

From Data Points to Faces: Reflections on Conducting Qualitative Interviews

Description

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Note: Parts of this text have been adapted from the Chapter 4. Designing the Study: Case Logic and Mixed Methods across Germany and the Netherlands of my doctoral dissertation.

When we do quantitative research with large datasets, especially using secondary data, we do not come into direct contact with the subjects of our research. Each subject, each individual, is just a line of data among thousands of others. They never see the researcher, and the researcher never sees them. But with qualitative interviews, the dynamic changes. Subject and researcher meet face to face, bringing a multitude of heuristics, perceptions, and emotions into play. In this blog entry, I share my experiences conducting qualitative interviews, what I learned about my own position as a researcher, and what that meant for my research.

I began interviewing first- and second-generation Turkish immigrants in Germany and the Netherlands in the summer of 2024 and finished in the spring of 2025, with a total of 35 interviews. Before that, I had received ethical approval from my university, attended workshops on conducting qualitative interviews, and carried out several pilot interviews within my personal network. In theory, I was ready. I had everything I needed: my recorder, my notes, and the most current iteration of my questionnaire. Yet, once I started conducting the interviews, I realized I had not fully considered how I would be perceived by my interviewees and how that would affect the process.

Do not get me wrong: I was aware of my position and knew it would matter. I had read many pieces about how the perceptions of both interviewer and interviewee affect the interview process. But really being in the field was quite different from just reading about it. I would usually introduce myself as a PhD researcher and explain the general focus of my study, without offering personal details. I suspect, given the change in their body language and their comments, that many participants were surprised when they first met me and

heard my accent. Several asked early on where I came from, wanting to confirm I was not German. Others waited until the end of the interview.

As soon as you know the other person is Turkish, it kind of feels like you're one of us. You know, there's always like this. (And) that would not happen in German culture. If I'm travelling and I hear somebody speaking German, you would avoid it. **You're not German, right?**

~A respondent

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Gradually, I noticed that me being a migrant sparked curiosity among participants. To some extent, it made me one of them. As a migrant myself, I shared an experience with my interviewees. For instance, participants occasionally referred to shared experiences of being treated differently abroad, such as being overcharged in their country of origin because they live abroad. Some even mentioned Ecuador, my country of origin, in their examples, drawing parallels between their stories and what they imagined my experiences might be. These moments created a sense that we both belonged to the same broader "migrant" category. I believe this helped participants feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics such as discrimination, disillusionment, and even critical remarks about other social groups.

I wouldn't say strongly discriminated, but to a certain extent, like, you are going for groceries and you get a different price than a local would get. I mean, it happens. (And) **I think probably you'll notice the same.** You go there, they notice you're not from here and they change the prices. So that's a sort of confirmation like hey, I'm being treated differently.

~A Respondent

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At the same time, I was clearly an outsider to the Turkish community. This distance allowed for more frank conversations about intra-community dynamics, without concerns about judgment or loyalties. However, my outsider status also raised suspicion in some cases. Certain organizations questioned my institutional affiliations, and several potential participants declined to take part because of this. One organization in specific asked

several times whether my research was funded by a government agency and insisted on checking an official university affiliation document, reflecting broader concerns about surveillance or misrepresentation.

“Yes, it is very, very important to learn the language. You don’t have to know it perfectly, but it’s enough to be able to communicate. **Like you now, great, that’s enough and also nice with the accent.**”

~A Respondent

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Beyond the insider-outsider question, I became increasingly aware that the topic of my research and my interactions with participants were intertwined in a more substantial way: the themes I was investigating, migration, identity, integration, surfaced in how participants perceived me and how I perceived them. For example, I conducted interviews in German or English, depending on the participants’ preference. When I spoke German, which is not my first language, some participants praised my language skills and stressed the importance of speaking the residence-country language for proper integration. At the same time, integration expectations for immigrants and their descendants were central to my research questions. When first-generation interviewees described leaving Turkey or when second-generation participants recounted their parents’ arrival stories, I found myself recalling my own impressions of departure and arrival. Their fears about anti-immigrant sentiment in politics resonated with my own. And when they asked why I was studying this topic or what had brought me to Germany, I began to reflect on where my research ended and I began.

“And every language has its own language. And sometimes you can’t say things in German like you can in Turkish or Spanish, you probably know that too. (â?) Actually, I see myself as international, I’m not German and Turkish at all, because I think those are just borders with different languages and cultures. (â?) **I also don’t think you and I are that different, you just speak a different language.** That’s fine. And you look a bit different too. But that’s normal. We all look different on Earth. That’s why I feel international.”

~A Respondent

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Over time, these reflections also influenced how I conducted later interviews. I began reserving more time at the beginning for participants to ask me questions. I realized that allowing them to satisfy their curiosity early on, about where I came from, why I was doing this, or what had brought me to Germany, helped create trust. Once they had this information, they could focus more on their own stories. I also learned that knowing how I might be seen by different participants helped me decide how to ask questions and follow-ups. Before my fieldwork, I had read about the importance of the perception of the interviewer's position in the interview process, but at this point I had actually understood it and put it into practice.

In the end, my own experiences as a migrant shaped my fieldwork in multiple ways. They influenced how participants responded to me, what they chose to share, and how they articulated it. My position also affected how I addressed topics and formulated questions. Still, it were my research questions that guided the analysis. In other words, while qualitative data collection is a dynamic process and all research carries elements of subjectivity, this does not undermine rigor. On the contrary, the emotional labor of interviewing and the researcher's position do not make it less important, rather they shape how it is exercised.

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