Introduction

This book is written for budding social scientists and those more advanced scholars interested in developing or fine-tuning their skills in qualitative research. It is crafted to take you out of the realm of the abstract and engage you in a sustained way in the twists and turns of conceptualizing and carrying out a qualitative research project. This text addresses planning a research design, conducting data collection and analysis, synthesizing and interpreting research themes, and writing up research results. Slices of a completed research project are inserted within this book to illustrate key dimensions of qualitative research in a concrete way as they are introduced. The book’s aim is to highlight the ways in which qualitative research builds on a rigorous, reflexive, and action-oriented tradition of social science.

While a number of methods are discussed here, there is a particular emphasis on the use of the semi-structured interview. This method is typically underutilized, yet it has remarkable potential. Characteristic of its unique flexibility, the semi-structured interview is sufficiently
structured to address specific dimensions of your research question while also leaving space for study participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study. The focus on the semi-structured interview is complemented in this book by attention to the use of multiple methods.

This book attends to the process of bringing to the surface the multi-dimensional nature of lived experience. It responds to an imperative for fine-grained qualitative analyses in order to open up new possibilities in understanding complicated phenomena often accepted as unproblematic. The semi-structured interview is particularly instrumental in achieving this type of texturing. It creates openings for a narrative to unfold, while also including questions informed by theory. It also leaves a space through which you might explore with participants the contextual influences evident in the narratives but not always narrated as such.

To illustrate this methodological approach and philosophical orientation, I make use of a real case study—a qualitative study focused on a particular social problem with a long history in education and psychology. Referred to throughout as “the desegregation study,” its inclusion is intended to illustrate in a concrete and detailed manner the use of the semi-structured interview within a multimethod qualitative study. By embedding an unfolding research story into rather straightforward “how-to” discussions, the book aims to draw you into the demands and dilemmas of qualitative research.

The overall philosophical orientation of the desegregation study that serves as the running example in this book reflects the critical theory interpretive tradition. Predicated on a desire to explore human relations and structural forces, or what the social psychologist and Jesuit priest Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994) referred to as “limit situations,” the discussion of the desegregation study attends to the human condition as a confrontation with both limitations and opportunities. This focus encompasses history as one of several analytical levels in relation to individual experience. The use of the semi-structured interview within a multimethod design in the desegregation study thus reflects an aspiration to not only study social problems but also play a role in disentangling the threads contributing to the problems (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Collins, 1998; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Lather, 1986; Martín-Baró, 1994; Weis & Fine, 2004).
The narrative within which this book is written is itself multilayered. It reflects a set of commitments to the story it tells about one school district’s history of desegregation. In the process of guiding you through the stages of qualitative research, it will illustrate the interpretive process through the inductive nature of qualitative research.

Structure of the Book

The book is organized into three sections, with chapters offering a general discussion of qualitative research methods, particularly multi-method designs and the use of the semi-structured interview, interspersed with excerpts from the desegregation study, which offer concrete examples as to the twists and turns that might occur in your conceptualizing and conducting research. As the structure of the book is intended to reflect the progressive movement of qualitative research methods, the book is best read not as isolated chapters but as a whole.

Section I of the book, “Setting the Stage,” introduces the task of crafting a qualitative research design. This section is meant to draw you into a more in-depth understanding of qualitative research through the use of the semi-structured interview.

Chapter 1 focuses on how to formulate your plan to research a particular topic. This chapter includes a discussion of key steps, such as preparing a literature review; conceptualizing the focus of your research through an interdisciplinary study of extant research; constructing a sufficiently open-ended research question; identifying methods best suited to that question; and developing a data analysis plan. The chapter is organized to address all aspects of the research design, including participant recruitment and selection, such practicalities as gaining access to your research setting, and, if applicable, considerations of your relationship with the site under study. The chapter includes a discussion of the specific research-design dilemmas and decisions that arose during the desegregation study as a means of illuminating the kinds of issues you might face in your own work.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of how to construct a semi-structured interview protocol. It underscores the continuum of structure available to researchers, with options to use more or less structure in the protocol, depending on the purpose of the research and the research
question. The chapter is designed to assist you in thinking about the development of a protocol and your inclusion of particular segments to address dimensions of your topic. It also highlights the use of tools and resources to draw the participant more fully into the topic of study. Specific tensions evident in the construction of the interview protocol for the desegregation study are highlighted in order to showcase the dilemmas you may confront. The chapter provides a detailed discussion of the deliberations and actual decision making about the types of questions included in the semi-structured interview for the desegregation study, and this demonstrates how such tensions can be worked through.

Section II, “The Semi-Structured Interview: Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data,” moves the book’s focus along to the topics of conducting an interview and analyzing interview data. I address the ongoing and iterative nature of qualitative data analysis and the way in which analysis accompanies data collection, and this process involves a close reading and coding of interview transcripts, reciprocity with one’s participants, and researcher reflexivity. The chapters within this section explore how specific thematic codes and patterns emerge and take on increased meaning and theoretical weight. Through the use of examples from the desegregation study, this section demonstrates efforts at researcher-participant reciprocity, researcher reflexivity, ongoing coding of interview data, the emergence of thematic clusters, and the early formulation of a conceptual framework.

Chapter 3 explores closely the nature of interviewing in general as an interaction between two or more individuals, and it discusses the benefits and drawbacks inherent in this method. I attend to the nature of decisions made during the actual interview, and the notion of the researcher as an instrument, reflecting and acting upon the nature of the exchange between the researcher and participant as the interview unfolds. The chapter consists of two sections. The first section focuses on your efforts to achieve reciprocity with your participants. The second section discusses the need for researcher reflexivity to assess the particular methodological and ethical snags that frequently emerge as one proceeds forward with qualitative research. As these decisions are frequently informed by the interpretive tradition guiding one’s research design, the desegregation study examples in chapter 3 reflect the critical theory interpretive tradition.
Chapter 4 details the analysis of the data, offering further elaboration on the way in which data collection and analysis occur in an ongoing manner in qualitative research. The chapter details each stage of the analysis, from organizing the data at an early stage to locating thematic patterns. It underscores the way in which qualitative data analysis is iterative, requiring a process of looping back into the data and demanding a close reading of the interview transcripts. The second half of the chapter demonstrates the analytical possibilities available in the movement between *individual experience* within a *relational context* and the *structural conditions* and *historical context* that participants encounter.

Section III, “Synthesizing and Interpreting Research Findings,” discusses the critical importance of the final phase of one’s research, including synthesizing themes toward interpretation and theory building, formulating this synthesis for a wider public, and engaging significant others in the implications of one’s work.

Chapter 5 outlines the progressive movement into synthesizing study findings. It demonstrates several tools that aid in interpretation, including graphic displays, reflective writing, and feedback from critical friends. This chapter underscores the iterative process of qualitative research as you search for relationships across thematic patterns. It discusses the way in which interpretation involves exploring empirical data in conversation with extant theory. The chapter notes the interpretive loops through which you articulate a conceptual framework in response to your research question. It prepares you for drawing together a set of ideas that provides the basis for theory building.

Chapter 6 discusses the steps subsequent to synthesizing one’s research findings and positioning the work within the literature. It underscores how writing carries with it ethical demands, challenges of representation, and issues of interpretation and deliberation in responding to your research question. The chapter also addresses the nature of research as inherently an ongoing conversation within and across disciplinary boundaries and communities of interest, and the manner in which research findings have the potential to lead to further theorizing and related research endeavors. Additionally, the chapter notes the importance of finding ways to draw those individuals and groups for whom your study is relevant into a discussion of the findings.

In sum, this text consists of three major sections, covering the stages
of research and the use of the semi-structured interview as part of a multimethod design. The strength of this book is that it offers undergraduate and graduate students, as well as those in the professions, a pathway into rigorous, reflexive, and action-oriented research through following the bumps and gains of one particular study. I invite you to think big when planning your research, providing you with considerable insight into the qualitative tools that are available to you. We will explore the way in which qualitative research draws social scientists into the depth of individual experience embedded within multiple and overlapping contexts throughout the research endeavor. In so doing, the book illustrates how the notion of “semi-structured” can be fully exploited to attend to complex research topics.