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Teaching Beginning Undergraduates How to Do an In-depth Interview: A Teaching Note with 12 Handy Tips

Victoria Healey-Etten¹ and Shane Sharp¹

Abstract

In-depth interviewing is now a common method in sociology. Although there are many potential benefits of in-depth interviewing assignments for both majors and nonmajors, few have developed tools one can use to teach this method at the first and second year, especially in substantive classes where instruction in interviewing is constrained by time and practical circumstances. In this note, the authors present an in-class exercise and tip sheet they developed to teach beginning undergraduates how to conduct quality in-depth interviews. Comparative analysis of students' preliminary and final interview guides, as well as the results of a student survey, support the teaching effectiveness of the workshop and tip sheet.

Keywords

In-depth interviewing techniques, qualitative methods instruction, in-class demonstrations

Many sociologists use in-depth interviewing to explore a multitude of substantive and theoretical topics (e.g., Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berkowitz and Marsiglio 2007; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Howard 2006, 2008; Karp 2006; Lamont 1992, 2000; Quark 2007; Read and Oselin 2008; Swidler 2001). Sociologists often use this method because it allows them to explore in detail people's subjective experiences, meaning-making, accounting processes, and unspoken assumptions about life and the social world in general. Because of the popularity of in-depth interviewing as a valued research methodology, more and more sociologists have started to assign in-depth interview projects in their beginning undergraduate courses.

Another reason that sociologists increasingly assign in-depth interview projects in beginning undergraduate courses is because of the educational value to majors and nonmajors alike. For majors, including in-depth interview projects in

beginning and substantive courses follows the recommendation of the American Sociological Association to "infuse the empirical base of sociology throughout the curriculum, giving students exposure to research opportunities across several methodological traditions" (McKinney et al. 2004:8). Also, as Charmaz (1991) argues, there is a multitude of substantive benefits for majors, including having "active involvement" in an empirical or theoretical topic, learning how to collect raw data and turn it into a presentable product, and understanding how the ethical and

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access considerations limit what researchers can study and know about a particular social phenomenon. Additionally, knowing how to elicit rich data using in-depth interviewing may give undergraduates who plan on future graduate careers an advantage over those who have no experience in the method.

Another benefit of teaching in-depth interviewing skills is that of discipline recruitment. Enjoyable and enriching interviewing experiences that allow students to learn actively about the effects that social structures and culture have on individuals might draw more students into the discipline of sociology and possible graduate careers. Conversely, poor classroom experiences with in-depth interviewing might push promising students away from the discipline of sociology. Thus, it is imperative that instructors who wish to have their students conduct in-depth interviewing consider how they go about teaching when exposing their students to this valuable skill.

In-depth interviewing projects can benefit nonmajors as well. First, it is in the discipline's interest to expose nonmajors to the research methods employed by sociologists so that they can gain an understanding, and perhaps appreciation, for how sociologists gather information in order to make knowledge claims. In addition, several occupational fields—clinical medicine, social work, psychological therapy, law, and human resources—require individuals to elicit detailed information from people by talking and listening to them; for instance, a physician begins an initial diagnosis by talking with his or her patient, and a human resources manager spends a considerable amount of time talking and listening to employees to discover possible resolutions to workplace grievances. Thus, having completed an in-depth interviewing project at some point in their undergraduate careers may not only help individuals to perform better in their job, but it also may even help them obtain the position in the first place (see Charmaz 1991:393).

A common problem with teaching in-depth interviewing, however, is that instructors often assign such projects to undergraduates without adequate instruction on how to conduct interviews properly so they can elicit rich and valuable responses that illuminate, as Mills (1959) would say, the intersections of individuals' biography and the vicissitudes of society. In-depth interviewing is a learned skill, and it can go badly without proper training and preparation. If advanced

scholars and graduate students in sociology have difficulties gathering rich data through their in-depth interviews, what can one expect from beginning undergraduates who are new to the discipline? The fact that in-depth interview projects are often assigned in courses with a substantive focus (social psychology, criminology, religion, etc.) rather than a methodological focus only exacerbates this situation, since extensive instruction in in-depth interviewing is constrained by time and other practical considerations.

To solve the problem of teaching how to do quality in-depth interviews in substantive beginning undergraduate courses, instructors need succinct yet substantial ways to teach the practical art of in-depth interviewing. Surprisingly, little or no material exists to aid instructors in this task. To rectify this situation, we developed a simple in-class demonstration and tip sheet specifically for beginning undergraduates. The in-class demonstration and tip sheet offer practical advice for conducting in-depth interviews in an amusing, helpful, and easy-to-remember way. Students' positive responses to the demonstration and the improvement of their interview guides over time suggest that these tools helped students conduct rich, interesting, and informative in-depth interviews.

BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2006 and 2008, both authors were teaching assistants for a sociology of marriage and family class; the first author in 2008 and the second author in 2006. The course consisted of approximately 500 students. Students met twice a week for lecture and once a week in small discussion classes (≤ 20 students) where they discussed the material with their teaching assistant and did various active-learning and small group exercises. Each of us had about 70 students in total.

One of the requirements for the course was a research project in which students conducted in-depth interviews with two family members from different generations. Students were to compare and interpret their family members' experiences and attitudes using sociological findings and theories concerning families that they were learning about in the course. The interview assignment consisted of several small assignments—such as turning in a preliminary interview guide, a revised interview guide, and a paper outline—plus a final five- to seven-page interview analysis paper. Students read

several research pieces that utilized in-depth interviewing as the means for collecting data (e.g., Gerson 1985; Hochschild 1989; Reimann 1997; Townsend 2002), so they had a general sense of what in-depth interviewing was and the characteristics of a finished in-depth interview project.

The interview assignment, however, presented several dilemmas. Given that the student body consisted of mostly first- and second-year undergraduates, few, if any, students had any prior training in conducting social scientific in-depth interviews.¹ Also, because we had to cover a fair amount of course material each week, there was only one discussion meeting available for teaching students how to do in-depth interviews. Moreover, there were potentially huge pitfalls with the assignment itself; because students were interviewing family members, there was a huge risk that students would not probe deeper into issues because they thought that they already knew the answer or because of family norms of younger family members not prying into elders' lives. Also, there was a big risk of students not probing "you know what I mean?" statements because of the perceived shared knowledge between the interviewer and the interviewee. To address these concerns, we developed an in-class exercise and tip sheet on interviewing designed specifically for first- and second-year undergraduates.

IN-CLASS EXERCISE AND TIP SHEET FOR IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

The week before the class session on in-depth interviewing, we had one student from each discussion section volunteer to interview us the next week. We told each student volunteer to come with a set of questions to ask us about marriage and family. We told them that the questions could come from their preliminary interview guide or they could bring questions directly relevant to us. We decided to have students interview us because we could actively perform the various behaviors that interviewees often do that, if not noticed and handled carefully, can result in low-quality data (more on this in the following).

We began the interviewing class session by lecturing students about interviews in general. We talked about the advantages and disadvantages of closed-ended and opened-ended questions and about the distinction between structured,

semistructured, and unstructured interview formats. We told them that their interviews should be semistructured (since the majority were too inexperienced to use an unstructured format) and consist mostly of open-ended questions. We told students that this format allows their interviewees to express deep feelings and give rich detail about specific experiences. We also went over some of the technical issues of interviewing, such as whether or not to use a tape-recorder and how to take notes during an interview.

Following these introductory remarks, we gave students a tip sheet called "12 Handy In-depth Interviewing Tips" (see Appendix) and discussed it with them. We constructed this tip sheet by distilling practical knowledge of in-depth interviewing into a set of simple, straightforward, and easy-to-remember tips. These tips represented the best advice we could give to a novice in-depth interviewer. It also included some of the biggest mistakes that interviewers can make and how they can overcome them. For example, the most important question in an in-depth interview is the "probe," a question asked to follow up and explore issues brought up by the interviewee. We actually put this on the list three times in order to convey the importance of this technique (which is why there are actually only 10 tips on the tip sheet). The tip sheet also included several tips on question construction—such as not asking leading questions ("Be a Good Ant and Don't Lead, Follow") and avoiding technical jargon ("Don't Use \$100 Words")—and advice on good interview etiquette—such as giving the interviewee adequate time to respond ("Enjoy the Silence") and allowing them to put things in their own terms ("Shut Up"). We made the tip sheet as humorous as possible in order to keep students engaged. We did so because several psychological and educational studies suggest that people better attend to and remember humorous material (e.g., Lippman and Dunn 2000; Schmidt 1994, 2002).²

After reviewing and discussing the tip sheet, we asked the student who volunteered to interview us to come up to the front of the class. We arranged two chairs in front of the classroom facing each other, and we told the student to sit in one. We then said to the interviewer and to the class that the student volunteer was going to interview us using the questions that he or she brought. We asked the class to look for problems with the interviewer's style and questions based on

what they had just learned and to think about ways the interviewer could improve. We told the interviewer to ask us anything that he or she wanted and that we would “play along” with his or her questions even if they did not apply to us (e.g., questions about raising children, being the opposite gender). As we were playing the role of the interviewee, we purposefully engaged in some of the problematic behaviors that we warned them about in the tip sheet. For example, we said “you know” several times to see if the interviewer would probe further, and we “thought” about some questions for several seconds (~15-30 seconds) to create “dead air” to see if the interviewer would “enjoy the silence.” We claimed ignorance and confusion when students used technical jargon, as when one student asked the second author about his “gender ideology.” We also tried to respond as an actual interviewee would to closed-ended, judgmental, or leading questions. After about 7 to 10 minutes, we stopped the interview and the class commented on what the interviewer did wrong, what he or she did right, and ways that he or she could improve.

These interview demonstrations successfully highlighted many of the things that can go wrong during in-depth interviews. For instance, many of the questions that the interviewers asked us were closed-ended. Our brief yet appropriate responses to these questions showed firsthand the value of open-ended questions in eliciting more details about certain topics. Fortunately, as the interview progressed the interviewers began to turn these “Clark Kent” questions into “Superman” questions by following up our short responses with “why” and “how” questions.

Some students were not able to follow up with probing questions and the workshop quickly demonstrated this mistake to all of the participants. During one of the classes led by the first author, one student—Kaylee³—asked “Can you describe a typical day when you had kids?” The first author responded, “Um . . . crazy,” to see if the student would follow up on this vague answer. Unfortunately, she did not. Another student—Jason—asked the first author, “Why do you think women are the primary caregivers?” Not only did the first author point out that this question made assumptions about gender roles and the beliefs of the interviewee, but when the first author responded, “Well, I just think they are better at it,” Jason failed to ask why the interviewee felt that way. Thus, the first author used both of these instances to demonstrate to students the importance of probing during in-depth interviews.

Another common mistake made by students was the use of jargon in their interview questions. For instance, one student asked the first author, “What is your biggest familial concern for women today?” The student assumed their interviewee would understand the term *familial concern* as well as have an opinion on the subject. The first author acted as if she did not know what the term *familial* meant, and this forced the student to give several examples of “familial concerns” including “working moms, single moms, and gender discrimination in the workplace.” Thus, the first author used this opportunity to demonstrate to students the importance of avoiding jargon in their interviews.

In another class with the second author the person who volunteered to be the interviewer—Brent—did not come prepared with questions. Thus, he and the second author had an unstructured interview. The interview did not go well. Brent asked many closed-ended, judgmental, and leading questions, and his question ordering was haphazard. Students watching the interview quickly pointed out these flaws and suggested ways Brent could improve. The second author used this opportunity to point out to students how important it is to have an interview guide before conducting an interview because it will help keep them focused and avoid potential pitfalls. The first author also had a student volunteer who came to class without prepared questions, which led to the same pitfalls experienced by Brent and provided the first author with an example of just how important preparing questions is for successful in-depth interviewing.

In another class, a student—Allison—interviewed the second author on the topic of parental discipline, a topic she planned to explore in her actual interviews for her paper. During the interview, Allison asked the second author questions about how he disciplined his children. The second author used this question as an opportunity to show students how to remain neutral during an interview. He answered Allison’s question by saying that he spanked his children quite often and, when they really misbehave, he “whoop[ed] them with a belt.” This answer visibly flustered Allison. She gasped and said, “How could you do that to your children?” Without hesitation and in a very defensive manner, the second author responded by telling Allison that she “didn’t have any business telling me how to raise my kids” and that she “didn’t know anything” because of her young age. Allison seemed to notice her mistake immediately and tried to assuage the second author by

Table 1. Summary of Results of Student Responses to Questionnaire Evaluating the Usefulness of the Interview Workshop ($N = 57$)

Did this workshop prepare you to conduct your interviews?	Yes: 91.2 % No: 8.8 %
Did any of the issues covered in the interview workshop come up during your interviews?	Yes: 61.4 % No: 38.6 %
How well did the interview workshop prepare you to conduct your interviews?	Extremely well: 3.5 % Very much: 52.6 % Somewhat: 38.6 % Not much: 5.3 % Not at all: 0.0 %
Overall, did you think that the interview workshop was an effective teaching technique?	Yes: 94.7 % No: 5.3 %

apologizing and moving on to another question. However, Allison was unable to regain the flow and overall dynamic the interview had before her judgmental slip-up. Nevertheless, Allison's interview gaffe benefited students because it showed them how being judgmental during an interview can lead to undesirable reactions from respondents that can negatively affect the interview dynamic.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

There are several indications from students' pre- and postworkshop interview guides that the interview workshop and tip sheet helped students to conduct better interviews and was an effective teaching technique. Both sets of data come from the first author's students.

We first assessed the effectiveness of the workshop and tip sheet by comparing students' pre- and postworkshop interview guides. Students came to the interview workshop class with a preliminary interview guide and after two weeks turned in a final interview guide. The first author collected both preliminary and final interview guides from 55 of her students. By far, students achieved significant improvement with their interview guides after the workshop in several ways. First, the most significant change between students' interview guides was the expansion of close-ended questions to open-ended ones; for example, several students changed a close-ended question such as, "Do you feel that it is good or bad for the wife to work outside the home?" to an open-ended question by rewording it to "Can you tell me your feelings about women in the workplace?" and by adding "Why do you feel this way?" A

second significant improvement in interview guides was the elimination of technical terms and jargon from questions; for instance, the question "What do you consider the ideal family type, traditional, transitional, or egalitarian?" on one student's preliminary guide was deleted from her final interview guide and the question "Please explain what you would consider to be an ideal family situation" was added. A third significant improvement was the elimination of questions that implied a particular cognitive or emotional valence and the inclusion of questions that implied no particular direction. For example, one student changed the question "Do you feel that there are any negative consequences of a father being the primary caretaker?" to "What are your feelings of fathers being the primary caregiver to the children?" Finally, we noticed considerable improvement in question ordering.

For our second assessment technique, at the end of the semester the first author administered a survey to assess students' perceived effectiveness of the workshop and tip sheet. The results are listed in Table 1. These results show that students felt that the workshop and tip sheet were effective teaching techniques. For instance, 91.2 percent ($n = 57$) felt that the workshop prepared them to conduct their interviews. Additionally, most students found the workshop at least somewhat helpful, and only 3 out of 57 students did not think the workshop was an effective teaching technique. The vast majority of students (94.7 percent) felt that the workshop was an effective teaching technique.

We also asked students if the issues that we covered in the interview workshop came up during their interviews. As we report in Table 1, more than 60 percent of the students said that they did. We included an open-ended addition to this survey

item, asking students who responded positively to report what issues came up. Some students said that several issues came up (“Pretty much everything”; “Needing to probe, be comfortable with silence, and ‘Do a Homer’”). By far, the issues of having to probe respondents (“I had to probe my interviewees a little at the beginning of the interview”; “I had to make sure to keep digging when I didn’t get a sufficient answer”; “The need to ask interviewees to elaborate on yes/no answers, like explaining how or why they felt a certain way, definitely came up”), avoid jargon (“Staying away from technical terms, I actually used one then remembered to reword it with a more general meaning”; “I accidentally used jargon”), and watching out for “you know what I mean” statements (“How to continue questioning when the interviewee says ‘you know’”; “one of my respondents asked me ‘do you know what I mean’ and I refrained from answering ‘yeah’”) arose most often.

CONCLUSION

In-depth interviewing has become a common research method in sociology, and there are many potential benefits of in-depth interviewing assignments for both sociology majors and nonmajors alike. However, instructors need effective ways to teach in-depth interviewing in simple yet helpful ways, for it is very possible that bad in-depth interview experiences can push potential students away from the discipline. Hopefully, instructors will find the exercise and tip sheet described in this note helpful in teaching in-depth interviewing, and we encourage instructors to modify the language and substantive thrust of the tip sheet to conform to their particular courses and their personal teaching philosophies and methods. We also encourage other instructors to develop more of these teaching techniques in the future.

APPENDIX

12 HANDY IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING TIPS

1. *Probe, Probe, Probe in a Nonalien Way*: The MOST IMPORTANT question for your interviews is probably not on your question sheet. Rather, the most important question is the probe, which is a question you ask in

order to learn more about what an interviewee just told you. Probing more in depth makes the interviewee think more about his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and thus allows you to learn just what is behind these things. Sometimes you can anticipate what issues will need further probing. If so, then it is helpful to write down probing questions underneath your main questions to remind you to probe further. Some specific interview probes you might use include: “Can you describe what the place looked like?”; “How did that make you feel at the time?”; “Can you give me an example of that?”; and “What did you mean when you said _____?”

2. *Avoid \$100 Words*: Don’t ask questions like “What is your gender ideology?” or “Tell me about your role overload.” Rather, phrase questions in a way that a generally educated respondent would understand. For instance, instead of asking “What is your gender ideology?,” ask “What do you think the proper role for a woman [man] is?” or “Who do you think should be responsible for housework?” The answers to these questions will let you know a person’s gender ideology.
3. *Turn a Clark Kent Question into a Superman Question*: Many closed-ended questions can be turned into an open-ended question by beginning the question with a “why” or “how” instead of “what,” or by following up the answer to a close-ended question with “Why?,” “Why not?,” “Why do you feel that way?,” “How does that make you feel?,” and other pithy phrases. For example, a question like “What chores do you do on a regular basis?” is rather closed-ended. However, adding the follow-up “Why do you do these chores in particular?” or “How did you and your spouse decide who does what chore?” opens up the question for further elaboration by the interviewee. In general, try to use “how” more than “why,” since “why” questions sometimes cause interviewees to feel that you are judging them. When

- you feel that asking a “why” question is appropriate, make sure to ask this question in as nonjudgmental way as possible (see 5 and 11).
4. *Probe, Probe, Probe*: Did I mention this? Good. Don’t forget it.
 5. *Do a Homer Simpson*: Sometimes you will ask questions that seem very commonsensical to your interviewees. One tactic for handling this problem is just to “play dumb.” Tell them that you really don’t know what they are talking about. This will make your interviewees further explain things, which will provide you with much better data. Another way you can do this is blame it on the assignment and say that even though you know what they will say, the assignment and your mean old professor and teaching assistant requires them to say it. Playing stupid is also a good way for you to not seem judgmental when asking a “why” question, since you can say that you want to know “why” because you sincerely don’t understand and not because you think they’re wrong for feeling, thinking, or behaving in a certain way.
 6. *Battle the “You Know What I Mean?” Demon*: You may find that your interviewees will end a statement by the phrase “You know what I mean?” or some other variant. Kill this demon every time you see it. Do not allow it to kill you by nodding your head and saying “Yep.” Rather, say no, you don’t know what they mean, or ask the interviewees to just clarify what they mean for your sake. This demon raises its ugly head especially with questions about thoughts and feelings. This is why this demon is especially evil, because unless you have the magical ability to know what’s in a person’s head, then you really don’t know what they mean.
 7. *Order Attention Pay to*: The questions that you ask should flow logically from one to another, or you should have transitions between sets of questions to let the interviewee know that you are now going in a different direction. Asking questions that do not logically follow one another makes the interview process seem disjointed and artificial, and this can have a huge impact on the interview dynamic. Questions that seem orderly put the interviewee at ease and make the interview seem more conversation-like, and this practice will cause the interviewee to open up to you more. It will also make you seem as if you’ve got your act together, giving you legitimacy as an interviewer.
 8. *Be a Good Ant and Don’t Lead, Follow*: Try to avoid leading questions that may make interviewees feel obligated to answer in a particular way. “How did the division of housework make you upset?” is a leading question because it assumes that the person was upset about the issue. However, the question “How did the division of the housework make you feel?” gets at the same thing, but it does not lead the interviewee into a specific emotional direction.
 9. *Probe, Probe, Probe*: Just in case it hasn’t burrowed its way into your mind forever by now. I’m serious. Do it. You’ll be sorry if you don’t.
 10. *Enjoy the Silence*: Oftentimes there will be “dead air” during the interview. Avoid the temptation to fill it. Give your interviewees time to think about the answers that they want to give. Don’t worry. Interviewees are usually quick to tell you if they don’t understand a question or if they don’t have anything else to say about a topic.
 11. *Don’t Be a Judge Judy*: You may not agree with some or a lot of what your interviewees say. However, it is really not your job as an interviewer and researcher to morally judge your interviewees. Rather, your goal is to document, understand, and try to explain why they think and feel in certain ways. Therefore, during the interview try not to take a judgmental tone or stance toward what the interviewee says. Also remember that you can express judgment in nonverbal ways, such as how you look at a person when they give an answer or the critical

tone you use when asking follow-up questions. Try to keep these nonverbal cues in check during the interview.

12. *Shut up*: Do not put words into people's mouths. Rather, let them say things in their own words, especially with questions that deal with thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Remember, if you say it, it's not data. It is only data when the interviewee says it. If you go back over an interview tape and you notice that you talk as much or more than the interviewee did, then it was probably not a good interview.

NOTES

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1. We verified this using a preworkshop survey taken by the students of the first author. Of her students, 74 percent ($n = 77$) were either in their first or second year of their undergraduate careers. Only 9 percent of all students had taken a sociological methods course, and only one student had taken a course that taught in-depth interviewing techniques.
2. Some might feel that using a humorous format for the tip sheet is tantamount to "talking down" to students. In these cases, we encourage instructors to modify the language in the tip sheet as they deem appropriate.
3. All names are pseudonyms.

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Bios

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