

# The Cost of Misalignment: A Reflective Account of Failed Semi-Structured Interviews

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## Abstract:

*This reflective paper examines a novice researcher's experience with semi-structured interviews, focusing on the consequences of failing to internalise research objectives. Despite conducting lengthy and seemingly successful interviews, the researcher later identified a critical misalignment between research aims, interview questions, and the data collected. This misalignment limited the analytical value of the dataset and ultimately led to journal rejection. Drawing on mentor feedback and reviewer comments, the paper highlights the importance of methodological coherence in qualitative research, particularly the alignment between research design, data collection, and analysis. It also challenges the assumption that rich or extensive data necessarily leads to meaningful findings, emphasising instead the need for relevance to clearly defined objectives. Framed as a process of reflective learning, the paper argues that research competence develops through the internalisation of research purposes and the ability to translate them into practice.*

My first attempt at conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews taught me a valuable lesson: without a thorough understanding of the research objectives, even a well-executed interview can lead to fundamentally flawed outcomes.



As a novice qualitative researcher, my study was initially shaped under the close guidance of my mentor. He introduced the research problem and explained its significance, and I remember feeling reassured that the topic was both meaningful and publishable. However, I experienced lingering uncertainty when asked to clarify the research problem. I attributed this to the fact that I had not identified the problem myself. I understood it only at a superficial level and had not internalised its nuances or fully grasped its practical implications. This superficial

understanding reflects a common characteristic of novice researchers, who often struggle to translate abstract research purposes into coherent and actionable designs (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Nevertheless, I convinced myself that I was ready. I drafted interview questions based on a vague understanding of the research objectives. Although this uncertainty was present, it was overshadowed by my eagerness as a novice researcher to begin data collection. As a result, I chose not to consult my mentor before and during the process.

The interviews themselves appeared successful. Each session lasted over an hour, and participants were articulate and reflective. I left each interview with a sense of accomplishment, assuming that length and depth naturally translated into rich data. At that stage, I equated duration with quality—a misconception I would later confront.

Difficulties emerged during data analysis. While reading the transcripts, I experienced a persistent sense of discomfort. The data were rich, but I struggled to identify clear patterns, and participants' responses to the same questions varied in ways that were difficult to reconcile. Unsure how to proceed, I sought guidance from my mentor.

Through critical discussions, my mentor helped me recognise a key issue: the lack of alignment between my research objectives, interview questions, and collected data. Such misalignment is a serious threat to qualitative research design, where

coherence across research questions, data collection, and analysis is essential (Maxwell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). My curiosity quickly turned into panic as my initial uncertainty was actually confirmed and it was a severe flaw. In other words, I had been conducting interviews without a clear sense of what I was truly investigating. To overcome this emotional turbulence, I once again sought help from my mentor. Despite my teaching commitments at the time, I was determined to meet with him almost every day to interpret the data as rigorously as possible. The intensive time we spent analysing the data gradually fostered in me a sense that the situation had been resolved.



This belief was soon shattered when I submitted the manuscript to a reputable journal, which rejected it within days. The reviewers pointed to unclear links between the research objectives and the interview questions, themes that failed to address the stated aims, and insufficiently justified conclusions. In other words, my failure to internalise the research problem was too fundamental to be remedied solely through attempts at data interpretation. This experience echoes Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), who argue that

qualitative analysis requires not only rich data but also analytic processes grounded in clearly defined research questions.

Rather than discouraging me, this became a turning point. Motivated by the feedback, I returned to my mentor with a renewed commitment to understanding the research objectives in depth. Through our discussions, I began to see even more clearly how each question, probe, and analytical decision must align with a coherent research aim. This reflects Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice, where professionals learn through critical reflection on experience.

Viewing this failure as a necessary step toward developing methodological rigour and intellectual clarity, I am considering a new round of interviews. Although this prospect is daunting, I approach it with a heightened awareness of the demands of qualitative research. This experience has shown me that a thorough understanding of the nuances of the research problem is essential for all researchers. For novice researchers, however, this can be particularly challenging, underscoring the importance of seeking guidance from more experienced scholars.

### References

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