a population. Because researchers will rarely talk to a random sample of people, the responses that they record can't necessarily be applied to people not included in the sample. Even if all participants in Shor and Simchai's (2009) research said that they had been attracted to others within their kibbutz, it wouldn't mean that all people are attracted this way. These interviews can't tell us about the wider population, but they can tell us about processes—about how things work—and that's often just as valuable.

Ethical Considerations

In-depth interviews gather a large amount of information from each participant, and since the researcher is conducting the interviews face-to-face, participants cannot be anonymous. The researcher knows who gave the information and has to take careful steps to protect the identities of the respondents. For instance, the real names of respondents should be replaced with pseudonyms, even in the audio or video recordings and fieldnotes created by the researcher. To further protect the identities of the respondents, the researcher should be careful to avoid revealing too much detail in any publicly available version of the data or results and should make sure to destroy recordings once transcription is complete.

FOCUS GROUPS

A **focus group** is a qualitative technique in which a group of participants is asked to discuss an issue together. As with in-depth interviews, researchers using focus groups strive to create a conversational tone, one that's reflective of the actual social dynamics underlying an issue. In-depth interviews try to uncover the lived experience of one individual, including things that particular respondent wouldn't want to share publicly. Focus groups, on the other hand, try to uncover the social dynamics of a topic, to see how people talk or think about issues in a group context.

Erica Chito Childs—Black Women and Interracial Relationships (2005)

While the rate of interracial marriages has increased significantly over the past few decades, marriages between African Americans and whites remain relatively rare. As of the 2000 census, 1.2 percent of all marriages in the United States were between whites and Asians. Only 0.06 percent of marriages were between whites and African Americans, and about 70 percent of these were between African American men and white women. This raises two interesting issues. First, within the African American community, the lack of eligible men is seen as a real problem, so why don't more African American women marry men from different racial backgrounds? Second, given that eligible men are seen as a scarce resource within the African American community, how does the African American community view men who choose to marry outside of their race?

Media portrayals of African American women show them as intransigently against interracial relationships, blaming white women for stealing the best men and the African American men for falling for it. Spike Lee movies, however, aren't research, and Erica Chito Childs (2005) set out to analyze how African American women actually viewed these relationships.

To do so, she convened focus groups of African American women at three different American universities, as well as carried out in-depth, semi-structured interviews with four African American women who were married to white men, with each interview lasting two to three hours. The focus groups consisted of between seven and twelve women. Childs (2005) began each session by having the participants introduce themselves and give a little background about themselves before she described the rules for the focus group. In focus groups, participants are typically told that the goal of the group is to facilitate discussion about a topic, that all of their ideas are valid and important, that their identities will be kept entirely confidential, and that they should be respectful of each other's views and opinions. Generally, participants then sign a consent form before beginning the discussion, including notification that the discussions will be recorded.

In Childs' (2005) focus groups, she began by prompting the women to discuss any experiences that they had with interracial relationships, their views of such relationships, and how they perceived the views of the African American community on such relationships. Participants also asked Childs (who is of Portuguese descent) why she was interested in the issue, leading her to disclose that she is married to an African American man and has mixed-race children.

None of the women in the focus groups admitted that they were involved in an interracial relationship (given their rarity, this was likely true), and Childs (2005) reports a consensus among the groups that such relationships were problematic, with participants saying things like "Blacks just like to see other Blacks, especially Black men who are successful, to stay Black, to be with a Black woman," and that they "would be uncomfortable knowing someone who dated a white person because whites just don't understand Blacks." They also said that their families and friends wouldn't support or understand a decision to be in a relationship with a white man.

According to the women in the focus groups, much of this opposition is based on the continuing problem of racism. If white people are biased against African Americans, why in the world would an African American want to be in a relationship with a white person? As such, the women in the focus groups tended to argue that African American men who chose to be with white women were, in some way, less tied to their communities than other African Americans. As one woman said, "Black men who are with white women are also usually submerged in white culture and have white friends." Another said, "Black guys who act white do tend to date white girls." A choice to be in a relationship with white women, in their view, is a betrayal. The men aren't just choosing to be with a white woman; they're rejecting African American women and the larger African American community. "It's dating outside of your race for a purpose," one woman said. "Black guys want their laundry done, homework done, food cooked, guys tell Black women off because they won't do their shit." African American men, according to the focus groups, "feel that white girls are easier, sexually loose, and on the flip side that Black women are too aggressive, too controlling, have an attitude."

Of interest, the women seemed far more accepting of African American women dating white men, saying things like "When I see a Black girl with a white guy, I think it must be love; he must be doing something right for her to cross over like that," and "A Black woman with a white man can go further, and there's not the same idea that she's going to desert the African-American community." They also told Childs (2005) that skin color had a different meaning for African American men and women: women with darker skin are less desirable, but skin tone doesn't matter for men.

The women Childs (2005) talked to in her interviews told her that they felt the same sorts of pressures against their relationships that the women in the focus groups had discussed. They said that their families had reservations about the relationships, mostly on the basis of the belief that whites were racist. They reported that other African American women had been hostile toward their relationships and even acknowledged that they had felt that they were selling out their own community.

Childs (2005) concludes that much of the media portrayal of African American women's views of interracial relationships are accurate: they do oppose these relationships and have very negative views of individuals who engage in them. These views, however, seem to be more focused on the effects of the relationship on the community, rather than the impact of the relationships on them personally.

Most of the time, when researchers want to study the views of members of a subpopulation, they make use of surveys, but this wasn't possible or desirable in Childs' (2005) case. A survey would have been very difficult to carry out because the population of African Americans married to whites is small, and contacting enough of them for a reasonable sample would be cost prohibitive, even if such a sample could be obtained. When researchers can't obtain a large, random sample of a population, they often turn to in-depth interviews in order to at least gather very detailed information about a smaller, nonrandom group, as Childs did. So why, then, would Childs go to the trouble of supplementing her in-depth interviews with a series of focus groups?

WHY FOCUS GROUPS?

Focus groups are similar to semi-structured interviews but are carried out in a group context. Just as in semi-structured interviews, the researcher (in focus groups, the researcher is sometimes referred to as a **moderator** or *facilitator*) comes in with a series of questions that are designed to prompt discussion in the group. The goal of these questions is to get the participants to talk and interact with each other as much as possible. During the course of the focus group, the job of the researcher is twofold. First, the researcher has to ensure that no individual in the focus group dominates the discussion and that every member of the group contributes to the discussion. Generally, researchers avoid cutting anyone off in the discussion, but they do cut in to ask for a different participant's input. Second, the researcher must try to keep the discussion on track to the greatest extent possible. Focus group discussions are semi-structured, not structured, interviews, so it's acceptable for participants to take the discussion in a direction other than what the researcher had originally anticipated. However, the researcher has to bring the group back from such tangents if the participants get too far away from the questions or time is an issue. The researcher has to make sure that the group gets through all of the questions before time runs out. Oftentimes, the prompts used by the researcher involve asking a general question, then asking participants to comment on what the other participants said.

In Childs' (2005) focus groups, the questions were about general topics: asking participants if they had ever been in or known someone in an interracial relationship, asking how they felt about other women engaging in these relationships. Once one of the participants responded to these questions, Childs would move the conversation around the room and bring in any participants who hadn't commented. If one of the participants said something especially interesting, she would ask others for their response to it. In a semi-structured interview, when a participant makes an interesting comment, the researcher asks him or her to expand on it. In a focus group, when a participant makes an interesting comment, the researcher asks someone else to expand on it.

The problem with focus groups is that participants may feel much greater pressure to conform to societal expectations than they would in an individual interview. In an interview, the participant may be worried, even subconsciously, about what the researcher wants to hear, and it's the job of the researcher to make the participant feel more at ease and minimize any reactivity. In a focus group, putting participants at ease is much more difficult because they are talking to a group of their peers. Therefore, if a researcher wants to know what an individual thinks, focus groups are not the way to go. However, if the researcher wants to know the opinions of a particular community, focus groups are often appropriate. Childs' (2005) research question wasn't about what the individual African American women thought about interracial relationships. She wanted to understand how the African American community treated women in interracial relationships. If she had been given a choice between knowing views that the women had but were afraid to express in front of their peers and hearing things that they would say in a group but didn't actually believe, she would prefer the latter. This isn't always the case, but when it is, focus groups may be the best way to go.

As in any qualitative research, reactivity can be a problem, as it was for Childs (2005). In her focus groups, she tells us that participants asked her why she—an apparently white woman—was asking a room full of African American women about interracial relationships. This is potentially a problem in interviews as well, but focus groups often lead to a more pronounced "us versus them" dynamic. Participants in an interview setting may have reservations about the researcher, but the researcher has enough one-to-one interaction to be able to assuage these concerns. In a focus group, there isn't nearly as much individual interaction, and there's the added dynamic of the participants in the group bonding with each other, potentially in opposition to the researcher. To avoid such issues, the researcher should attempt to identify with the group as much as possible by using words such as *we* and *us*, rather than oppositional terms such as *you*. In addition, the researcher should try to be as demographically similar to the group as possible: a woman probably wouldn't be the best choice to run a focus group of men, or an African American to run a focus group of whites. Childs was able to overcome these issues and get the women in her focus group to open up despite their demographic differences (especially relevant when the discussion is about race), but she may have had an easier time if she had been African American herself.

FOCUS GROUP COMPOSITION

Any focus group is only going to be as useful as the individuals who are brought into it. While in-depth interviews might strive to find representative individuals—respondents whose experiences mirror that of the larger population—the composition of focus groups is generally much more deliberate. Since the goal of a focus group is to look at how issues play out in a social context, it's important that the group be composed to look something like society. If an issue is controversial, a focus group that is entirely on one side of it isn't going to be very informative; on the other hand, a focus group made of people who are at each other's throats won't tell the researcher very much either.

Maggie Evans and Colleagues—Parents' Perspectives on Immunizations (2001)

In the past 20 years, the percentage of parents who are immunizing their children against childhood diseases such as measles, mumps, and rubella has fallen dramatically. Not too long ago, these diseases were unheard of in wealthy nations, but the decline in immunizations has led to a resurgence in these illnesses. Perhaps more important, public health researchers are worried about herd immunity—as long as a certain proportion of a population is immunized against a disease, it's okay if some people aren't because the disease won't be able to spread. If too many people aren't immunized, the whole population is at risk, sometimes even those who have received the vaccine.

As this trend began to take hold in the late 1990s, researchers such as Maggie Evans, a researcher at the University of Bristol, and her colleagues tried to find out why more parents were refusing immunizations. To do so, they held six focus groups, with four to nine participants in each. Because they wanted young parents—the type of people who are making decisions about immunizations—

Evans and her colleagues (2001) provided child care for the hour or two that each discussion lasted. This is actually an important step: researchers using focus groups always try to make the participants feel comfortable, providing informal settings, snacks, and whatever participants need to feel at ease. For young parents, not having children running around is crucial. Evans and her colleagues recruited the parents from community groups in two English towns and made sure to include individuals from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Evans and her colleagues (2001) divided individuals into focus groups based on their vaccination decisions: three of the groups were composed of participants who had vaccinated their children, and three were composed of participants who had not. This is not because society was split about evenly on the subject—the vast majority of parents still vaccinate their children—but rather to ensure that participants would speak freely.

In each focus group, the researchers had a moderator and an assistant. The focus groups were semi-structured, with the moderator asking a series of open-ended questions to the group, making sure that everyone responded and also allowing participants to talk about any related issues that were important to them. Once the focus groups were completed, the researchers transcribed the recordings and began examining the transcripts, defining various themes as they went. (This process of emergent coding is described in detail in the Chapter 8.) They then had various members of the research team independently analyze the transcripts according to these themes and made sure that everyone found the same things in the transcripts.

Once the analysis was done, the researchers compared the statements of immunizing and nonimmunizing parents to find any differences in their statements on the various themes. They found that nonimmunizing parents understood that their children were at risk for contracting a disease but felt that nothing too bad would happen and that having childhood diseases was somehow good for the children. They also found that both sets of parents tended to distrust government reports on the subject and that they felt that doctors were unwilling to talk to them about the subject.

The researchers concluded that since parents felt they couldn't get trusted information from the government, and couldn't talk to their doctors about immunizations, they were turning to less reputable sources—mostly online—that were giving them the false idea that there was a real scientific controversy about vaccines, especially the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine that some celebrities have claimed is linked to autism. To fix this, they recommend opening lines of communication and having government reports and flyers that take the issue seriously and report on the actual benefits and risks of these vaccines.

In order to find out why people were refusing to vaccinate their children, Evans and her colleagues (2001) had to balance two major concerns when populating their focus groups. First, they needed to ensure that all participants felt comfortable discussing their views on a difficult issue. They created separate focus groups for parents who had or had not vaccinated their children. If the groups had been mixed, it's likely that each group of parents would have spent the focus group defending their decisions and potentially challenging the decisions of the other group. In the real world, parents don't generally know whether other parents have vaccinated their children, so putting people into a situation where they do know this information may artificially create conflict. That's a fine strategy for *Jerry Springer*, but not so good for social science research. Because the groups were separated, participants did not have to defend their decisions. Many of the parents expressed regret or said that they had been bullied into their vaccination decision. Because they knew that everyone in the group had made the same decision, they didn't worry about being judged.

Second, Evans and her colleagues (2001) needed the focus groups to represent a cross-section of society. While these focus groups weren't intended to be representative of the whole British population in the same way that a survey is, the researchers wanted to have some idea of whether socioeconomic status, education, and other factors mattered in how parents made decisions about vaccinations. If the researchers had selected participants through a random process, it's likely that the small groups wouldn't have included participants from all walks of life. Researchers can't simply trust that their focus groups will look like the population they're trying to study (as they often do in survey research), but must actively construct such groups. Often this means seeking out participants through community groups or schools rather than simply offering money, which tends to attract poorer people. To achieve diversity within a focus group, it's best to use a combination of recruitment techniques.

Typically, focus groups consist of five to twelve people. Having fewer participants can allow one or two strong personalities to dominate the discussion. Having more participants makes it too easy for some individuals to get away without contributing to the discussion. It's also important to ensure that there aren't any preexisting power relationships within the focus group. It wouldn't be appropriate to have an employer and employee in a group together, or a teacher and student, or generally even people who know each other well. Focus groups require participants to openly state their opinions and engage with the opinions of others. Any relationship that might make participants less likely to do so is undesirable. Of course, some degree of inequality often arises during the focus group. Some participants talk more than others or have stronger opinions. These sorts of inequalities, though, can be remedied by an active moderator who makes sure that everyone's opinion is heard and that no one dominates the conversation.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups allow researchers to collect data from a group of participants. Compared to individual interviews, focus groups save time, and, in some ways, the two techniques are designed to do the same thing: let participants explain their decisions and views and walk the researchers through the process. Focus groups, however, add in a social element and can thus help researchers understand not only how participants feel about an issue, but also how they portray themselves and their decisions publically. This social aspect is why the technique is used so often by market researchers to test products and by political analysts to test political candidates and messages.

The group setting, however, can also leave some participants feeling intimidated. In some cases, especially when they're expressing what they perceive to be unpopular opinions, participants may be willing to talk in a confidential interview but not in a focus group. Furthermore, some of the opinions expressed in a group discussion might not accurately reflect individual opinions. Since the participants are artificially brought together, some of the opinions they express are context based and wouldn't necessarily be aired if the participants were alone. The social aspect that makes focus groups valuable to researchers can also distort what individual participants say. If an individual feels marginalized within the focus group, he or she may become more aggressive or defensive than would otherwise happen. If the participant feels that he or she is in accord with the other participants, he or she may exaggerate views that seem desirable to the group. Furthermore, focus groups tend to display a **polarization effect**, in which participants express more extreme opinions than they would in individual settings. While it is the job of the moderator to minimize these group effects, it's impossible to fully do so. Researchers should be careful not to conflate the views expressed in the focus group with participants' opinions outside of that context.

Ethical Concerns

Focus groups aren't as ethically problematic as some other research techniques, but they do raise a unique set of concerns. First, participants are being asked to express opinions in front of other people, and this may include unpopular views. Participants might reasonably be worried that they'll be judged for airing certain views (and the moderator may well be pressuring them to make those views known), so it's the job of the researcher to minimize any potential social consequences from the focus group. This means making sure that focus group members don't know each other, and it often means ensuring that everyone in a particular focus group is on the same side of an issue, as in the research that Evans and her colleagues (2001) carried out.

A second ethical concern arises from the fact that focus groups are typically video-recorded to allow the researcher to record any nonverbal communications (frowns, crossed arms, rolled eyes) and to make sure that statements are attributed to the correct participant. While this is useful, it also means that researchers need to be extra cautious to protect confidentiality. Of course, when reporting their findings, researchers change the names and all identifying characteristics of the participants, but they also need to ensure that no one outside the research team has access to the videos and that the videos are destroyed when the analysis is over.

Finally, since focus groups can be so time consuming and typically require that participants travel to a certain place at a certain time (in-depth interviews, in contrast, are generally scheduled for whenever the participant is available, near or in the participant's home), researchers often give participants prizes or honoraria. Offering small prizes or honoraria often helps increase response rates, but researchers should be certain to follow the guidelines for monetary coercion discussed previously. These issues can be minimized by keeping the honoraria and prizes small and making sure that participants know that they can leave at any time and still receive their full payment.

SUMMARY

While ethnographic research and focus groups can give researchers some traction in understanding the lived experience of the people they're studying, it's sometimes necessary to actually talk to people. This need is clearest when the research involves questions about things that happened in the past; internal states, which can't be directly observed; or the experiences of the underprivileged, which can't always be found in official records or public accounts.

When talking with participants, researchers make use of semi-structured interview techniques. Most of the questions are predefined, but there's room to explore certain topics in greater depth. Researchers also need to make judicious use of prompts and follow-up questions to get all of the relevant information and to keep the interview on track.

As valuable as interviews can be, researchers may be interested in the social dynamics of phenomena: how people act when they're in a group. In these situations, researchers often turn to focus group research, in which a facilitator or moderator conducts interviews in a group setting, making sure that everyone in the group contributes and no one individual dominates the discussion. When carrying out focus groups, researchers also have to be careful to avoid groupings that may lead to undue conflict or make individuals less likely to speak their minds.

Study and Review

Different research techniques often lead to different conclusions. Why did Shor and Simchai's (2009) conclusions about incest avoidance (and Klinenberg's [2003] work on the Chicago heat wave) differ so much from that of other researchers?

Under what circumstances can we trust the statements that individuals make during in-depth interviews?

Why is transcription of interviews necessary?

Why couldn't Childs (or Evans and her colleagues) have carried out their research with in-depth interviews?