Interviewing Immigrants and Refugees: Reflexive Engagement with Research Subjects

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Introduction

Qualitative interviewing is often used in migration studies; however, there has been little discussion concerning the application of this research method to immigrant subjects. Before interviews are conducted, a number of questions often arise: Why are interviews important for studying immigrants? What interview methods are used in empirical research and what are their principles? What factors need to be considered when interviewing immigrants and why? How does a researcher’s role affect interview dynamics? What interview strategies are useful when interviewing women, men, and adolescents? How should undocumented immigrants and refugees be approached? How does the interviewer earn the trust of interviewees? How is the interview consent acquired? How should sensitive questions be posed? What language should be used when interviewees are not native speakers? How should interviews conducted in a foreign language be transcribed and reported? How should the interviewer dress for an interview? Is giving gifts unethical? What are the strengths and weaknesses of interview methods? How are interviews used in a mixed method approach and in team research? To address these issues, this chapter provides reviews of interview methods and discusses their applications to immigrant subjects, including refugees.

The chapter begins with an introduction of two interview methods: in-depth interviews and life history interviews. Following this introduction, I discuss various issues to be considered during the interview process with immigrants and refugees. These issues include the researcher’s role as an insider or outsider, structural positions (race/gender/class) in the interview encounter, language use, cultural sensitivity, and ethics. To address these issues, I draw from examples of my own research of Taiwanese immigrants and Burmese refugees and integrate studies by other scholars.1

Interview methods

Interviewing is used in both quantitative and qualitative research, and its format can vary greatly. Interviews involve asking questions and getting responses. They can be conducted in one-on-one interactions, as group discussions, or over the phone. Interviews may be