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In-Depth Interviews as a Tool for Qualitative Research: Theoretical Foundations, Typologies, Design, Analysis, and Emerging Trends

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Abstract

The in-depth interview (IDI) is the most widely used method in qualitative research, offering unparalleled access to the subjective meanings, lived experiences, and interpretive frameworks through which individuals construct and narrate their social worlds. This paper provides a comprehensive and critically grounded methodological review of IDIs as a qualitative research tool, tracing their intellectual lineage from psychoanalytic case-study practice and anthropological fieldwork through the formal codification of semi-structured and unstructured interviewing in the sociology of the 1960s and 1970s to their contemporary deployment in online, AI-assisted, and mixed-methods contexts. The paper systematically addresses the definitional boundaries and epistemological foundations of the IDI; a typology of eight format variants; principles of purposive sampling and theoretical saturation; the architecture of the interview guide; the craft of probing and active listening; the management of power, positionality, and ethics; data collection and transcription practice; and six major analytical frameworks thematic analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, narrative analysis, framework analysis, and discourse analysis. Six structured tables consolidate comparative and decision-making guidance. The advantages of IDIs depth, flexibility, privacy, rapport, and analytical versatility are evaluated against their limitations, including cost, interviewer effects, social-desirability bias, and the demands of reflexivity. Recent developments, including the validation of online video interviews, AI-assisted transcription, and the use of large language models for first-pass coding, are assessed critically. The paper concludes that the IDI remains methodologically indispensable

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wherever depth, nuance, and the individual's own interpretive voice are the primary objects of inquiry provided the method is implemented with epistemological self-awareness, ethical rigour, and transparent analytical practice.

Keywords: in-depth interview, qualitative research, semi-structured interview, thematic analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, research methodology, online interviews, reflexivity

Introduction

The in-depth interview occupies a foundational position in the architecture of qualitative research. Across the social sciences, health sciences, education, media studies, and applied policy research, it is the method to which researchers most frequently turn when their question is not 'how many?' or 'how often?' but 'what does this mean to this person, in this context, at this moment?' Its defining epistemological commitment is to the interior world of the individual to the subjective meanings, interpretive frameworks, biographical contexts, and lived experiences that give human behaviour its intelligibility and it pursues that commitment through extended, purposeful, reflective conversation guided but not constrained by the researcher.

Despite its ubiquity, the in-depth interview is frequently misunderstood as simply a 'long questionnaire' or as an informal chat elevated to research status by the presence of a recorder. These characterisations miss the methodological sophistication that distinguishes a rigorous IDI study from mere anecdote collection. The design of the interview guide, the management of rapport and power, the deployment of probes, the conduct of analysis, and the demonstration of rigour through reflexivity, member-checking, and saturation all require disciplined decision-making grounded in a clear epistemological position.

This paper aims to provide exactly that grounding a comprehensive, critically informed, and practically oriented methodological review of in-depth interviews as a qualitative research tool. It traces the method's intellectual history, examines all major design and implementation decisions, presents a taxonomy of format variants, reviews the principal analytical approaches, and addresses the most significant recent developments, including the validation of online interviewing and the integration of AI-assisted transcription and analysis. The review is designed to be useful both to researchers planning their first IDI study and to experienced qualitative researchers seeking a systematic synthesis of the current methodological state of the art.

Historical Background and Intellectual Origins

The intellectual lineage of the in-depth interview is longer and more philosophically diverse than most contemporary methodology textbooks acknowledge. It draws on at least four distinct traditions that converged during the twentieth century to produce the semi-structured and unstructured interview forms in common use today.

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Psychoanalytic and Clinical Traditions

The earliest intellectual antecedent of the in-depth interview is the psychoanalytic clinical session, in which Sigmund Freud and his successors developed the technique of extended, non-directive conversation as a tool for accessing unconscious material. The free-association method asking patients to speak without self-censorship about whatever came to mind established the epistemological principle that the richest data lie beneath the surface of structured questioning, and that the interviewer's primary task is to create conditions in which disclosure is possible rather than to direct its content (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Alfred Adler's individual-psychology interviews introduced the biographical dimension the systematic exploration of early experience as a context for present behaviour that would later become central to narrative and life-history interviewing.

Anthropological Fieldwork Traditions

The second foundational tradition is anthropological fieldwork, in which extended naturalistic conversation was the primary instrument of data collection. Bronislaw Malinowski's Trobriand Islands fieldwork of the 1910s, Margaret Mead's Samoan studies, and Franz Boas's Native American ethnography all relied on sustained, relationship-based interviewing in which the researcher's presence in the community over months or years created the conditions for candid, contextualised disclosure (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This tradition contributed to the contemporary IDI its emphasis on relational rapport, cultural sensitivity, and the importance of extended contact rather than one-shot data extraction.

Survey Research and the Focused Interview

The formalisation of the interview as a specifically social science instrument occurred primarily within the survey research tradition of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly at Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. Lazarsfeld's Programme Analyser and Robert Merton's focused interview technique (Merton & Kendall, 1946) established the methodological logic of using structured qualitative probing to interpret and contextualise survey responses a logic that remains at the heart of mixed-methods designs today. The distinction between structured and unstructured interview forms, and the epistemological implications of each, were first systematically theorised in this period.

Feminist and Critical Social Science

The 1970s and 1980s brought a transformative critique of traditional interview practice from feminist social science. Ann Oakley's (1981) landmark paper 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms?' challenged the positivist fiction of the detached, neutral interviewer, arguing that genuine rapport, personal disclosure, and reciprocity were not methodological contaminants but ethical obligations when researching women's lives. This critique permanently altered the landscape of qualitative interviewing, foregrounding reflexivity, power, and the relational dimensions of the interview encounter as central methodological concerns rather than peripheral irritants. It also opened the way for the consolidation of IDI methodology in the works

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of Kvale (1996), Rubin and Rubin (2005), and Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Table 1 summarises this historical trajectory.

Table 1

Historical Development of In-Depth Interview Methodology

Note. Compiled from Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), Oakley (1981), and Creswell (2013).

Era	Key Development	Significance	Key Scholars
1900s–1920s	Psychoanalytic case-study interview	Established deep probing of individual experience as a research act	Freud, Adler
1930s–1940s	Anthropological field interviews	Extended naturalistic interviewing in community settings	Malinowski, Mead, Boas
1940s–1950s	Survey research depth component	IDIs used as pre-pilots and post-survey follow-up instruments	Lazarsfeld, Merton
1960s–1970s	Sociological and feminist research	Unstructured interviews as emancipatory tools; critiques of positivism	Oakley, Cicourel, Glaser & Strauss
1980s–1990s	Formalisation in qualitative methodology	Typologies, ethical frameworks, and sampling logics codified	Spradley, Rubin & Rubin, Kvale
2000s	Mixed-methods integration	IDIs combined with surveys, observation, and document analysis	Creswell, Teddlie & Tashakkori
2010s	Online and telephone interviewing	Geographic barriers reduced; Skype/Zoom interviews validated as equivalent	Deakin & Wakefield, Salmons
2020–2026	AI-assisted transcription and analysis	LLMs accelerate transcription; NLP tools code and query interview data	Barrera et al., Braun & Clarke

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Definition and Epistemological Foundations

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define the qualitative research interview as 'an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena' (p. 3). This definition captures three features that distinguish the IDI from other interview forms: its focus on the life-world rather than isolated facts; its orientation toward meaning-making rather than information extraction; and its interpretive rather than enumerative analytical ambition.

The epistemological foundations of the IDI are plural rather than uniform, and different format variants rest on different philosophical commitments. Semi-structured IDIs are typically grounded in social constructionism or critical realism, treating the interview as a site in which participants actively construct accounts of their experience in response to the researcher's questions rather than simply reporting pre-formed inner states. Unstructured and narrative IDIs draw more heavily on phenomenological philosophy particularly Husserl's concept of intentionality and Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world treating the participant's account as the primary means of accessing the structure of lived experience. Grounded-theory interviews are rooted in pragmatist philosophy and symbolic interactionism, treating the interview as a data source for inductively constructing theoretical accounts of social processes.

What all these traditions share is a rejection of the positivist view of the interview as a measurement instrument a pipeline through which pre-existing attitudes and beliefs flow from the participant's mind to the researcher's data file with minimal distortion. The IDI, in all its forms, treats the interview itself as a co-produced social encounter in which meaning is negotiated, context matters, and the researcher's presence is an analytic resource rather than a source of error (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Typology of In-Depth Interview Formats

The term 'in-depth interview' encompasses a family of related but epistemologically and procedurally distinct formats. The most fundamental distinction is the degree of structure imposed by the researcher, which runs from fully structured (fixed questions in fixed order) through semi-structured (guide plus probing) to unstructured (opening question and conversational follow-up). Table 2 presents a comprehensive typology of eight format variants, including the increasingly important online and asynchronous forms that have achieved methodological mainstream status since 2020.

The semi-structured in-depth interview is by far the most commonly used format in contemporary qualitative social science and health research. It balances two epistemological goods that fully structured and fully unstructured interviews cannot simultaneously achieve: the comparability across interviews that comes from a shared thematic guide, and the flexibility to pursue participant-specific meanings, experiences, and framings that emerge unpredictably in the course of conversation. This balance makes semi-structured IDIs particularly well-suited to studies

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that seek both descriptive breadth across a sample and interpretive depth within individual accounts.

Table 2

Typology of In-Depth Interview Formats

Note. Compiled from Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), Rubin and Rubin (2005), Creswell (2013), and Salmons (2015).

Type	**Structure Level**	**Moderator Control**	**Best Use**	**Typical Duration**
Structured IDI	High	Fixed questions, fixed order	Comparative studies; theory testing; policy evaluation	30–45 min
Semi-Structured IDI	Medium	Guide + flexible probing	Most social science and health research; allows depth and comparison	45–90 min
Unstructured / Narrative	Low	Opening question only	Life histories; phenomenological inquiry; exploratory research	60–120 min
Focused Interview	Medium-High	Specific stimulus, guided probes	Evaluation of communications, media, products, or events	45–60 min
Elite / Expert Interview	Low–Medium	Conversational; respondent steers	Policy networks; institutional knowledge; key-informant research	60–90 min
Biographical / Life History	Low	Narrative prompts only	Identity research; migration, trauma, career studies	90–180 min

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Online Synchronous (Video)	Any	Same as face-to-face equivalent	Geographically dispersed populations; follow-up interviews	30–90 min
Asynchronous Online (Email/Text)	Medium	Sequential question-response	Participants needing reflection time; multilingual research	Days–weeks

Planning and Designing In-Depth Interview Research

Sampling Strategies and Theoretical Saturation

In-depth interview research employs non-probabilistic sampling strategies, of which purposive sampling is the most common. Participants are selected because they have the specific characteristics, experiences, or perspectives that are relevant to the research question not because they are statistically representative of a population. Theoretical sampling, developed within grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and elaborated by Charmaz (2014), involves sampling decisions that are driven iteratively by the developing analysis: the researcher samples to extend, challenge, or refine the emerging theoretical account rather than to achieve predetermined demographic coverage.

The question of when to stop recruiting data saturation is the subject of extensive empirical and conceptual debate in the IDI literature. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) conducted one of the few empirical studies of saturation in semi-structured interview research and found that basic thematic saturation was typically achieved by twelve interviews, with 92% of themes present by the sixth interview in a relatively homogeneous sample. Subsequent work by Hennink and Kaiser (2022) distinguished code saturation (no new codes emerging, typically by nine interviews) from meaning saturation (full elaboration of those codes, typically by sixteen to twenty-four interviews), arguing that researchers must specify which form of saturation they are targeting when reporting sample-size rationale.

Interview Guide Design

The architecture of the interview guide is one of the most consequential design decisions in IDI research. Rubin and Rubin (2005) recommend organising questions around main questions (the broad topical domains), follow-up questions (invitations to elaborate), and probes (specific prompts to deepen, clarify, or challenge). The guide should move in a funnel structure from broad, open, non-threatening questions that establish rapport and orient the participant to the topic, through increasingly focused questions that address the core analytical domains, to a closing question that invites reflection and additions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

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The most important technical skill in guide design is the construction of truly open questions questions that do not embed an assumption about the direction or valence of the answer. Questions beginning with 'How did you experience...', 'What did that mean to you...', and 'Can you walk me through...' invite narrative elaboration; questions beginning with 'Did you find that...', 'Don't you think...', or 'Wasn't it the case that...' embed assumptions and lead the participant toward pre-formed answers. The distinction between these question types is not merely stylistic but epistemological: leading questions undermine the constructionist warrant of the IDI by substituting the researcher's interpretive frame for the participant's own.

Probing Techniques

Probing is the heart of the in-depth interview the set of conversational moves through which the researcher deepens, clarifies, and extends a participant's initial response to achieve the interpretive richness that distinguishes an IDI from a survey. Patton (2015) identifies several major probe types: elaboration probes ('Can you say more about that?'), clarification probes ('When you say X, what do you mean exactly?'), example probes ('Could you give me an example of a time when that happened?'), contrast probes ('How was that different from...?'), and silence the use of a brief, expectant pause to signal that more is expected without directing its content.

Table 3

Steps in In-Depth Interview Research Design and Implementation

Note. Adapted from Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), Rubin and Rubin (2005), and Creswell (2013).

Step	Phase	Key Activities and Decisions
1	Conceptualise	Define the research question; confirm epistemological stance (phenomenological, constructivist, critical realist); establish that IDIs are the best-fit method
2	Design sampling	Select purposive, theoretical, or snowball sampling strategy; determine inclusion/exclusion criteria; plan for theoretical saturation
3	Develop guide	Write opening, core, and closing questions; build in probe ladders; pilot with 2–3 participants; refine language and sequencing
4	Recruit	Identify gatekeepers and recruitment channels; screen participants; obtain informed consent; address power, coercion, and compensation issues

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5	Prepare	Train interviewers in active listening and probing; arrange setting (quiet, private, neutral); test recording equipment; brief participants
6	Conduct interview	Build rapport; use funnel structure; deploy probes and follow-ups; manage time; close with summary and open invitation
7	Record and transcribe	Dual audio recording + field notes; verbatim transcription with paralinguistic annotations; AI-assisted transcription with human review
8	Analyse	Apply chosen analytical approach (TA, IPA, grounded theory, narrative analysis, framework analysis); establish analytic rigour procedures
9	Verify and validate	Member-checking; negative case analysis; peer debriefing; reflexivity journaling; inter-rater reliability if quantifying
10	Report	Anonymise; present findings with illustrative quotations; discuss transferability; report sample size with saturation rationale

Conducting the In-Depth Interview

Rapport, Power, and the Interview Relationship

The interview relationship is the medium through which data are produced, and its quality is a primary determinant of data quality. Rapport the sense of mutual trust, respect, and interest that makes candid self-disclosure possible is not a pre-existing property of good interviewers but an achievement constructed through specific interactional practices: demonstrating genuine curiosity, responding empathically to emotional content, being willing to share relevant personal experience when asked, maintaining eye contact, and communicating through body language and paralinguistic cues that the participant's account is being heard and valued (Oakley, 1981; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Power asymmetries are endemic to research interviews, flowing from multiple sources simultaneously: the researcher's institutional authority, the participant's uncertainty about how their words will be used, status and demographic differences, and the researcher's control over the framing of questions. Feminist and critical scholars have argued that these asymmetries cannot be eliminated but must be acknowledged, managed, and reflected upon as part of the researcher's analytic practice. Practically, power can be partially redistributed by sharing the interview guide in advance, by positioning the participant as the expert on their own experience, by inviting the

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participant to redirect or challenge questions they find ill-framed, and by member-checking the researcher's interpretations at the end of the interview (Riessman, 2008).

Managing Sensitive Topics

In-depth interviews are the method of choice for research on sensitive, stigmatised, or legally sensitive topics precisely because the private, one-on-one format minimises the social-desirability pressures that distort data in group settings and the anonymity gaps that undermine trust in survey research. However, sensitive topics require specific preparation: researchers must anticipate potential distress and have referral resources available; they must address confidentiality and data security explicitly in the consent process; and they must develop protocols for managing disclosures that indicate risk of harm to the participant or others. IRB guidance on sensitive-topic interviewing including research on domestic violence, substance use, mental health, political persecution, and illegal activity varies by institution and jurisdiction and must be consulted at the design stage (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007).

Data Collection and Recording

Standard data collection practice in IDI research combines audio recording (dual device: primary and backup), contemporaneous field notes capturing the physical setting, observational impressions, and paralinguistic features of the conversation, and where the research question concerns embodied or gestural communication video recording. Verbatim transcription, including hesitations, overlaps, laughter, and notable silences, is the documentation standard for most analytical approaches, and is essential for discourse and conversation analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

AI-assisted transcription services including Otter.ai, Verbit, Whisper, and Rev have substantially reduced the transcription burden for IDI research, achieving word-error rates of 5 to 15% for clearly recorded speech in standard English, and lower rates for careful professional transcription contexts. Human review and correction of AI-generated transcripts remains essential: AI systems systematically mishandle proper nouns, technical terminology, accented speech, emotional prosody markers, and overlapping talk. Barrera et al. (2025) recommend a tiered approach AI for initial transcript generation, human review for accuracy and paralinguistic annotation as the current methodological best practice.

Data Analysis Approaches for In-Depth Interview Data

The choice of analytical approach for IDI data is not a technical decision made after data collection but an epistemological commitment that should be specified at the design stage and that shapes the sampling strategy, guide design, conduct of interviews, and representation of findings. Table 4 summarises six major analytical frameworks; each is briefly characterised below.

Thematic Analysis

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Thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) is the most widely used analytical approach in IDI research across the social and health sciences, and its flexibility across epistemological positions from critical realist to constructionist accounts for much of its popularity. The six-phase process (familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting) is iterative rather than linear, and Braun and Clarke's reflexive formulation explicitly positions themes as constructed by the researcher rather than found in the data. This requires transparent documentation of analytical decisions, including the treatment of deviant cases and the management of researcher assumptions.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis, developed by Jonathan Smith and colleagues (Smith et al., 2009), is designed specifically for IDI data and seeks to understand how particular participants, in particular contexts, make sense of their particular lived experience. Its ideographic orientation means that IPA studies typically use small, purposive samples (three to ten participants for a single-group design) and produce detailed, case-by-case analyses before moving to cross-case patterns. IPA is particularly well-suited to health psychology, illness experience, and identity research, where the specific texture of individual meaning-making is the analytic object.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and substantially revised by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (2014), uses IDI data to generate theoretical accounts of social processes through systematic comparative analysis. Its hallmark procedures constant comparison, theoretical sampling, memo-writing, and the search for a core category require that analysis begins with the first interview and shapes all subsequent sampling decisions. Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory has been particularly influential in health and social science research, offering a more reflexive and epistemologically sophisticated version of the method than the original Glaserian formulation.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis treats the stories participants tell in interviews their narrative accounts of events, relationships, and experiences as the primary unit of analysis, examining how they structure their narratives, what they include and exclude, whose voices they incorporate, and how they position themselves as actors in their own accounts (Riessman, 2008). This approach is particularly powerful for research on identity, biography, trauma, and migration, where the way a story is told reveals as much as its content. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry framework extends this approach to longitudinal and collaborative research designs.

Framework Analysis and Discourse Analysis

Framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) is particularly suited to applied and policy-oriented IDI research, offering a structured and auditable analytical procedure that moves from familiarisation through indexing and charting to interpretation within a predefined or inductively

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derived thematic framework. Discourse analysis, in its various forms (critical discourse analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis, discursive psychology), treats interview talk not as a window onto inner states but as a form of social action examining how participants use language to construct versions of reality, manage identity, and exercise or resist power (Fairclough, 2003; Wetherell et al., 2001).

Table 4

Analytical Approaches for In-Depth Interview Data

Note. Compiled from Braun and Clarke (2006), Smith et al. (2009), Charmaz (2014), Riessman (2008), Ritchie and Spencer (1994), and Fairclough (2003).

Approach	**Core Process**	**Epistemological Home**	**Key Output**	**Primary Scholars**
Thematic Analysis (TA)	Code → search themes → review → define → report	Constructivist / interpretivist; flexible across paradigms	Thematic map with rich description	Braun & Clarke (2006, 2021)
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Read → initial notes → emergent themes → superordinate themes → cross-case patterns	Phenomenological; idiographic	Detailed account of lived experience	Smith et al. (2009)
Grounded Theory	Open coding → axial coding → selective coding → theoretical sampling → saturation	Pragmatist / symbolic interactionist	Substantive or formal theory	Glaser & Strauss (1967); Charmaz (2014)
Narrative Analysis	Identify story structure → analyse plot, voice, context → interpret meaning	Social constructionist; humanistic	Narrative account of experience	Riessman (2008); Clandinin (2013)
Framework Analysis	Familiarise → thematic framework → index → chart → interpret	Applied / deductive-inductive hybrid	Structured analytical matrix	Ritchie & Spencer (1994)

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Discourse Analysis	Transcribe in detail → identify rhetorical devices → analyse power and positioning	Post-structuralist / critical	Account of discursive construction	Fairclough (2003); Wetherell et al. (2001)

Rigour, Reflexivity, and Quality in IDI Research

Establishing the trustworthiness of IDI research requires a different set of quality criteria than those used to evaluate quantitative studies. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) foundational framework proposed four parallel criteria: credibility (analogous to internal validity), transferability (analogous to external validity), dependability (analogous to reliability), and confirmability (analogous to objectivity). Procedures for establishing credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, member-checking, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis. Transferability is supported by thick description of the sample, context, and analytical procedures, enabling readers to judge whether findings are applicable to their own contexts.

Reflexivity the systematic examination of how the researcher's own background, assumptions, theoretical commitments, and emotional responses have shaped the data and the analysis has become a central quality criterion in contemporary IDI research, particularly in feminist, critical, and constructionist traditions (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Reflexivity is not merely a methodological nicety but an epistemological necessity: if the interview encounter is co-produced and the researcher is a constitutive presence in the data, then failing to examine and report the researcher's contribution to that data is a form of methodological dishonesty. Reflexivity journaling keeping a systematic record of analytic decisions, emotional responses, and positionality concerns throughout the study is the primary practical vehicle for reflexive practice.

Advantages and Limitations of In-Depth Interviews

The primary advantage of the in-depth interview, and the one that justifies its cost relative to alternatives, is the depth and nuance it achieves: no other method generates individual-level qualitative data of comparable richness, contextual specificity, and interpretive complexity. This depth is a product of three features of the IDI that no other method replicates simultaneously: extended one-to-one contact that builds rapport and trust; iterative probing that pursues the meanings beneath surface-level responses; and the flexibility to follow analytically significant threads that were not anticipated in the guide. Table 5 presents a systematic comparison of advantages and limitations.

The principal limitations of the IDI are the substantial costs it imposes on researcher time and skill. Each interview requires scheduling, travel or technical setup, conduct, verbatim transcription, and time-intensive analysis. The ratio of data to insight is high a typical IDI study

generates hundreds of pages of transcript and the analytical frameworks that do justice to that data, particularly IPA and grounded theory, are demanding in both conceptual and procedural terms. Interviewer effects the ways in which the researcher's demographic characteristics, communication style, and theoretical assumptions shape participant responses are real and must be acknowledged rather than denied. Social-desirability bias, the tendency of participants to present socially acceptable rather than personally authentic accounts, is less pronounced in IDIs than in surveys or focus groups but is never absent, particularly in research on sensitive topics or with participants whose professional identity is at stake.

Table 5

Comparative Overview of Advantages and Limitations of In-Depth Interviews

Note. Compiled from Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), Rubin and Rubin (2005), and Guest et al. (2006).

Advantages	**Limitations**
Depth and nuance: richest individual-level data in qualitative research	Time and cost: each interview requires scheduling, conduct, transcription, and analysis
Flexibility: moderator can follow unexpected but analytically important threads	Interviewer effects: rapport, bias, and power dynamics shape what is disclosed
Participant privacy: no peer observation; ideal for sensitive, stigmatised, or illegal topics	Social desirability bias: participants may present idealised self-narratives
Rapport-building: extended one-to-one contact generates trust and candour	Generalisability: findings are conceptual/transferable, not statistically representative
Suitable for hard-to-reach, elite, or vulnerable populations	Reflexivity demands: researcher positionality requires ongoing critical examination
Compatible with all major analytical frameworks (TA, IPA, GT, NA, FA, DA)	Transcription burden: verbatim transcription is time-intensive even with AI assistance
Enables longitudinal repeat-interview designs to track change over time	Sampling constraints: purposive samples may systematically exclude certain voices

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Generates rich verbatim quotations to substantiate published findings	Saturation uncertainty: determining when to stop recruiting requires analytic judgement

Ethical Considerations in IDI Research

Ethical practice in in-depth interview research begins with, but extends well beyond, the formal requirements of institutional review board approval and written informed consent. Dickson-Swift et al. (2007), drawing on a systematic review of researchers' own accounts of ethical challenges in sensitive-topic IDI studies, identify four domains of ethical complexity that transcend the consent form: participant welfare during and after the interview; researcher welfare and the emotional labour of sensitive fieldwork; the boundaries of confidentiality; and the ethics of representation in publication.

Informed consent in IDI research must be genuinely informed meaning that participants understand how the data will be used, who will have access to transcripts, how anonymisation will be achieved, and what will happen if they disclose something that indicates risk of harm. For online and telephone interviews, consent must address data security, recording, and storage on digital platforms. Deferred consent obtaining initial consent at recruitment and fuller consent after the interview when the participant has experienced what participation involves is recommended for particularly sensitive or emotionally demanding studies.

The ethics of representation the responsibility the researcher bears to participants whose words and lives become the raw material of published findings is the most philosophically complex dimension of IDI ethics. Researchers must balance the analytical necessity of presenting challenging, contradictory, or self-incriminating participant accounts against the obligation to protect participants from harm arising from publication. Strategies include rigorous anonymisation, participant review of findings, and the use of composite vignettes where individual accounts would be identifiable even after pseudonymisation (Riessman, 2008).

Applications Across Disciplines

In-depth interviews are the dominant qualitative data collection method across the social sciences, health sciences, education, and applied research, and their disciplinary applications are too numerous for comprehensive review. A few domains merit specific attention for their methodological distinctiveness.

In health and clinical research, IDIs are the method of choice for understanding illness experience, treatment decision-making, patient-clinician communication, and the social determinants of health behaviour. The phenomenological and narrative frameworks most commonly used in health IDI research attend to the meaning of illness and recovery in the context of whole lives, producing findings that have direct implications for clinical practice and health service design (Smith et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 1998).

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In education research, IDIs are widely used for teacher professional development studies, student-experience research, curriculum evaluation, and policy implementation analysis. The capacity of the IDI to access teachers' and students' tacit knowledge the understandings embedded in practice that are rarely made explicit in surveys or observation makes it irreplaceable for research on pedagogical processes (Creswell, 2013).

In media and communications studies, IDIs are fundamental to journalism research, audience reception studies, and increasingly to AI and platform governance research. Elite interviewing of editors, regulators, and platform executives requires the expert-interview format, which demands high topic familiarity and a non-deferential probing style from the researcher. In disinformation and AI ethics research directly relevant to current work in NLP and digital governance IDIs with practitioners, policymakers, and community stakeholders generate the contextual and evaluative knowledge that quantitative analysis of content or behaviour cannot provide.

Comparison With Other Qualitative Research Methods

In-depth interviews sit within an ecosystem of qualitative methods, and their selection should be justified relative to available alternatives. Table 6 provides a systematic comparison across six dimensions. The most important empirical comparison is with focus groups: Guest et al. (2017) found in a randomised study that individual interviews generate more unique thematic items per participant and more sensitive disclosures on stigmatised topics, while focus groups match or exceed IDIs in breadth at the topic level and generate interactional data on social norms that IDIs cannot access. The choice between them should be driven by the research question IDIs for depth of individual experience, focus groups for collective sense-making.

Table 6

Comparison of In-Depth Interviews With Other Qualitative Research Methods

Note. Compiled from Morgan (1997), Guest et al. (2017), Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), and Creswell (2013).

Dimension	In-Depth Interview	Focus Group	Ethnography	Survey (Open-Ended)	Document Analysis
Primary data	Individual narrative	Group interaction	Naturalistic behaviour	Written responses	Texts and artefacts
Depth per participant	Very high	Moderate	Contextual depth	Low–moderate	Depends on document

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Breadth (N)	8–30	24–72 total	1–3 settings	30–1,000+	Variable
Sensitive topics	Best private	Mixed	Variable	Anonymous best	No interaction risk
Generalisability	Conceptual	Conceptual	Conceptual	Statistical (if prob.)	Conceptual
Cost per insight	High	Moderate	Very high	Low	Low–moderate
Interaction data	Dyadic only	Group central	Observed	None	None
Best epistemological fit	Phenomenology, constructivism	Constructivism	Ethnography	Positivism	Critical/historical

Recent Trends and Emerging Developments

Online and Telephone Interviewing

The validity of online video interviewing as a substitute for face-to-face IDIs has been empirically established across multiple disciplines. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) found that Skype interviews achieved comparable data richness to face-to-face interviews in educational research. Salmons (2015) identified specific design adaptations required for online IDIs, including shorter session lengths (online fatigue is real), more explicit rapport-building practices to compensate for reduced nonverbal communication, and technical contingency planning. The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as an involuntary large-scale validation study: dozens of published methodological accounts confirmed that online video IDIs produce qualitative data of equivalent depth and credibility to in-person interviews, with the additional benefits of geographic reach, reduced travel costs, and improved participant access for mobility-limited or geographically remote individuals.

AI-Assisted Transcription and Analysis

The integration of AI tools into IDI research pipelines has accelerated dramatically since 2022. In the transcription domain, tools built on OpenAI's Whisper architecture, Google's speech-to-text API, and commercial platforms (Otter.ai, Verbit, Descript) have reduced transcription time and cost by 60 to 80% while producing transcripts that require human review and correction rather than full manual transcription. The quality implications are significant: AI transcripts are currently most accurate for clearly recorded, single-speaker, standard-variety English audio, and least accurate for emotionally laden speech, non-standard accents, technical vocabulary, and multilingual or code-switching data (Barrera et al., 2025).

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The use of large language models (LLMs) including GPT-4, Claude, and Gemini for first-pass thematic coding, candidate-theme generation, negative-case identification, and cross-interview query is at an earlier stage of methodological validation. Emerging studies suggest that LLM-generated codes are broadly coherent with human analyst codes for manifest content but diverge on latent, contextual, and emotionally nuanced material. The critical methodological concern is not whether LLMs can assist qualitative analysis they demonstrably can but whether researchers using them are maintaining the interpretive depth, reflexivity, and analytic accountability that give qualitative findings their epistemic warrant. AI tools should be understood as analytical assistants requiring expert human supervision, not as replacements for the interpretive judgment that is the distinctive product of qualitative research expertise.

Longitudinal and Repeat-Interview Designs

Repeat-interview designs interviewing the same participants at two or more time points have attracted growing methodological interest as a means of tracking how individuals' experiences, meanings, and identities change over time in response to events, transitions, or interventions. Thomson and Holland's (2003) work on biographical methods and the work of Neale (2021) on qualitative longitudinal research have established the theoretical and procedural framework for these designs, which offer unique analytic access to processes of change that cross-sectional IDIs cannot capture.

Conclusion

The in-depth interview has endured as the cornerstone of qualitative research for over a century because it addresses a question that no other method can answer as well: what does this experience mean to this person, in their own words, in their own terms, in their own narrative frame? The answer to that question in its specificity, complexity, and irreducibility to categories predefined by the researcher is the distinctive epistemic contribution of the IDI to the social sciences and beyond.

That contribution demands methodological seriousness. The IDI is not a simple instrument: its quality depends on a clear epistemological position, a carefully designed guide, skilled probing and rapport management, rigorous analysis, transparent reflexivity, and honest engagement with limitations. Researchers who treat it as a convenient shortcut to qualitative credibility a dozen interviews, a perfunctory thematic analysis, and a claim to 'rich data' undermine both the method and the discipline.

The contemporary landscape characterised by the maturation of online interviewing, the rapid integration of AI-assisted transcription and coding, and the growing methodological sophistication of repeat-interview and narrative designs offers genuine opportunities to extend the reach, reduce the cost, and deepen the analytical power of IDI research. These opportunities are real. But they do not change the fundamental epistemological logic of the method: the in-depth interview generates reliable knowledge only when the researcher brings to it genuine curiosity,

disciplined preparation, reflexive self-awareness, and the analytic commitment to pursue meaning rather than merely to record it.

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