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Listening for Culture: Using Interviews to Understand Identity in Context

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Abstract

There is an inextricable link between humans and their cultural environments, as each reciprocally creates and is created by the other. This chapter discusses interviewing as a critical methodological tool for understanding culture as intricately intertwined with subjective meaning-making and identity processes. We start from the premise that the stories gathered through research-based interviews serve as repositories of shared cultural knowledge as experienced and interpreted by individuals. After briefly examining the historical position of interviewing in the field of psychology, the chapter will draw on examples from the authors' own research in the United States and Germany to offer guidance on (1) designing interview protocols that allow for cultural analysis, and (2) conducting analysis to see culture through interview data. Empirically-guided suggestions for fostering researcher reflexivity, acknowledging power, and dismantling hierarchies are provided throughout the chapter, all in service of truly "hearing" culture in the stories participants tell.

Keywords: Semi-structured interviews, culture, cultural context, qualitative methods, identity, racial identity, gender identity, national identity, interview protocol, interview analysis

There is an enduring and inextricable link between humans and their cultural ecological environments. Sociologist Clifford Geertz (1973) wrote: “Without men, no culture, certainly; but equally, and more significantly, without culture, no men” (p. 49). The essence of what it means to be human hinges on the shared cultural beliefs and practices that organize and guide human development and behavior. The term “culture,” as illustrated throughout this volume, can be defined in a number of ways, but broadly refers to beliefs and practices shared by a group of people. Culture is both persistent and dynamic, created and recreated by its members; it is vast and “macro,” yet it permeates the “micro” level of the individual. Mistry and colleagues (2016) define culture as the “ideologies and practices shared by groups *and* the meaning-making processes through which individuals interpret their environmental contexts” (p. 1016, emphasis added). Our chapter focuses on this “meaning-making” component of culture. In doing so, we cast culture not as a static variable unidirectionally shaping individual outcomes, but as a context reciprocally formed by and forming the beliefs, behaviors, and identities of individuals across the lifespan (Bhatia, 2007; McLean & Syed, 2015).

In this chapter, we present interviewing – specifically, phenomenological, semi-structured interviews – as a methodological tool for hearing subjective meaning-making as a process intricately woven with culture (Gilligan, 2015; Rogers & Way, 2015; Seidman, 2006; see also Weststrate, this volume). Our thesis is that the stories we gather through research-based interviews serve as repositories of shared cultural knowledge, as experienced and interpreted by individuals. According to Brayboy (2005), such “stories as ‘data’ are important,” but more central is *how* one collects and analyzes those stories:

[O]ne key to collecting these data is “hearing”... Stories often are the guardians of cumulative knowledges that hold a place in the psyches of the group members, memories of tradition, and reflections on power. Hearers ultimately understand the nuances in stories and recognize that the onus for hearing is placed on the hearer rather than the speaker for delivering a clearly articulated message (p. 440).

Interviewing is a method of inquiry that both privileges the subjective meaning-making of the story *tellers* and calls upon researchers to be careful and intentional *hearers* of the culture embedded therein.

We use the topic of identity to illustrate the utility of interviewing as a method to hear culture. Identity is broadly concerned with the question “Who am I?”, focused on establishing a clear and coherent narrative of the self in relation to others and one’s sociocultural context. Identity is universal to the human experience; people in all societies and cultures around the globe form a “sense of self” and grapple with questions about who they are and how they fit in and contribute to the world around them. Though identity is universal, it is also deeply personal, cultural, and political. Erik Erikson (1968) defined identity as “a process ‘located’ in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture” (p. 22). From this perspective, identity acts as an “empirical window” (Hammack & Toolis, 2015) not solely to view the internal psyche of individuals, but also to interpret and understand the culture, history and politics of the contexts in which individuals’ meaning-making processes reside (Rogers, 2018). In other words, researchers need not look “out there” to understand culture; we can listen to and hear participants’ stories as layers of culture with which every individual engages (Gjerde, 2004; Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017; see also Fish & Counts, this volume; Weststrate, this volume).

This chapter first outlines the historical and theoretical considerations of interviewing in psychological research along with key reasons for using interview methods. We then focus on (a) how to design interview protocols and questions, and (b) how to conduct interview analysis in ways that are suitable for hearing and understanding culture. Here we draw from our own identity research across two cultural contexts: the United States and Germany. Although an emphasis on the differences across our data sets would provide interesting evidence of culture, our purpose here is not to identify (or amplify) cross-cultural differences but rather to highlight analytical approaches and processes that unearth culture in the data. We use our empirical examples, in other words, to illustrate how the macro-level of culture manifests in the micro-level identities of individuals growing up within cultural ecologies.

Historical and Theoretical Considerations

The use of interviews and qualitative methods in psychological study can be traced back to the early 1800s, before the official founding of psychology as a field (Wertz, 2014). As documented by numerous historical reviews (Gough & Lyons, 2016; Kvale, 2003; Ponterotto et al., 2008), qualitative methods have been important for the majority of historically prominent psychologists, even if these methodologies have not been characterized as a core component of their research program. Sigmund Freud analyzed therapeutic interviews to develop his theories of psychoanalysis. Jean Piaget used clinical interviewing and ultimately created his theory of cognitive development based on systematic analysis of behavioral observations, interviews, and diary studies with children. Gordon Allport used interviews and document analysis to detail his theories on personality and racism. Erik Erikson used case studies, memoirs, and observations to chart his psychosocial identity theory across the lifespan. It was through qualitative research that each of these scientists forged the foundations of the field of psychology.

Despite the strong contributions of interviewing to psychological theory, quantitative and statistical approaches became the preferred methods of psychological study. The roots of this quantitative emphasis can be traced back to Enlightenment thinking in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Enlightenment represented an epistemological turn towards positivism, which defines the world as objectively knowable, and elevated science as the best way to access these objective “truths.” Positivism, and its associated “objective” quantification, replaced the summarily devalued “subjective” methods of religion and spirituality which had come before (Gergen, 2001). In his detailed history of psychological research, Danziger (1998) follows this positivist thread through the nascent stages of modern psychology (see also: Ponterotto, 2005b; Rogers & Willig, 2017). At the field’s inception in the late 19th century, psychology was largely considered non-scientific because of its focus on introspection and subjective experience. As such, quantification of the field was needed to “mark psychology as one of the exact sciences” such as mathematics or physics, and to “distinguish it sharply from such questionable pursuits as philosophy and spiritualism, with which it had been popularly associated” (Danziger, 1998, p. 147). This emphasis on quantifiable data and statistical methods, successfully pursued to gain public legitimacy, quickly became “reflected in the norms that governed the internal status hierarchy within the discipline” (Danziger, 1998, p. 147). With this shift came a push towards generalizability, and a concomitant focus on trends across individuals (and cultural settings), rather than on individuals *in relation to* their cultural contexts.

Evidence of a value structure that esteems quantitative over qualitative data still persists. Qualitative methods have been largely ignored in handbooks on psychological methodology, especially those in the United States (Kvale, 2003). Publication outlets have continued to emphasize quantitative pursuits over qualitative ones. Rennie and colleagues (2002) conducted

an analysis of the *PsychINFO* database and found that records containing qualitative research-related search terms were almost nonexistent until the 1980s, and even after a sharp increase in the 1990s, accounted for only 0.45% of records published in that decade. A survey of North American counseling psychology programs shows a similar pattern of emphasis: only 10% of programs required qualitative research coursework, and 10% of doctoral dissertations per year used qualitative methods (Ponterotto, 2005a). Although qualitative research in psychology is more widely applied and taught in certain countries, including the United Kingdom (Moffitt et al., 2020), the broader international scene mimics “the United States blackout of qualitative research” (Kvale, 2003).

The Qualitative Turn

Nonetheless, there has and continues to be psychological research that privileges qualitative methodologies, and a resurgence has occurred toward re-centering qualitative perspectives (Gergen et al., 2015; Gough & Lyons, 2016). This push is most evident among scholars and in those disciplines engaged in critical theorizing—critical race theory, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, intersectionality, queer theory—which utilize qualitative tools to disrupt hegemonic systems of knowledge and center the experiences of marginalized peoples often ignored or problematized by traditional psychological theory (Bhatia & Stam, 2005; Gilligan, 1982; Marecek et al., 2001; Rogers & Willig, 2017; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). Recently, there has also been an encouraging shift in the structural markers of methodological hierarchy with the success of a major qualitative methods handbook, the rise of several journals focused on qualitative and mixed-methods research (Gergen et al., 2015), and shared reporting standards for qualitative scholarship (Levitt et al., 2018).

The call to recognize and value qualitative methods is epistemological, with a rejection of *positivism* in favor of *constructivism-interpretivism*. Constructivism assumes “multiple, equally valid, and socially co-constructed realities” that can be uncovered principally through a “highly interactive researcher-participant relationship that leads to discovered meaning...” (Ponterotto, 2010, p. 582). In a field that emphasizes the importance of objectivity, neutrality, and detachment as the ultimate path toward true knowledge, this can seem counterintuitive. However, critical scholars have long highlighted the ways in which the positivist emphasis on detached objectivity not only fundamentally distorts research, but also serves to implicitly uphold biased norms and systems of oppression (e.g., Fine & Barreras, 2001). (For a deeper read on the topics of objectivity, subjectivity, and positionality in research, we recommend Ali and Sichel, 2018; Fine, 2006; and Milner, 2007.)

Here, we highlight Fine’s (2006) notion of *strong objectivity*, which calls researchers to interrogate our own perspectives and positionalities and actively consider who will be highlighted and silenced by our research. Rather than downplaying or minimizing the role researchers play in the social processes we study, Fine urges us to closely identify our blind spots and examine our motivations, which allows us to see where our assumptions shape the stories participants tell us in ways they did not intend. Researchers are trained to build expertise in specific areas and to hone a particular way of understanding and interpreting a given aspect of human behavior or development, which inevitably lays the foundation for our work. Striving for *strong objectivity* does not ask researchers to discount this expertise, but instead entails an intentional examination of our aims, experiences, and potential biases at each step of the research process, beginning in the planning phase before any data have been collected. This introspection is often done through writing exercises, group discussions, positionality statements,

interdisciplinary collaborations, and more. In doing so, we can foster “radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world” (Gergen, 1985, p. 267).

A stance of *strong objectivity* can help us better and more accurately hear and see the lived experiences of others while recognizing the structures that give rise to those experiences, especially in cases of resistance to hegemonic societal narratives. It is within this historical, sociopolitical, and epistemological landscape that we take up psychological interviewing as a critical methodology for describing, understanding, and transforming culture.

Why Interview?

Interviewing is one of many qualitative tools for psychological research. Research interviews can range from highly structured, researcher-led and survey-like to largely unstructured, open-ended participant-led conversations. Semi-structured interviews fall in between these endpoints, with a clear and intentional set of questions, but a responsive and fluid format, such that researcher and participant are *in conversation* and *in relationship* with each other (Gilligan, 2015; Rogers & Way, 2015). The format of semi-structured interviewing reserves space for the co-construction of “facts” and “truth”, and thus the examination of culture as *lived* and *subjectively experienced*.

Semi-structured interviewing also has the potential to shift the power structure embedded in research, with the scientist as “knower” and participant as the subject to be “known” (e.g., Seidman, 2006). Doing this well requires a humanizing approach, in which researcher and participant are equals and there is a critical awareness of context. Ali and Sichel (2018) outline three components of such an approach. *Un-othering participants* calls for a turn from research *on* subjects to research *with* participants, positioning participants as co-creators of scientific knowledge. *Humanizing the researcher* emphasizes the fallibility of researchers and requires a

humble self-acknowledgement of how our own perspectives impact our work (akin to *strong objectivity*). Finally, *contextualizing oppression* demands simultaneous attention not only to the lived experiences of oppression, but also to the contexts and structures which perpetrate it.

Semi-structured interviewing is well suited to this humanizing approach through its recognition of the agency, intentions, and perspectives of both researcher and participant. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher guides but does not dictate the conversation, and the participant redirects the interaction based on their own responses (Rogers & Way, 2015; Seidman, 2006). The open-ended questions and probes then allow for both researcher and participant to come to a shared understanding of the stories being told (Gilligan, 2015). Interviewing in this way foregrounds the participants' *perspective*, *lived-experience*, and *meaning-making*, which shifts the role of "knower" from researcher to participant. This, in turn, paves the way to researchers' discovery.

- *Perspective*: Whose gaze do we privilege? Too often, researchers can assert the dominance of their own way of seeing the world by "assimilating the experience of another to what one already believes," which does not respect the variety of ways to see and know the world (Gilligan, 2015). Recognizing that our participants' perspectives may differ from our own necessitates an acknowledgment of ourselves as subjective, culturally situated beings, rather than as objective, neutral observers, which is a fundamental aspect of achieving *strong objectivity*. Interviewing in this way creates space for participants' perspectives and understanding of the world above our own.
- *Lived-experience*: How does a person's life look and feel? Interviewing acknowledges that the person being interviewed is the expert on their own experiences and environments. With a corresponding shift in perspective, we can more fully understand

the daily existence of others (Ponterotto, 2010). Rather than an abstracted account of the parts of the story the researcher wishes to hear and know, interviewing provides a context to hold the pieces in storied reality.

- *Meaning-making*: How does a person interpret the world around them? Even if we observe an individual going about their daily life, we will never know how they feel and think about their lived experience unless we *ask*. Interviewing allows us to bring an individual's "inner world out into the open" in order to understand the *why* as well as the *what* of their story (Gilligan, 2015).
- *Discovery*: How do we uncover what we did not know or hear what we did not expect? By privileging another's perspective and attending to the lived-experiences and meaning-making of others, interviewing can enable us to notice and pursue things we may not have noticed before (Yoshikawa et al., 2008). This is a gift of interviewing—the humbling scientific process not of confirming hypotheses but of new discoveries.

Our focus on interviewing is not meant to imply that other methods cannot afford these opportunities; in our work and experience as interviewers, we find interviewing to be a methodological context that allows these values to flourish. In our next section, we move through constructing, administering, and interpreting semi-structured interviews with these humanizing, critical perspectives in mind.

Listening for Culture in Interviews: Designing the Protocol and Conducting the Analysis

The goal of this section is to describe how to use interviewing as a culturally relevant, responsive, and revealing tool. Here we will delve into two tasks: (1) designing interview protocols that allow for cultural analysis, and (2) conducting analysis of interviews to reveal culture in our data. Throughout this section, we will also examine the role of researcher

positionality and power throughout the interview process, posing questions and offering empirically based examples to flesh out our discussion.

Designing the Interview Protocol

An interview protocol (also called interview guide or interview schedule) is analogous to a survey instrument, with interview questions being the items on a scale assessing the construct of interest. The questions, in short, are crucial to the interview itself. As Lisa Bowleg states in her paper on methods for understanding intersectional experiences, “It is so obvious as to not even warrant mention: the wording of questions shapes how participants respond to them” (2008, p. 314). Our intent in this section is to provide tailored guidance for researchers interested in using interviews to assess the ways that individuals interpret, negotiate, reinforce, and disrupt the status quo of culture. As such, this is not meant as a general guide for writing interview questions. This section is instead building on three key issues important for generating meaningful data that explore how culture shapes, and is itself shaped by, its members: (a) subjective meaning-making of culture; (b) lived-experiences of research participants; and (c) positionality of the interviewer.

First, interview questions must be written in a way that assumes the dynamism of culture itself and acknowledges the participants’ subjective interpretation of it. Questions that assume cultural essentialism will undermine the work of actually understanding culture in analysis. This may seem both obvious (*Of course one shouldn’t essentialize*) and ambiguous (*What exactly does cultural essentialism mean and how can it be avoided?*), but it is worth naming and unpacking. Cultural essentialism reflects an implicit theory that culture is both static and concrete, with distinct boundaries between members and nonmembers (Carter & Bolden, 2012;

Grillo, 2003). This perspective often hinges on and reinforces stereotypes (Haslam et al., 2006) and situates participants as *representatives* of cultural groups (i.e., tokenism), rather than as individuals within a given cultural context. Although researcher expectations cannot be isolated from the interview protocol (or research itself), in striving for *strong objectivity*, as laid out above, we can be intentional and reflexive about them (*Where do my expectations come from? Whom do they serve and whom do they represent?*), and aim to identify when they color the interview protocol. Consider the following examples:

Example 1: “How important is religion in your culture? Can you give examples of common religious practices?”

Example 2: “Would you say that religion is an important part of your identity? Can you give examples of how you practice religion in your daily life?”

The first example assumes (a) that there are “common religious practices” and (b) that the participant holds all the knowledge and experience of said “culture” as a fixed entity. The second example, which is drawn from the second author’s own interview protocol from past research, privileges the lived experience of the individual participant, who is situated as a member of a particular cultural group but does not *represent* the group. Designing questions about religious identity in this way garnered responses not only about the ways in which the Turkish German participants in the study practiced (or did not practice) Islam, but also about their engagement with societal expectations regarding what it means to be Muslim in Germany. Indeed, the questions in Example 2 encouraged participants to tell their *own* stories, instead of merely asking them to affirm or deny previous assumptions about their cultural group. Doing so allowed for research *discovery* and underscores the link between the interview protocol and data analysis.

In this way, we contend that individual stories reveal culture—including norms, expectations, and practices—when designed and analyzed to do so. Of course, not every question needs to focus solely on participants’ personal experiences in order to capture cultural processes. However, based in a constructivist understanding, questions should reflect the fluid and transactional nature of both culture and identity (Okazaki et al., 2008; Rogers, 2018). Building on the above example, this can entail writing questions that access participants’ understanding of or engagement with cultural norms and expectations in indirect ways, which allows them to speak in their own voice.

For instance, the first author’s research on racial identity in middle childhood used semi-structured interviews to examine how children make sense of race as it relates to their own identities and social interactions (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). The interview protocol was not designed to probe racial stereotypes or attitudes regarding children of different races, but rather to investigate how racial stereotypes and related societal norms and expectations show up in children’s racialized experiences. The difference may seem subtle, yet this important distinction shapes the types of questions asked and the answers received. Rather than asking, “*What are some stereotypes about being Black?*” simply asking, “*What does being Black mean to you?*” privileges participants’ subjective meaning-making while engaging cultural scripts about Blackness and the broader construction of race (Rogers et al., 2020).

Another strategy is to design questions that allow participants to abstract beyond their own experiences, to make visible the often-invisible cultural scripts. In her research, Rogers often asks young people to engage in hypothetical imaginings. For example: “*Try to imagine you are not [race with which child identifies]. What would it be like if you weren’t [race]?*” The answers participants give illuminate both how they understand their own identities and how they

perceive societal expectations about what race means, how it is constructed, and how racial inequality shapes identity in the United States (Rogers et al., 2020; Rogers & Syed, 2020; Way et al., 2008). Asking participants to imagine the experiences of an “Other” is particularly well suited to younger interviewees (McTague et al., 2017) who may not have the capacity for metacognition regarding their own identities, but who are certainly engaging in culturally situated identity processes. This type of question allows youth to contemplate their own and societal meaning regarding a salient aspect of identity, without being told by the researcher which stereotypes or expectations are deemed relevant.

This brings us to the second key issue in designing interview protocols to capture culture: interview questions must be relevant and relatable for participants. For instance, across cultural contexts, gendered and racialized inequity shape lived experience in countless ways. Yet, individuals are often hesitant to explicitly name such inequalities (e.g., Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). Such reticence to explicitly label an experience as discriminatory is itself revelatory of a cultural norm. The tendency to define discrimination as overt and carried out by individual racists ignores the fact that it can also be subtle, systemic, and upheld by the majority without explicit “action” taking place (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). For this reason, relevant and meaningful experiences may be left out when researchers use only direct prompts such as, “Tell me about a time you experienced discrimination.” However, interview questions that probe stories and experiences and indirectly assess discriminatory processes are often more effective (Way, 1998; Way et al., 2008). Researchers have found that the same participants claiming little or no experience with explicit discrimination will tell stories which would be unquestionably coded as such (Syed, 2015; Way, 1998).

Indeed, when we have asked children and adolescents what they “like” and “do not like” about being a member of their respective racial or ethnic group, the most common theme for the latter is stories of racial stereotypes and discrimination. For example, in Rogers’ research (Rogers et al., 2020), a young Black girl (3rd grade) being interviewed about racial identity initially suggested that race is of little significance to her, explaining, “it doesn’t matter if you’re Black or White or tan or Asian or ethnic or like a brown or light brown; it doesn’t really matter because you’re part of the world.” Yet, when subsequently asked if there is anything hard or that she does not like about being Black, she replied, “Like they call you racist and things like that, and people say I can’t be friends with you because you’re Black.” The question is not directly asking about discrimination, but it probed her to reflect on her racial evaluation and extracted insight into her racial identity beyond the colorblind tenor of her initial response. Thus, a benefit of interviewing is its capacity to delve deep, but this only happens if the interview itself is structured to get below the surface of *cultural norms* that may prevent individuals from answering direct questions (Gilligan, 2015; McTague et al., 2017; Way & Nelson, 2018).

The final issue we will address regarding the crafting of interview protocols is researcher positionality and “closeness” to participants (Nzinga et al., 2018). Would, for instance, participant responses to interview questions about their religious or racial identities have differed if the researchers’ own identities were different? Numerous scholars have written about the benefits and drawbacks of so-called “insider” vs. “outsider” status in research (e.g., Chavez, 2008; Finlay, 2002; Headland et al., 1990). This debate can be situated to some degree within the positivist/constructivist divide. Within positivist psychology, the gold standard of researcher objectivity is contingent upon the ability to “observe with dispassion” (Gergen, 2015, p.7), which has historically been framed as something only an “outsider” can achieve. From a constructivist

perspective, regardless of whether one identifies as an “insider” or “outsider”, conducting high-quality research necessitates a critical examination of one’s experiences, assumptions, and biases. Adopting a practice of *strong objectivity*, it is not simply one’s race or gender position that matters, but also the ways in which we recognize and address our identities throughout the research process, including how we write and pose interview questions.

Relatedly, many scholars have called for a more complicated examination of this supposed dichotomy, for instance by drawing on intersectionality to recognize that researchers can be “insiders” in some domains and “outsiders” in others, and the lines are often blurry (Couture et al., 2012). For example, in Rogers’ longitudinal research at an all-Black, all-male high school in a predominately low-income community, she shared a racial background with her sample but not gender or social class (Rogers & Way, 2016). In this case, did shared racial identity equate to “insider” status? Is “insider” status granted if the researcher shares *any* salient identity group with participants? Does it depend on the identit(ies) being studied, or which are most salient for the participants? Such questions prompt greater recognition of both the interlocking and fluid nature of identities (Breen, 2007; Nowicka & Ryan, 2015), while making clear the need for intentional and systematic reflexivity on the part of all researchers, regardless of identity (see also Hamby, this volume).

In the second author’s research with White and Turkish German participants, she recognized that, as a non-native German speaker, her status as a foreigner would likely be salient throughout all interviews, though she would match some participants in terms of gender and/or race. With the intention of shifting the power dynamic and humanizing herself as a researcher (Ali & Sichel, 2018), Moffitt spent time at the beginning of each interview discussing her background, allowing participants to ask questions that were not only research related, but also

personal. In terms of writing the interview protocol, researchers can recognize the strengths in both “insider” and “outsider” status (Mielants & Weiner, 2015). For Moffitt, she was able to pose questions that may have seemed overly basic or obvious had she been German, giving participants space to expound on their perspectives in ways they may have felt less inclined to do with a national “insider”, particularly in relation to discussions of racism and discrimination. Thus, we do not claim that researcher positionality plays no role in the interview process, but instead recognize the many possible ways in which our identities shape our research, including the openness participants may feel with us and the stories they are motivated to share. Readers are encouraged to see Way and Nelson (2018) for greater detail on transformative interviewing practices and strategies.

Data Analysis: Coding and Interpretation

Once interview data is gathered, the researcher not only reports the stories collected, but makes meaning from them, becoming an active and contextually-grounded “hearer” of the stories told. Data analysis is where the responsibility of the story “hearer” becomes salient—the one who listens, interprets, and draws conclusions about what participants have shared. We can “hear” the same story in a variety of ways depending on our own subjectivities and positionalities, as well as our own scientific theories and analytical frames. Recognizing such openness in data analysis can raise concern about the validity of analysis and interpretation; the “trustworthiness” of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Fine’s (2006) *strong objectivity* remains focally relevant here, as researchers must be actively attentive to their own perspectives that color what they pay attention to, what becomes a “finding” and what does not. One practical strategy for practicing *strong objectivity* in analysis is building an “interpretive community” – a group of scholars that reads and codes the data to provide alternative interpretations and push the

edges of normativity (Marecek et al., 2001). In our own research, we have crafted interpretive communities comprised of researchers with diverse levels of higher education (undergraduate, graduate, professional), academic disciplines (psychology, urban education, theater), and social positionalities (race/ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender, sexuality). Such diversity is intentional and necessary for seeing the data through multiple lenses, challenging implicit assumptions, and drawing conclusions that are close to the data rather than defaults of researcher (and cultural) biases and backgrounds (Maxwell, 2012). Such carefulness in the process of data analysis is what makes for good science—qualitative or otherwise (Nzinga et al., 2018).

Coding is the primary way we systematically “hear” the data and analyze interviews. A code is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-defining, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 3). Coding, first and foremost, breaks the interview data apart into manageable pieces. It is quite difficult to see patterns in hundreds of pages of text. Just as a quantitative approach uses numbers to stand in for a more complex idea or construct, a qualitative approach uses codes to stand in for more complex meanings and experiences. By identifying relevant code terminology, we can summarize whole stories (or even participants) into a single word/phrase that can be used to assess patterns and themes across cases. Finally, and most importantly, codes are the link between data collection and communicating the meaning of our findings. In this way, the codes themselves matter because they ensure that the analysis remains “close to the data” and the interpretations are valid (Maxwell, 2012).

The codes one develops will determine the findings and types of conclusions drawn. There are a number of ways to code qualitative data (see Camic et al., 2003, for a review), and the analytic purpose of coding should guide the decision of which type one undertakes. The

precise steps involved in coding are varied, and while a substantive review of such approaches is beyond the scope of this chapter, we refer readers to the *Handbook for Qualitative Research* (Camic et al., 2003), *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and *The Listening Guide Method of Psychological Inquiry* (Gilligan, 2015) for helpful how-to guides that we have used in our own research.

Here we utilize Wolcott's (1994) three levels of analysis as a framework to illustrate interrelated and iterative coding strategies for interview analysis: *description*, *analysis*, and *interpretation*.

- *Level 1*—Description: What is the general landscape of the dataset – what is going on? What stories am I hearing? What is common and consistent across the interviews, what is prevalent, surprising, distinct?
- *Level 2*—Analysis: How does it work? How do these observations fit together? Is there a process or a grouping of ideas? Are different “types” of stories being told? Are there patterns in *who* is telling those stories?
- *Level 3*— Interpretation: What does it mean? What do these stories reveal about our research question? Why are these stories and patterns important? Why do we care? How do these patterns reflect the cultural context?

These three levels of analysis correspond with three coding strategies (Wolcott, 1994). Level 1 is “open coding” where the researcher is learning from the data, capturing the landscape of the dataset. Level 2 analysis employs “axial” coding where the codes are connected to each other to decipher patterns and consider how they fit together, whether there is a process unfolding or a typology emerging, whether there are clusters or groups within the data (by gender, age, race, or another relevant grouping). Finally, Level 3 is realized through “selective

coding.” Not every code, theme, or idea is represented in every analysis. Just as quantitative approaches select the most parsimonious and “best fitting” model for the results, a qualitative analysis must select the coding framework that best tells the story of the data. If a poorly fitting coding framework is selected, the ways in which participants engage with and make sense of their cultural context may go “unheard”. A strong coding framework, on the other hand, lays the groundwork for “hearing” culture in the data.

Each level of analysis is necessary but none is sufficient independently to unearth a meaningful and valid analysis of culture. Imagine, for example, that we wanted to examine the types of shoes worn by graduate students attending a U.S. university. We could *describe* (Level 1) the shoes every student is wearing; attending to color and type (heels, flats, tennis shoes). We could go on to *analyze* (Level 2) these patterns, counting, for example, how many of each type, assessing if there are gender differences, age differences, or perhaps differences by area of study. To make this analysis of shoes meaningful, however, we would need to *interpret* (Level 3) these patterns in context to address the “So what?” question. What does it mean and why do we care about shoe selections? This is where culture is a useful guide. We can ask, for instance, what does culture say about color and types of shoes? Who wears particular colors in what settings, and what might these choices communicate about the wearer? Are there certain norms guiding these decisions?

For example, what if we saw an abundance of dark, flat-soled shoes across genders in our graduate student sample? The color black in the U.S. is often associated with formality and a level of success and seriousness. Cultural norms around clothing are also gendered; masculine standards of success and formality still organize “professionalism” in the workplace. In this context, if a woman were not wearing dark, flat-soled shoes, but was instead wearing hot pink

stilettos, it may raise questions about her style choices, as well as about her intelligence and seriousness, her motives, and overall “fit” in the academic context. In this example, analyzing the number and type of shoes worn by graduate students can be the first step in revealing the role of culture in our data observations, but the analysis should not stop there. Interpretation is necessary to recognize the ways in which culture has shaped the identities and behaviors of participants. To illustrate how these levels of analysis play out in identity interviews, we walk through three data examples from own research studies.

Empirical Example #1: Gender Identity in the United States

Gender is both a sociocultural construct that organizes how society and social groups function, and a psychosocial identity concerning how individuals align with and make sense of what it means to be a boy or a girl (Gilligan, 2011; Liben, 2017). Rogers (2018; Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017) conducted in-depth interviews to analyze how children, ages 7-11 years old, understand what it means to be a boy or a girl. Their descriptive analysis examined what meanings children assign to their gender; specifically, how children in the sample responded to the question, “What does being a [boy/girl] mean to you?” (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017).

The first phase of open coding led to a variety of ideas or concepts, such as behaviors and activities, biological or physical characteristics, and family and friend influences. At this level of analysis, the researchers coded the multiple ideas children communicated, totaling 21 specific descriptive codes. With an axial coding approach, the open codes were synthesized into larger themes, for a total of five substantive codes: *physical appearance*, *inequality/difference*; *humanistic/equality*; *family*; *pride/positive traits* (see Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). By looking for patterns among the descriptive codes, the axial codes provided a set of results about how children describe the meaning of gender. We also analyzed patterns – did boys discuss certain themes

more than girls? Were there any age differences based on which themes children emphasized?

The analysis revealed that (a) children provide a diverse set of interpretations for the meaning of gender; (b) the most common theme emphasized the *differences* between boys and girls (43% of the sample); and (c) girls were more likely to reference physical appearance than boys.

The interpretative level of this analysis was to ask about the role of culture: Given the cultural construction of gender, why would these particular ideas emerge (and not others) and in what ways do these ideas matter? Here, we can *interpret* what the patterns mean and how they are significant. For example, the finding that girls more frequently described being a girl in terms of physical appearance – “you wear pretty girl clothes like this” – is not simply a “girly” thing to do but an engagement with the cultural emphasis on beauty and appearance for women and girls. As one of the girls explained: “I think [being a girl] means glam. Like looking glamorous and pretty for everyone” (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017, p. 329). Thus, our finding here suggests that young girls are attuned to the cultural narrative of gender and although we asked “What does being a girl mean to *you*?”, a question about identity, we actually hear the cultural consciousness of the meaning of “girlness” that children are negotiating. However, we only saw this cultural covering because we attended to it. Alternatively, one could conclude that girls are more appearance-focused than boys without acknowledging the cultural context in which boys and girls are learning about and experience girlhood and boyhood.

In a further analysis, Rogers and her team considered not simply the meaning(s) children assigned to their specific gender label but how they constructed a narrative about gender. The research question, thus, shifted to explicitly examine how cultural scripts and the structure of gender inequality manifests in children’s gender identity narratives. In this approach, the master narrative framework provided an analytical lens, with a strategy of selective coding (McLean &

Syed, 2015; McLean et al., 2017; Syed & McLean, 2020; see also Fish & Counts, this volume; Manago, et al., this volume; Weststrate, this volume). This analysis asked how children's descriptions of gender align with or disrupt the "master narrative" of gender differences and inequalities (Rogers, 2020). The four typologies identified in this analysis were: *difference*—where children emphasized that boys and girls were distinct and different from each other; *gender-blind*—where children suggested that gender "doesn't matter" because boys and girls are the same (and treated) equally; *incongruent*—where children shifted back and forth between gender equality and naming inequalities; and *counternarrative*—where children were explicit about naming and disrupting gender stereotypes (Rogers, 2020).

The incongruent narrative, characterized by contradictions, is an interesting and informative example of the value of listening for culture, and the potential to transform culture. These narratives make evident the cultural conflict embedded around gender that children are growing up with: being told both that they are equal and can do anything *and* that boys are essentially better than girls. For example, a White girl (4th-grade) discussed the complexity of gender inequality in her narrative:

Interviewer: What do you think it means to be a girl?

Response: Well it doesn't really mean anything; it means something but it doesn't really mean anything like being a boy, being the boy is almost the same as being a girl; you're still human beings.

Subsequently, the interviewer asked if boys and girls get treated differently. The participant replied:

R: Well boys usually get treated like they're super-cool and girls usually get treated like they are something that is lying on the ground. [...] They don't really care about girls as

much as they care about something that is lying on the ground.

I: Who is “they”?

R: Like boys. ... Um because they’re male and we’re female; they just don’t; they’re just different and they feel like they’re better than girls. Which they’re not; they can’t be.

(excerpted from Rogers, 2020, p. 188)

This young girl asserts gender equality and insignificance of gender (“it doesn’t really mean anything”), but also knows from experience that gender inequality exists and it *does* matter. Without a cultural perspective of gender messages and experiences, this quote is interesting but confusing; the child has not yet sorted out the meaning of gender. While this may be partially true, the more interesting cultural interpretation is recognition of the contradictory messages society routinely communicates about gender. We both say everyone is equal and girls can be anything *and* exclude girls from particular “masculine” activities, pay them *less* when they do those activities, and devalue the skillsets, jobs, and roles held by women. From this vantage point, children’s *incongruent* narratives suggest the ways in which they grapple with societal inequality as they work out their own gender identities in this cultural space.

Empirical Example #2: National Identity in Germany

Contradictory cultural messaging is by no means unique to the U.S. context. The second author conducted research on the negotiation of national identity in Germany among White German and Turkish German young adults (Moffitt et al., 2018). Over the past decades in Germany, laws have been broadened to create pathways to citizenship for individuals without German ancestry (Morjé Howard, 2008), and to allow dual citizenship for individuals with heritage from outside the European Union (Stadlmair, 2018). These policy changes have been slow to catch up to an already diverse population, however, as multiple generations of people in

the second half of the 20th century were born and raised in Germany without German citizenship, and until 2014 most children of non-European Union immigrants were forced to choose between keeping their parents' citizenship or gaining German citizenship (Hailbrunner & Farahat, 2015). Today, regardless of citizenship, the term "German" is employed in common usage to mean White German, while those perceived as having foreign heritage tend to be labeled "migrants" (El-Tayeb, 2014; Moffitt & Juang, 2019). The changes to citizenship policy have direct material impact, but how they have permeated the culture, being both informed by and informing norms of national belonging, is much more difficult to assess.

Moffitt and colleagues (2018) were interested in examining not just inter-ethnic stereotypes and prejudice, but also how both White German and Turkish German young adults navigate a climate wherein being German is legally defined by having German citizenship, yet cultural norms draw more exclusionary, racialized boundaries around the national group. Based on open coding of the interview data, it became clear that many participants situated their responses around three interrelated societal narratives: *the implicit link between Whiteness and Germanness, the taboo of expressing pride in being German, and the demand for anyone read as not White to "integrate" into German society*. The master narrative framework (McLean & Syed, 2015) was adopted at this stage of analysis, offering an analytic lens to examine the ways in which participants both implicitly and explicitly engaged with these three societal narratives. Axial coding yielded 36 relevant textual extracts from across the 16 interviews, which were then analyzed in relation to both group-based and individual differences across participants.

One way the researchers aimed to assess individuals' identity negotiation in this context was by asking participants how they tend to respond when others asks them the question, "Where are you from?" Similar to the U.S. context (Armenta et al., 2013), when this question is posed to

people of color in Germany there is often cultural subtext. The questioner is not simply asking where someone is born or where they grew up, but instead questions their belonging, and is waiting for an answer that situates the person outside of Germany. Even if no harm is intended, the Othering undergirding the question is a microaggression, and is often navigated as such.

Interviewer: Um, when you're somewhere in Germany and someone asks you where you're from, what do you usually say?

Response: Berlin. Um, I say, 'I grew up in Berlin, I'm from Berlin. And my parents...' well, if I notice, well it depends on how the question is asked a little bit, like if I notice that someone wants to know about my cultural background, like, 'Where are you really from?', then I say, um, 'From the east of Turkey' or 'Turkey,' or something. Well I say that my parents are from Turkey, I always really intentionally say 'my parents,' not me. I am from Berlin, I am from Germany, but my parents are from Turkey.

This response from Esma, a 27-year-old Turkish German woman, could be described as precise but also elaborate, as she specifies that *she* is from Germany, *her parents* are from Turkey.

Nearly all Turkish German participants described where their parents are from in addition to where they are from, while no White German participant did so, unearthing the differential cultural expectations based on race and heritage. The following excerpt from an interview with Erika, a 25-year-old White German woman, offers an example of a very different type of response from Esma's:

I: When you're in Germany and someone asks where you're from, what do you tend to say?

R: Münster, my hometown.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that the Turkish German participants talk about referencing their heritage when asked where they are from, whereas the White German participants do not. But *why* is this unsurprising, and what does this tell us about the lives and identities of these individuals, as well as about the culture in which they live? Understanding the culturally situated significance of this response pattern necessitates critical reflection and interpretation of this seemingly everyday interaction. As illustrated by Esma's answer, this is not an unfamiliar question to her, but it requires parsing and mental and emotional engagement each time it is posed. By answering that her parents are from Turkey but that she is from Berlin, from Germany, she both acknowledges the implication of Otherness inherent in the question—*You can't be from here, so where are you really from?*—while actively claiming both her local and national identity. In this brief response is embedded a negotiation with interpersonal and societal expectations, all of which reflect and are recreated by the individuals within that cultural context. Although there were clear differences in the responses of the White German and Turkish German participants, the cultural norms with which they negotiate were evident because the authors were attuned to them during data analysis and interpretation. Being able to “hear” culture in these data was contingent upon a multi-step process, shifting from broad, open coding to more narrow and nuanced axial coding, and finally engaging in in-depth analysis.

Empirical Example #3: Racial Identity and Intersectionality in the United States

Our final example focuses on the interpretive level of analysis—where selective coding is leveraged. Specifically, intersectionality was used as an interpretative lens for drawing meaning from the stories young people share about their identities—and the broader culture in which they share. Intersectionality, originally put forth by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; see also Delucio & Villicana, this volume), describes the compounding effects of racial and gender

oppression that Black women face (for more detail on intersectionality in the study of identity see: Moffitt et al., 2020; Rogers & Syed, 2020; Syed & McLean, 2016). Here we demonstrate how young people interlace insights about the broader culture with their subjective experiences.

Interviewer: What does being African American mean to you?

Response: Well, I don't like basketball. Where I grew up, basketball, everybody, every Black person wants to be Michael Jordan. Um, um, most of us, like guys who wear their pants like to their thighs or their knees, Doo-rag, purple bandana or whatever, care more about getting Air Jordans than an "A" or get like a "C-" and don't care about grades or that stuff. African Americans [are] like the lowest percentage at graduation. They are only 48% at graduation. ...I'm not, I'm not like the average African American; like I'm different. I know that some of them, most of them probably like don't study or care about school, and I'm not like that. My backpack has a lot of books and you won't find a lot of African Americans reading Harry Potter.

This is a quote from John, a 6th-grade, Black boy who participated in an interview study of identity (Way & Rogers, 2015). The interview question is about his subjective meaning-making around race and his response reveals the cultural construction of race. At the level of *description*, John offers a list of descriptors to tell us what "it means to be Black" and our *analysis* (Level 2) of how these items fit together in John's story can be understood as societal standards and stereotypes about Black people (males in particular): basketball, doo-rag, bandana, low academic performance and graduation rates. *Interpreting* (Level 3) why John told this story, and why it is meaningful to our understanding of racial identity, takes us beyond the items on his list. John describes who he is by telling us who he is *not* – "I don't like basketball... I'm not like the

average African American.” John’s response certainly reveals his own thinking about and feelings toward being Black, but is also a window into society.

We also hear, in this quote, that race intersects with other identities—being Black is not experienced in isolation. Gender is most evident, as John describes a Blackness that characterizes Black *males*: basketball and doo-rags are stereotypes of Black men and boys, specifically. If we are not attentive to the cultural construction of race, however, John’s racial identity can be flatly interpreted as internalized oppression. By situating identity in culture and analyzing data through a cultural lens, we can know the pervasive cultural script that positions Black boys, specifically, as narrowly defined by such stereotypes, and thus interpret John’s interview as a set of strategies to negotiate racial identity in response to society’s narrow and negative definition of Black boys (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Rogers & Way, 2016).

When asked questions that center their own lived experiences, we find that young people often divulge the salience of cultural stereotypes. Here are some interview examples:

I: Okay, um, how do you think things might be different if you were um say a White girl? Would anything be different?

R: Um, people would look at me in a different way, cuz I know that when people look at a White girl, they usually think, like Starbucks or like boots and stuff but like instead there’s like some gangster girls at the school otherwise, they like act like all thug.

In this short quote we gather from An, an early adolescent Chinese girl (7th grade), that she is aware of the multiple and intersecting social identities, and is attuned to what others think about her (and others) on basis of these memberships. An distinguishes between types of girls, “Starbucks” (White) girls and “Gangster” (Black) girls, suggesting that her own Chinese girlness is distinct from these. And, if we consider the cultural constructions and representations of White

girls, Black girls, and Chinese girls, we also see this reality manifested in the broader culture. While one could code this interview in terms of “negative stereotypes” (descriptively), an interpretative analysis would delve deeper into what this interview reveals to us about culture, and the context of her school, and her positionality as a Chinese girl in this school setting.

Sometimes the link from identity to culture is more explicit and direct in a participant’s response. For example, when Giana, a Black girl, 7th grade, was asked what is something that’s hard about being Black girl, she replied: “Um, the racism.” Giana’s immediate response is not about her personal feelings, thoughts, or evaluations; she directly ties her racial identity to racism. As descriptive analysis (Level 1), racism is identified as the topic or idea raised in the conversation. But, situating this single response within the context of larger semi-structured interview, and within the racialized history of the U.S., we gain insight into what *racism* means to Giana, how it is subjectively experienced. The subsequent interview questions allow for this deeper analysis (Level 2), drawing the link between the subjectivities of identity and culture:

I: Do you think things would be different if you were a White girl?

R: Um if I was a White girl um then I would probably have like a better house or like a better living situation or like better clothes or I don’t know. [...]

I: How about if you were a Black boy?

R: If I was a Black boy? Then I probably would get shot {giggle}. I am just playing, I am just playing. But um if I was a Black boy then um I don’t know, like I’d probably be, probably be like an athlete or something or I’d probably be into football.

Giana’s initial response about “racism” evolves to reveal an astute awareness of the construction of intersectional social group identities and inequalities. In the span of a few sentences, Giana

threads social class (“have a better house”) with being a White girl, and links athleticism and police brutality to the experience of Black boys.

The question of analysis (Level 2) asks how these stories fit together, and our interpretation (Level 3) offers an answer. Giana’s own positionality is marked by “racism” and while she provides much less about the specifics of her own racialized experiences, we garner insight into these experiences through her reflection on these related social groups: As a Black girl she does not have “a better house” or “living situation” or “clothes”; she is not likely to “get shot” and is not “an athlete”; these are the cultural realities that shape her understanding and experience as a Black girl. Juliana, a 4th-grade girl who identified as Hispanic, similarly explained that if she were a boy:

[Y]ou could probably get in to do more things. Because males do much more things. Um, because they – they are able to go in the World Cup, they’re still able to be in uh acrobatic and girls can’t do that much but they are able to do acrobatic stuff.

In each of these quotes, young people paint for us a picture of the overlapping inequalities and stereotypes that are tied to their developing social identities and understandings of who they are and who they can become in this cultural context. Using the interpretive lens of intersectional inequality, it becomes evident that gender stereotypes and opportunities, for example, operate both within and across racial groups. We can hear that these young people’s responses not only communicate their individual identity processes but also reveal how identities are negotiated within cultural contexts to both afford and deny one access and opportunities.

Tying it Together

Across our examples and case studies, the levels of analysis and coding strategies are neither mutually exclusive nor discrete, but it is useful to understand the primary purpose and

place of each of them in the whole process of analysis. *Description* is necessary for understanding the landscape of the data, the context of who and what is being shared. It allows the scientist to understand a given story relative to the rest of the stories being told. It provides a sense of scope – how prevalent are the ideas within and across a sample, are they common or unique? Are they persistent or random? Are there exemplars that stand out and catch our attention? Describing the data, just as one does in quantitative analysis, provides necessary context but is not sufficient. The level of *analysis* is where researchers do the work of meaning-making, of hearing and listening to the data, and discovering how the pieces fit together. This is where we find out what is indeed interesting and relevant to the research question. Analysis flows into interpretation, setting the stage for conclusions. The level of *interpretation* is pertinent for meaningful analysis, but cannot be undertaken without the foundations of the previous two levels. Moving to interpretation without description or analysis often results in overgeneralizations and reliance on broad trends and confirmation biases. Conversely, avoiding culture by reporting the data without interpretation is also problematic because it often undersells the depth of the stories gathered and ignores the cultural realities that shape those stories and the lives of the individuals telling them.

Conclusion

Our assumption in this chapter is that culture *is* in the data; the question is whether and how we can hear and describe it. Yet, culture is not static. Culture shapes individuals, and, in turn, individuals shape culture. As we have shown throughout this chapter, individuals make meaning about who they are in relation to the norms, expectations, and related structures of their cultural worlds. In short, the macro is in the micro. By investigating how, why, and in which ways individuals reinforce or resist cultural norms as they make sense of their identities, we can

gain a clearer picture of both person and society. Thinking about the dynamic interplay between individuals and culture should inform the whole research process, but it is particularly salient when writing interview questions and conducting analyses, as these steps shape the type of data gathered and the types of conclusions drawn.

McGrath and Johnson (2003) argue that “methodology makes meaning” – a quantitative or a qualitative lens shapes what we see in our data. More than the method itself, we describe here how interviewing and analysis help us to understand culture in the stories our participants tell – and how these stories can transform culture. The types of questions we ask participants and the ways in which we describe, analyze, and interpret our data matter – researchers are often both the “hearers” and “tellers” of other peoples’ stories. There are many methods for studying identity and culture, but we believe qualitative interviewing is particularly well suited to this multi-layered task. We also believe in the impact that stories can have. People hear statistics and they imagine numbers; people hear stories and they imagine people’s lives. Our science could benefit from more opportunities to imagine the livelihood and humanity of others.

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