Qualitative Interviewing in Ethnic-Chinese Contexts: Reflections From Researching Taiwanese Immigrants in the United States

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Abstract

Qualitative interviewing is a broadly used method of data collection, but its discussions have rarely been situated in ethnic-Chinese contexts and immigrant communities. What factors are crucial for conducting effective interviews with ethnic-Chinese subjects? In what contexts do general principles not apply, thereby needing adjustments, and how? Reflecting on the experience of interviewing approximately 100 Taiwanese immigrants in the United States, I discuss the importance of mindfulness, cultural sensitivity, and triangulation. I argue that researchers need to be mindful of the potential effects of interviewers’ and interviewees’ structural positions on the interview process, quality, and outcomes. Cultural understanding is necessary when assessing ethical issues and designing interview questions. However, researchers also need to set aside their knowledge of ethnic-Chinese culture from time to time in order to capture the nuanced cultural meanings. Finally, conducting ethnographic observations helps researchers understand the lived contexts of subjects’ experiences and their varied interpretations. Using examples from two research projects, I illustrate significant factors that facilitate or hinder the proceeding of qualitative interviewing with ethnic-Chinese subjects. These reflections foster researchers’ understanding and practice of reflexivity at the crossroads of methods and ethnic culture.

Keywords

reflexivity, qualitative interviewing, culture, Taiwanese immigrants, ethnic-Chinese contexts

Introduction

Culture is central to understanding human behaviors, social perceptions and attitudes, and social interactions. Qualitative interviewing in social research is a special form of social interaction between the researched and the researcher, both of whom bring their cultural understandings to their conversations. Such understandings are by no means neutral, distant, or value-free (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). While research methods are originally derived from the Western world, how they are applied to studies of non-Westerners warrants reflexivity and adjustments. As a researcher who grew up in an ethnic-Chinese culture (Taiwan), learned research methods in the United States from my all-White professors, and collected qualitative data from an ethnic-Chinese immigrant group (Taiwanese immigrants in the Midwest), I have encountered many situations in which I had to reflect on what I was doing in the field and make adjustments because of my subjects’ sociocultural characteristics and responses during the interview process. These experiences have facilitated my understanding and have nurtured my proficiency in conducting effective qualitative research in ethnic-Chinese contexts. In this article, I critically reflect on the proceedings of qualitative interviewing in my research to discuss a unique type of reflexivity at the crossroads of methods and culture.

Scholars who use qualitative methods and feminist methodology have discussed reflexivity as an essential quality and practice for researchers. They consider reflexivity as an active and ongoing process of critical reflection on the power relations between the researcher and the researched (Wolf, 1996), the effects of the researcher’s positionality (insider vs. outsider) on the proceedings and outcomes of the research (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008; Finefter-Rosenbluh, 1996).
2017; Griffith, 1998; May, 2014; Weiss, 1995), and researchers’ emotions and potential bias (McLean, 2007). Central to reflexivity lies the researchers’ careful and conscious self-awareness during the process of producing knowledge from empirical investigations. While the concept and exercise of reflexivity are not new in Western academia, scholarly discussions of reflexivity have rarely been situated in non-Western contexts or immigrant communities (for exceptions, see Cui, 2015; Hsiung, 2015, 2016; Zhao, 2017). Moreover, not much attention has focused on how researchers’ professional development and accumulated fieldwork experience—mattering from doctoral students or new researchers to experienced scholars—shape their methodological approaches.

How do researchers respond to empirical situations when what they have learned in graduate school or from method textbooks does not work in the field? How do researchers remain sensitive to subjects’ culture while keeping their own cultural values in check? What should researchers do to contextualize subjects’ life experiences? In this article, I answer these questions by critically reflecting on both my field experience researching Taiwanese immigrants in the United States and my professional development over the last decade, starting as a graduate student from Taiwan who learned research methods in the United States and applied them to an immigrant community in the Midwest region.

As reflexivity and mindfulness are central to my discussion, my personal background provides a reference point for illustrating my reflections articulated in this article. I grew up in Taiwan, a one-race Asian society. As a female growing up in a traditional three-generation patriarchal household in a small town in Southern Taiwan, I witnessed much gender inequality and injustice because only boys and men mattered in my family. My grandfather often said that “girls are useless,” and my mother often took the blame when my father was not home, when my brother received bad grades, or when the house was not clean enough. My childhood family experience—living with more than 20 people among whom power play and interpersonal conflicts were constant—largely shaped my sensitivity to human emotions. Growing up “invisible” in a patriarchal household gave me numerous opportunities to observe people’s behaviors, through which I learned to discern nuances in facial expressions, body postures, and interactions. I knew when to run away when a “perfect storm” was coming and whom not to trust because of the inconsistencies of what they said and what they did. It was not until about 10 years ago, when I began to conduct ethnography, that I realized how my early family experience had profoundly shaped my unique ability to make keen observations and capture subtle emotions both in the field and when conducting interviews.

After high school, I was drawn to sociology because it helped me to understand social inequality and power dynamics, including my childhood family experience. In college (in the 1990s), all my sociology professors were male. Except for one who earned his PhD in Germany, all were U.S.-educated. At this so-called Taiwan’s Harvard university (using my former professor’s term), most sociology courses require English readings. The text I read in Research Methods class was an English textbook published in 1960 or 1962, one that my professor read during his graduate study in the United States. I pursued my PhD at a large public research university in the Midwestern United States, where I took Qualitative Research Methods with a White male professor. The readings assigned for the course were written mostly by male American sociologists about studying White Americans, and I do not recall any class discussion about how to study non-White populations. Nevertheless, I was unaware of any inadequacies at that time because I had been socialized by my U.S.-trained college professors into worshipping U.S. education long before I entered graduate school. It was not until I became a college professor that I began to read and teach students (mostly Whites) about researching racial minorities. Looking back, my formal education did not sufficiently prepare me to study a non-White immigrant group from a non-White standpoint. This largely contributed to the discrepancies between “what the books say” and “what is happening in the field” that I had learned to deal with on my own, which I discuss in this article.

Two book projects serve as the main sources from which my discussion is drawn. For my first project (Gu, 2006), I conducted 54 in-depth interviews with Taiwanese immigrant men and women (both first- and second-generation immigrants) in Chicago. These interviews ranged from 1 to 4 hr and were conducted in Taiwanese, Chinese, and English. I was a graduate student and single at the time of data collection. For my second book (Gu, 2017), I conducted 45 life-history interviews with Taiwanese immigrant women (both professionals and housewives) in two Midwest urban areas. These interviews ranged from 2 to 12 hr and were conducted in Taiwanese and Chinese. I also conducted ethnographic observations in one of these urban areas over a period of 7 years. I met with a group of ethnic-Chinese immigrant women monthly for lunch, most were middle-class housewives migrating from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Indonesia. I was a college professor and married with two kids when collecting data for the research. I also conducted a focus group with six second-generation Taiwanese teenagers to learn about their family relations and school experiences. Using examples from these two projects, I discuss the importance of mindfulness, cultural sensitivity, and triangulation in developing a reflexivity methodology for qualitative interviewing. Below, I explain these three areas of reflections.

Mindfulness: Insider Versus Outsider Status in Qualitative Interviewing

In the 1970s, 98% of social scientists were White. Several scholars began to reflect on the effects of the researcher’s race on the proceeding and findings of social research when the subjects are racial minorities. Much of the earlier discussion centered on whether and to what extent an outsider researcher (White) can fully understand insiders’ (Blacks or Latinos) experiences (see Baca Zinn, 1979; Merton, 1972; Moore, 1973). The “insider versus outsider” debate has continued in
modern times regardless of the increased diversity in the profession, and the discussion has gone beyond race and ethnicity to include other social factors such as gender, sexuality, and nationality. The terms insider and outsider do not suggest a binary framework in perceiving researchers and the researched. Rather, they are used to discuss the potential effects of researchers’ relational positions—as out-group or in-group members in relation to subjects—on research.1 Generally speaking, the researcher’s role as an insider or outsider affects the proceedings and outcomes of research, and both roles have advantages and disadvantages.

For instance, when the researcher belongs to the ethnic group under study, it is easier to collect information, locate informants, and communicate with subjects because of their shared ethnic and cultural background. Subjects are also likely to share their experiences because they expect the interviewer will have a good understanding of their culture. However, there are also some drawbacks. When socialized in the same culture, an insider researcher might take certain things for granted, thereby missing important clues in the subjects’ stories that an outsider researcher might find intriguing. Some subjects might hesitate to be interviewed by a co-ethnic because of the concerns about anonymity and confidentiality. In some cases, insider researchers take on more responsibility than they can handle because of their reciprocal ideal and their informants’ expectations that researchers ought to contribute to the community in some way (see Baca Zinn, 1979).

In contrast, out-group interviewers benefit from their outsider status in that they tend to make fewer assumptions about the researched group. Because of the cultural gap with their subjects, out-group researchers are more likely to ask questions that outsiders do not typically pose, which may lead to important discoveries. However, outsider researchers must also overcome obstacles such as understanding the group’s culture and history, finding key informants to help them collect information and locate interviewees, speaking the language, and earning subjects’ trust. Many outsider researchers therefore conduct fieldwork in addition to interviews to strengthen their ties with the researched community and to earn trust that helps in recruiting subjects for interviews.

Qualitative interviewing is a one-on-one social interaction, which is by no means “socially neutral.” Rather, both the interviewer and the interviewee are social products of their life-worlds, whose viewpoints and behaviors are shaped by their gender, social class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, ability/disability, and past experiences. Both parties bring their social characteristics and cultural habits into the interview encounter, which affects what questions are asked, how questions are perceived and answered, and what probes are pursued and how they are responded to during an interview. Being mindful about the potential effects of both parties’ structural positions on the interview process can help interviewers to consciously guard bias, quickly establish rapport, and smoothly advance the interview.

Many scholars have discussed how to interview racialized minorities. For example, Dunbar and colleagues (2001) suggest that interviewing racialized populations requires very special caution and attention because the social context of a racialized experience differs significantly from the mainstream culture. Interviewers must be very familiar with respondents’ lives to facilitate in-depth expressions of an interviewee’s emotions and life experiences. Reflexivity, empathy, and sensitivity are also valuable assets that can help researchers capture the complexities of ethnic minorities’ lives. These principles are also helpful when interviewing ethnic-Chinese individuals in Western societies, especially when the researcher is not from the same ethnic group.

In contrast, when ethnic-Chinese researchers study ethnic-Chinese subjects, race is less an issue. Rather, gender and age could greatly affect interview dynamics and results because they constitute two major factors that shape hierarchical status in ethnic-Chinese communities. Interviewers and interviewees are shaped by culturally ascribed meanings of masculinity and femininity; therefore, gender affects both the interaction atmosphere and the extent to which personal experiences are shared. Cross-sex interviewing appears to be more challenging than same-sex interviewing, as feelings of discomfort and limited self-disclosure occur more frequently in cross-sex interactions. For instance, women volunteer more personal information to female interviewers than to male interviewers (Padfield & Procter, 1996). Socialized into their gender role, women tend to be self-silencing and soft-spoken, especially when men are present. Interviewing women, therefore, needs an approach that differs from that of studying men (Reinharz & Chase, 2001). Feminist scholars argue that choosing female interviewers to interview women, developing sisterhood bonds with subjects, and the interviewer’s self-disclosure are essential approaches to encourage and hear women’s voices and subjective experiences in the interview (DeVault, 2004; Oakley, 1981).

In contrast, men’s masculine selves often lead to their disclosing few emotions and their tendency to exaggerate rationality, autonomy, and control. Therefore, interviewers should avoid questions that threaten a male subject’s masculine self such as economic failure and stress; taking indirect approaches would work more effectively. For example, asking for stories (instead of direct questions about emotionally loaded topics) and shifting the focus to the contexts (rather than actions) are useful ways to elicit in-depth expressions from men (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001).

From my experiences interviewing Taiwanese immigrant men and women, I find gender played an important role in the interview process. For example, in my first project, the theme “family relations” was listed prior to “work relations” in my interview schedule. Initially, I followed the exact order of my interview questions but soon realized that I had to switch the order when interviewing men. During my first few interviews, men had little to say about their family lives but went to great lengths, with enthusiasm, to talk about their work accomplishments and experiences. Since gender differences were the main analytical focus in the project, I was worried about not having enough data from men’s perspectives to compare with women’s perspectives. I remember thinking about how to probe for more
descriptions regarding family dynamics and asking myself why men had little to say about their families. I also observed that it took longer to turn my initial Q & A interaction into dynamic conversational flows when interviewing men, while partnership-style conversations were easily and quickly built with women subjects. I knew my gender played an important role, according to the literature and the feeling of effortlessness when talking with people of the same gender. But could there be something else?

I tried to solve my puzzle by approaching the problem from a different angle. We all understand the importance of establishing a good rapport with subjects in the beginning of an interview. So, I said to myself, “If I want men to open up to me more quickly, I have to talk about things that interest them.” I considered a few ideas such as football, basketball, and politics—topics that are popular in male culture. However, I soon realized that I was not “equipped” to discuss these topics because of my own gender socialization. I simply knew too little about sports and politics at that time (this changed later in my life as I grew more interested in some sports and public policies after becoming a “soccer mom” and a U.S. citizen many years later). Then, I recalled the excitement and energy during my interviews with men when asking about their work. “Maybe I should talk about work (instead of sports and politics),” I wondered. As an experiment, I began to ask about work first with male subjects. This strategy prompted men to open up quickly, and they offered much more detailed descriptions of their family relations later in our interviews. From this experiment, I learned a valuable lesson: The order of questions matters.

Another gender factor manifested when I asked men about racial discrimination at work. Only one or two directly answered “yes” about their experiences of racial discrimination. Most first-generation immigrant men brushed off the issue by normalizing racial inequality. Many said that “It’s [racial inequality] the way American society is.” “It’s common [for Asians] to be discriminated against. It’s no big deal.” Even among those who said “Yes, I have been racially discriminated against,” they often added that “It’s quite common for Asian men. My story is not that unique.” However, when discussing what their children have to do to succeed in U.S. society, all male subjects articulated strong and clear opinions about the obstacles Asian Americans face in the workplace in general by using their own experiences of racial discrimination. They also made suggestions about how to “Americanize” their children (i.e., be aggressive and vocal when pursuing career goals; engage in self-promotion) in order to help them become competitive in U.S. society. In other words, Taiwanese immigrant men’s frustrations about the glass ceiling they encounter at work are often expressed indirectly through their expectations for the next generation.

What I learned from this experience is the importance of work in the men’s masculine self. Although successful in their socioeconomic achievements, these middle-class professionals’ race hinders their ability to fulfill their career aspiration—a topic that might be difficult for some to directly discuss in an interview (especially to a female young researcher). Therefore, instead of asking men to describe their difficulties, it is more effective to ask questions about their expectations for the next generation and to use examples of other Asian Americans’ racialized experiences to initiate conversations about inequality. It is also helpful to probe for examples to solicit their observations and ask them to provide advice for fellow immigrants, through which subjects’ own experiences with unfair treatment and racial inequality are often described. In other words, asking men about their children’s future helps bring out their own personal stories of racialization.

As a woman, I had a very smooth and easy experience interviewing female subjects, especially in my second project when my age was closer to my subjects. All women I interviewed were very open and candid. Many offered extensive details in their private lives, including their sexuality and resentment toward their significant others that they had not shared with others. The women talked about their “only choice” to be obedient in the family according to traditional Taiwanese culture. They also described their anger, despair, and different ways of finding emotional outlets in disguise of obedience. Many of their opinions about gender inequality differed from their overt behaviors that I observed in their ethnic community, which provided rich data to understand the complexities and deep meanings of their lived experiences. I believe that my gender played a central role in earning these women’s trust with their intimate information, which would not have been achieved by a male researcher. Several women, mostly housewives, expressed their gratitude for the interview opportunity because they did not think their stories mattered. In these cases, I assured them that their stories are important to understand Taiwanese immigration and I thanked them for contributing to my research. Based on my experience, attentive listening and empathetic understanding are key to acquiring detailed descriptions during interviews with Taiwanese immigrant women.

I have not found self-disclosure necessary, as some scholars have argued (see DeVault, 2004; Oakley, 1981). Most women were eager to tell me their stories and showed little interest in my personal life. In the beginning of my second project, I “went by the book” to disclose my own experience of adapting to American culture as an immigrant in order to “establish sisterhood bond,” based on the literature (DeVault, 2004; Oakley, 1981). However, my female subjects just nodded with little or no comments and then quickly continued to tell their stories. After a few interviews seeing the same responses, I stopped talking about myself unless subjects asked about me, which happened only once or twice and led to very short conversations. As Reinhartz and Chase (2001) suggest, “interviewers need to think carefully about whether, when, and how much disclosure makes sense in the context of particular research projects and with specific participants” (p. 80). My reflection echoes this wise advice.

When interviewing female subjects, it is important to make sure that you are alone with the interviewee. Once, I had a difficult time talking to a female subject because her husband
was present and kept interrupting us during the interview. Every time the wife said something, the husband would jump in to offer his unsolicited opinions and went on for a long period of time. While remaining calm, I was anxious about losing my subject. However, I did not feel comfortable interrupting or stopping her husband. I quietly screamed to myself, “What do I do now? What do I do now?” At that moment, I could not recall reading anything in the textbook about what to do in this context. I tried to look only at the wife when asking questions, implying that the questions were for her. Nevertheless, the husband kept answering. As a result, the wife became quieter and quieter toward the end of the interview, and I ended up collecting the husband’s narratives. Reflecting on my hesitation and inability to interrupt the husband, I think, to some extent, the importance of politeness instilled by my culture of origin played an important role. From my youth, I had been taught to be polite, be attentive when others are talking, and respect people older than me and never talk back to them, especially men. As a young female graduate student at that time, I found myself incapable of redirecting the conversation to focus on my female subject when her husband acted dominantly.

After this experience, I always made sure that only the woman I contacted would be at the interview. This arrangement allowed female subjects to freely express their perspectives. It also prevented me from having to deal with similar situations again because I did not know what to do back then (this has changed after becoming a full professor and learning more about asserting myself). For those who had small children, I tried to schedule a time when the women were free from childcare to avoid distractions during the interview. However, one interview was cut short when the subject’s husband came to the café where the interview took place, to ask his wife to go home because he could not handle their 6-year-old son alone. As a result, I scheduled another meeting to finish the interview.

In addition to gender, age is another factor that has been discussed in qualitative methods. Eder and Fingerson (2003) argue that children and adolescents are socially disadvantaged and disempowered groups; therefore, interviewing them requires a different approach than interviewing adults. They suggest that creating a natural context, conducting a brief observation before the interview, and interviewing in group settings are all useful methods. In a study of second-generation immigrants, Wolf (1997) conducted four focus groups to elicit the perceptions of Filipino youth concerning intergenerational conflicts. These group settings allowed these immigrant children to express their psychological struggles with two competing cultural traditions—a topic that may not have been as easy to discuss in other contexts. Hearing similar stories from their peers allowed these adolescents to open up and share their own experiences. They felt that they were not alone in their cultural tug with their parents and that they could be well understood. This study exemplifies the importance of group settings when interviewing adolescents.

Nevertheless, my focus-group interview with second-generation Taiwanese immigrant adolescents (in the second project) did not produce desirable results. During our discussion about their school and family experiences, those teenagers did not discuss too deeply about their feelings when reconciling two different systems of cultural values. They mostly downplayed the differences between their perspectives and their parents’ by normalizing their struggles as common experiences among immigrant children. “It’s no big deal” and “You just suck it up” were typical responses when discussing family conflicts and Asian stereotypes at school. I suspected that my “insider” status—I came from the same ethnic community and knew my subjects’ parents—might have contributed to the limited disclosure within the focus group. In contrast, my one-on-one interviews with adult second-generation Taiwanese immigrants (in the first project) were fairly productive. Both young men and women responded to my recruitment fliers and initiated the interviews, which significantly differed from first-generation subjects whom I recruited mostly through personal networks and referrals. Compared to the first-generation subjects who were often indirect, second-generation immigrants spoke in a straightforward style and offered keen observations of the Taiwanese immigrant community, especially about generational differences and conflicts.

Reflecting on how differently my interactions with second-generation Taiwanese immigrants played out in these two projects, I believe that the age differences between my subjects and me played a key role in shaping the distinctive results. When conducting my first project, I was close to my second-generation subjects’ age, but I was about their parents’ age when interviewing teenagers for my second project. Although I come from the same ethnic group, subjects who differ in age from me might feel varied degrees of ease (or dis-ease) when expressing their perspectives. If I were to redo my focus-group interviews for the second project, I would hire and train a few young second-generation Taiwanese immigrants to facilitate the discussions. It might yield better results having an interviewer closer to the teenagers’ age, who shares the same ethnic culture, is sensitive to teenagers’ emotions, and can articulate and understand the unique experience of being a second-generation immigrant. Moreover, I would group subjects by gender because teenage boys and girls have different experiences. I would also arrange for same-gender interviewers to help facilitate the conversations.

These different experiences suggest that an in-group researcher may not always benefit from the shared culture and that we cannot always go “by the book” in the field when collecting data. The importance of understanding the social positioning of the interviewer in relation to the interviewee lies in its emphasis on scholars’ attentiveness to the potential effects that structural positions (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexuality, religion, etc.) could generate on research. Nevertheless, many factors can shape the in-group/out-group status, and their intersectional effects might not always be the same when studying different subjects. Some status advantages could become disadvantages in a different project. Researchers must be observant of subjects’ responses and subtle clues during the research process, which can be used to make judgments.
about how to adjust interview strategies and research approaches.

Cultural Sensitivity

Culture is essential for understanding any social group’s lived experiences, regardless of the researcher’s insider or outsider status. In qualitative research, researchers’ cultural competency helps them comprehend the meanings of subjects’ narratives and behaviors. It also helps researchers to act in culturally appropriate ways and avoid taboos during their fieldwork. I will discuss three culture-related issues that arose during my interviews with Taiwanese immigrants: informed consent, gifts, and national identity.

As a Western concept, “informed consent” is derived from an individualist culture that highly values individuals’ rights and autonomy and where lawsuits are often pursued when individual rights are violated. The purpose of acquiring informed consent is to ensure that subjects understand the purpose of the research, the costs and benefits involved in participating in the research (e.g., time needed, monetary compensation), and their rights during and after the research (e.g., agreement or refusal to be recorded, the rights to not answer any questions or to stop the interview at any time, agreement to be responsible for any cost involving counseling as a result of the interview). Therefore, researchers are required to explain the research objective, procedures, benefits, and costs; they are also required to acquire a signature from the subject before an interview is conducted. This standard procedure, however, could cause suspicion or reluctance to participate when interviewing ethnic-Chinese subjects. Historically, signing legal documents has not been a common practice in ethnic-Chinese cultures. Quite the contrary, when people are asked to sign a legal document, it is often related to lawsuits or loans. Taiwan’s colonization history and China’s communist regime have prevented many people from getting involved in politics and legal affairs. Being asked to sign formal documents, such as consent forms, could generate suspicion and anxiety in such a cultural context.

When I first learned about the requirement of signing consent forms in graduate school, my first reaction was, “Oh, no, [Taiwanese] people are not going to sign anything.” I recalled that my grandpa repeatedly warned everyone to stay away from politics and legal affairs. Growing up under the Japanese colonization and the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) regime, my grandpa told us numerous stories of Taiwanese people (ben-shengren) who were tricked or forced into signing documents that led to their executions. More importantly, I also recalled that my grandma refused to sign and forbade my father to sign the consent document when my mother needed a surgery after a car accident because she “did not want to be responsible if something happened” to my mom, according to my late grandma. I remember thinking that I would not be able to get any interviews done if I had to do this (asking subjects to sign). If my grandma did not want to sign that document, why would I expect subjects to sign my consent form? Although I was unsure how different or similar my subjects would be from my late grandmother, I felt a strong urge not to use written consent forms in my research.

Therefore, I came up with a different approach. For my first project, I explained the cultural factor in my Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) application and requested an alternative method of acquiring informed consent. My dissertation advisor had conducted research in Taiwan for decades and understood the taboo of signing legal documents in the Taiwanese culture. She suggested that I could use oral consent, which was what she did when conducting ethnography in Taiwan. With my advisor’s strong support, my request was quickly approved. I was allowed to use oral consent, which was recorded at the beginning of every interview. This approach helped me earn the subjects’ trust and facilitated the interviews, which went very smoothly.

My second project, however, used a different approach. The HSIRB office at the university where I work is less flexible than that at my graduate school. I was asked to use a standardized format and language in my consent form. Unable to use oral consent, I was a little worried that this requirement might hinder the proceeding of my interviews. Out of precaution, I spent approximately 8–10 min before each interview to explain my university policy, the purpose of a consent form, and the confidentiality of their signed documents. Since all subjects in this project were middle-class immigrants (citizens) who had lived in the United States for a long time, they seemed to understand the practice without any questions or objections. Almost everyone signed the consent form immediately without reading it. I believe that both my careful explanation and my status as a college professor helped earn my subjects’ trust.

Reflecting on the two different ways of administering the informed consent procedure in my projects, I still believe that oral consent is the best way to study ethnic-Chinese subjects. From my observations, when Taiwanese immigrants agree to be interviewed, they trust you. Therefore, I would recommend that researchers explain cultural factors in their HSIRB applications and request alternative methods of acquiring informed consent. If a written consent form is used, researchers should explain why this is a required procedure. Moreover, it is important to consider a few things that I think I overlooked in my second project. Looking back, I think I should have sent an electronic copy of the consent form to my subjects prior to our interviews. This step would give subjects enough time to review the document before they sign it and to ask questions. I also should have prepared a Chinese version of my consent form, in case some subjects prefer to read the document in Chinese. These additional preparations would help ensure that subjects fully understand the research and what they agree to if they choose to be interviewed. It might not make a huge difference with middle-class professionals who understand liability and legal issues in the United States, but it could be important when researching people who are from lower class backgrounds or new immigrants. As researchers, we need to hold ourselves accountable for informing subjects and protecting their well-being during the process of data collection.
Another culture-related issue arose in my research concerning whether I should give gifts to interviewees. In graduate school, I learned that it is unethical to give gifts to subjects because gifts could create pressure and indirectly coerce potential subjects to participate in research. Research will eventually benefit the subjects once scholarly understanding of their lives is enhanced by collecting data from them. Subjects also benefit from having the opportunity to participate in and contribute to a study. However, monetary compensation can be an important incentive for low-income respondents to participate in research, although it might not be necessary for middle-class interviewees (Weiss, 1995).²

When I started my first project, I went “by the book” and did not bring any presents for my interviews. Minutes after arriving at my subjects’ houses with nothing, I sensed some disappointment from my respondents and some awkward moments during our initial interactions. I felt something seemed to be missing. Then, I recalled that my late mother always spent much time preparing gifts before we visited relatives or friends. I wondered if it was the idea of bringing a gift that I missed in my visits to subjects’ homes. After a few interviews, I began bringing small presents, usually small fruit baskets. I no longer experienced the awkwardness and was able to quickly establish rapport. This difference helped me realize that giving gifts is an important norm in Taiwanese culture. The old saying, “禮多人不怪” (no one would blame too many gifts), conveys a gift-giving custom that is crucial in interpersonal interactions. For my second project, I budgeted gifts into my research proposal and gave subjects a university mug and a small bottle of Michigan maple syrup. After each interview, I sent a thank-you card to express my appreciation for their time and assistance. In my opinion, presenting gifts is an issue of cultural appropriateness and less an ethical concern. In Taiwanese and many other Asian traditions, giving gifts is an important norm in social interactions. Giving presents to subjects can serve as a friendly gesture and an expression of researchers’ gratitude, thereby setting the tone for good rapport.

One of the most significant issues I encountered during my research was the usage of “Taiwanese” and “Chinese” in my interviews. Historically, China and Taiwan share the Confucian cultural root but have developed distinct political, socioeconomic, and cultural characteristics. After losing the civil war to the Chinese Communists in 1949, the KMT government retreated to Taiwan and brought a great number of officials, soldiers, and supporters to the island. This historical event has created a clear ethnic distinction between Mainlanders or waishengren (post-1945 Chinese immigrants who are primarily Mandarin speakers) and Taiwanese or benshengren (pre-1945 Chinese immigrants who speak Hokkien and Hakka) who hold very different national identities. During the KMT rule, 1949–2000, waishengren tended to identify with China, whereas benshengren identified with Taiwan.³ This ethnic distinction has extended to the Taiwanese immigrant community in the United States and shapes how overseas Taiwanese identify themselves.

During the initial phase of my research, some subjects corrected me during the interview when I referred them as “Taiwanese” because they identified themselves as Chinese and asked me to call them “Chinese.” In contrast, those who identified themselves as Taiwanese became offended when I referred them as “Chinese.” One subject spent a lot of time emphasizing the importance of Taiwanese identity, while others used the term Chinese to describe all immigrants with ethnic-Chinese backgrounds. Although national identity was not a focus of my research, I soon realized the sensitivity associated with these two terms. To avoid generating tension, I used “immigrants from Taiwan” in my introductory description and then followed with whichever term the subject used in conversation. I also set aside my own national identity (Taiwanese and benshengren) during interviews and fieldwork—I did not correct subjects when the term they used to call me contradicted my own identity. I remained neutral on political matters and gave full attention to all subjects I interviewed, regardless of their various political viewpoints and national identities.

Moreover, I patiently listened to the nuances in interviewees’ narratives when commenting on different topics and ethnic groups to detect sensitive issues. Observing subjects’ facial expressions and body language also helped me discover their feelings of hesitation, embarrassment, or disagreement. In other words, when interviewing subjects who are sensitive to specific terms or issues for any reason, the researcher should recognize subjects’ feelings of discomfort and rephrase the questions accordingly. Interviewers can also ask interviewees to explain how they use and perceive different terms to probe for interpretations in order to gain more in-depth understanding of sensitive issues.

Income is another culturally sensitive topic when interviewing Taiwanese immigrants. From my experience, both men and women (especially women) tend to conceal their wealth. Possibly, the old saying in Taiwan, “財不露白” (don’t tell people how much money you have), suggests a cultural tradition in which people believe that disclosing wealth will bring jealousy or unwanted trouble (e.g., robberies or scams). In the United States, the questions “What is your annual income?” and “What is your family income level?” are often used in social research. Nevertheless, using the same questions in studies of Taiwanese immigrants tends to underestimate subjects’ economic capital, especially those of middle and upper class. In my study, subjects often paused or showed a little hesitation when being asked about family or individual income. Some answered “just enough to get by” or “not much” without giving an amount, although I knew they were apparently giving a humble response, because they lived in predominantly White, middle-class neighborhoods and owned multiple luxury cars.

In addition, many Taiwanese immigrants brought family financial resources with them before landing a job in the United States. For example, some purchased houses with the money given by their parents, some invested in stocks while working a part-time job or unemployed, and some wives had a “private account” only for themselves. Therefore, questions about “personal income” and “family income” often do not...
reflect subjects’ economic abilities and resources. I would suggest that using income ranges (e.g., $50,000–$99,999, $100,000–$149,999) is a better option than the question “What is your annual income?” Also, if researchers wish to obtain more financial information, they should consider asking questions about investment and mortgage payments. However, they should keep in mind that income-related questions must be asked at the end of the interview because this is a sensitive topic. Subjects are more likely to open up to private or sensitive probes after rapport has been established in the interview. To help ease subjects’ hesitation, researchers could also explain why they need income information in a project and how they will use it in their analysis. However, if subjects continue to show reluctance in providing income-related answers, researchers should stop probing.

Most importantly, interviewers’ facial expressions and body language are crucial in conducting qualitative interviewing. Interviewers should show understanding, friendliness, empathy, and a genuine interest in what subjects have to say, even when they wander off the topic. In particular, researchers should remain calm when responding to unexpected answers. Once during an interview, a subject described details of her sex life. I was blushing inside because sexuality is not something women openly discuss in the Taiwanese culture in which I was brought up. I tried very hard to remain composed and continued to show an interest in the interviewee’s story, although the sex part was not what I asked. Even today, I still remember trying to focus on writing notes at some awkward moments during that particular interview and feeling uncomfortable when reading those parts of her verbatim transcription later on. I realized that, after having lived in the United States for more than a decade, I had not been fully socialized into American gender culture in which sexuality is much more explicitly expressed than in my culture of origin. Although I consider myself fairly “Americanized” in general, I understand that I would probably never be able to study sexuality in my research or to talk about sex with anyone.

Except for a few unforeseen situations like this, usually I nodded a lot during my interviews to encourage more detailed descriptions and interpretations. I asked a lot of “why” questions and frequently requested that subjects provide examples to illustrate their perspectives, especially about sensitive or difficult issues. By doing so, I was able to bring many abstract ideas or general statements “down to the ground” by soliciting real-life stories that provide rich sociocultural contexts of interviewees’ lived experiences. For instance, many Taiwanese immigrant women said, “I cannot disobey my mother-in-law” during our interviews. I would probe for more details by asking many follow-up questions such as What do you mean by that? Where did that idea come from? Where did you learn about this norm? Could you give me an example to illustrate why you feel you “cannot disobey her”? Have you thought about possible options other than “obeying her”? What are these other options? How did you come to the conclusion that obedience is the only choice in that situation? What would have happened if you did not obey her? Have you had any experience when you did not obey your mother-in-law? If yes, could you tell me what happened when you disobeyed her? How did you feel in that situation? If not, what would you imagine happening to you if you disobeyed her? Why do you predict this outcome? Have you had any experience when you thought about disobeying her but changed your mind? What changed your mind? and How did you feel in that situation?

These probing questions were not listed in my interview schedule but they played an important role in prompting stories and exploring subjects’ thinking processes and emotions about their relations with their mothers-in-law specifically and Taiwanese gender norms in general. After seeing similar statements emerge in the first few interviews, I began to list these probing questions in a separate file and prepared to use them as a supplement to my initial interview schedule when needed. This approach has tremendously helped me gain valuable life histories of Taiwanese immigrant women, who revealed numerous heart-wrenching and painful details of their most intimate family lives. I believe that my gender and marital status played an important role in probing the women’s revealing stories. A male researcher would be less likely to solicit some intimate details and perspectives that are against patriarchal culture.

Since in-law relations could be sensitive and painful for married women to discuss, I was careful in my probing and never questioned subjects’ sentiments that might sound “culturally inappropriate” to those who hold traditional values. Rather, I guided them to express their discontent with some social norms and to describe their self-doubting thoughts. Having questioned patriarchy while growing up, I knew where the women’s struggles came from and felt deeply for them. This relatability greatly helped my interview proceedings. If researchers do not share similar life experiences with their subjects but hope to encourage free expressions in qualitative interviewing, they must not bring moral judgments to the stories they hear during the interview. Most importantly, listening to subjects with empathy and sensitivity and seeing the world from interviewees’ standpoints pave the foundation for achieving intersubjectivities in qualitative interviewing.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation involves collecting multiple sources of data to deepen understanding of social phenomena. Scholars often use four different approaches of triangulation in research: comparing people with different viewpoints, including multiple researchers on a project to check on coding and interpretations of data, using more than one method to collect data, and using multiple theories to examine and interpret the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1999). The objective of triangulation is not always about seeking consistency in the data or reaching consensus among researchers. Rather, qualitative researchers use triangulation to ensure that their accounts are empirically solid, well developed, and comprehensive. Finding discrepancies among various sources of data sometimes helps in understanding different perspectives on the same issue. For instance, in
Evicted, Desmond (2017) compares renters’ accounts with official eviction records on voluntary and involuntary moves. He uses inconsistencies between the two to illuminate conceptual differences in how eviction is understood by the renters and the courts.

In my study of Taiwanese immigrant women, I used ethnographic observations as a supplement to life-history interviews. This approach helped me contextualize my interviews in actual social dynamics, meanwhile exploring different viewpoints from multiple sources. For instance, many subjects identified their in-law relations as a major source of stress. In addition to conducting interviews, I listened to how ethnic-Chinese immigrant women talked about their family relations, including in-laws, at their monthly gatherings. I paid attention to different opinions among ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kongese, Chinese Malaysian, Chinese Indonesian) and age groups. I also observed whenever possible how the women interacted with their in-laws. My ethnographic observations significantly enriched my accounts about Taiwanese in-law dynamics and the ironies that existed in the Taiwanese immigrant community. For instance, while most Taiwanese immigrant women shared the unhappiness of obeying their mothers-in-law and condemned the mistreatment they endured, they advised each other to be submissive and act happy in front of in-laws. I also had a few opportunities to observe how Taiwanese immigrant husbands behaved differently when their parents were visiting (e.g., they did less housework than usual).

In particular, I discovered the role of the women’s mothers in reproducing Confucian patriarchy, which had not been discussed in previous studies. When Amy, a 30-year-old Taiwanese immigrant woman, described how her mother advised her to religiously obey her mother-in-law and endure the pain that comes with being a daughter-in-law, it reminded me of my late mother. I recalled that on my wedding day, my mom said to my mother-in-law in front of me: “My daughter knows nothing. Please teach her what to do in your family.” I was mad. I had a serious argument with my mother in private later that day. I remember saying to her, “I have a PhD; how could you say that I know nothing? You’ve raised me to be independent and well-educated, and that’s exactly what I have become. How could you say that?” My mom calmly responded, “I did that to ensure that you will have a happy marriage. If your mother-in-law is unhappy, you will suffer. I said that to make her happy, because all mothers-in-law like submissive daughters-in-law.” At first, I thought maybe it was a coincidence that Amy’s mom and my mom were alike. However, when the second subject, the third, and then the fourth woman mentioned how their mothers perceived gender roles, I began to wonder about the role of married women’s mothers in shaping the in-law hierarchy. So, I began to explore and document this theme.

In addition to subjects’ interview narratives, I had some opportunities to speak to immigrant women’s mothers when they were visiting from Taiwan during my fieldwork. I asked about their expectations for their daughters’ behaviors in interacting with their in-laws specifically and their rationales for such expectations; I also inquired about how they perceived traditional gender culture in general and women’s roles in the family. These conversations validated subjects’ descriptions in my interviews, extended my understanding of the topic from mothers’ viewpoints, and added firsthand field data to my project. As a result, I developed an argument in my work (Gu, 2017, 2018) that married women’s mothers work as an additional “female deputy of patriarchy,” adding a new element to Stacey’s (1983) original argument about mothers-in-law in Chinese families. On a personal level, this scholarly discovery helped me better understand the larger structural context that prompted my late mother’s account almost two decades ago.

Not only as a tool of triangulation, ethnographic observations also helped to enrich my write-ups of interview data. Compared to my first book (Gu, 2006) that solely relied on interviews, I was able to provide rich storytelling contexts surrounding the interviews in my second book (Gu, 2017) because my fieldwork had deepened my understanding of the social dynamics and ethnic culture in Taiwanese immigrant women’s lives. Moreover, I became an immigrant long after I began studying immigrants. Some of my own immigration experiences resemble my subjects’ stories such as their unspeakable pain in dealing with in-laws and their battle against racial prejudice at work. My personal experiences, although not disclosed during interviews, situated me in subjects’ shoes to understand, firsthand, how it feels to be a foreign housewife and what goes through their minds when being treated unfairly because of their skin color and accent. I have been there. Therefore, I was able to write from subjects’ standpoints, describing their lifeworlds and emotions from their perspectives and feelings.

Lamont and Swidler (2014) address some weaknesses of interview-based research, including lacking relational explanations, neglecting social and cultural processes of reality, and the tendency to seek coherence than contradictions that real lives normally embody. I argue that triangulation, to some extent, helps to overcome these shortcomings. It also promotes the shift from methodological tribalism to methodological pluralism, what Lamont and Swidler (2014) advocate, by integrating the strengths of various research methods. In particular, ethnography allows researchers to observe interviewees’ behaviors, their social relations, and dynamic social interactions in natural settings over time. It strengthens interview-based research by adding relational aspects, sociocultural processes, and contradictions between narratives and behaviors and among social actors’ perceptions, which altogether can better discover the complexities of individuals’ lived experiences than by employing one research method alone.

**Conclusion: Reflexivity and Knowledge Production in Qualitative Research**

Practicing reflexivity involves a paradigm shift that interweaves both methodology and epistemology in qualitative research, rather than considering research methods alone (Hsiung, 2008). Reflexive sociology requires researchers to develop intersubjectivity with those we study, which cannot
be separated from the larger social contexts (Burawoy, 1998). Embracing this paradigm, I argue that researchers’ documentation of their practices of reflexivity when studying different social groups (e.g., variations in gender, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, age) enrich and facilitate the growth of knowledge in qualitative research. They offer a fruitful “think tank” for scholars from different backgrounds and in all walks of their research journeys. This article epitomizes an effort of doing so.

Drawing from my research experience with Taiwanese immigrants over the past decade, I discuss the importance of mindfulness, cultural sensitivity, and triangulation in conducting qualitative interviewing. Be mindful about the potential effects of structural positions (e.g., gender, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, nationality) on the interview process and results, be sensitive and attentive to subjects’ cultural values and customs, and use various sources of data and multiple methods to deepen understanding of subjects’ lived experiences and to validate analytical accounts. These principles are central to practicing reflexivity in qualitative interviewing because they all require researchers’ deep understanding and critical reflections in every step of data collection, analysis, and write-ups.

In this article, I provide some examples from my projects to illustrate these principles. Researchers need to note that different interviewers and interviewees produce different interviewing atmospheres and results. These principles serve as reminders to guide researchers in conducting interview-based research, regardless of subjects’ ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. I do not intend to lay out these principles as a fixed “how to” handbook, as I have learned from my experience that the “going by the book” approach often does not work out in actual research. Rather, I learned the most about “how to” in the field by maintaining a reflexive mindset, allowing flexibility in adjusting what I am doing, and taking to heart the lessons of trials and errors. In this article, I offer some insights about the keys to successful interviews by reflecting on my own research with Taiwanese immigrants in the Midwest region in the United States. Please keep in mind that ethnic-Chinese groups are by no means homogeneous. Scholars need to be reflexive in carrying out their research to maximize productive outcomes.

To enhance scholarly understanding of ethnic variations in responding to qualitative interviewing specifically and qualitative research in general, I encourage more documentation of reflexivity practices in the field. The more we reflect on and write about our research experiences and different strategies in the field, the more others can draw from these examples. Researchers need to note that different interviewers and interviewees produce different interview atmospheres and results. These principles serve as reminders to guide researchers in conducting interview-based research, regardless of subjects’ ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. I do not intend to lay out these principles as a fixed “how to” handbook, as I have learned from my experience that the “going by the book” approach does not work out in actual research. Rather, I learned the most about “how to” in the field by maintaining a reflexive mindset, allowing flexibility in adjusting what I am doing, and taking to heart the lessons of trials and errors. In this article, I offer some insights about the keys to successful interviews by reflecting on my own research with Taiwanese immigrants in the Midwest region in the United States. Please keep in mind that ethnic-Chinese groups are by no means homogeneous. Scholars need to be reflexive in carrying out their research to maximize productive outcomes.

To enhance scholarly understanding of ethnic variations in responding to qualitative interviewing specifically and qualitative research in general, I encourage more documentation of reflexivity practices in the field. The more we reflect on and write about our research experiences and different strategies in the field, the more others can draw from these think tanks for their research. I did not have such resources when I was a graduate student more than 10 years ago. Therefore, I encourage more efforts in building research resources for junior scholars and graduate students.

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Notes
1. The terms out-group and in-group members are derived from social psychology; they are used to discuss how individuals in different groups hold different perceptions of “us” and “them,” which shape their social attitudes and interactions.
2. In practice, many researchers offer gift cards, small presents, or cash as incentives or compensation for participants’ time. The small amount of monetary rewards usually is not significant enough to change subjects’ financial situations, so gifting in research has not become a major debate in research methods.
3. In contemporary Taiwan, the younger generations have developed more complex national identities, and the ethnic distinction between waishengren and benshengren is no longer as significant as in earlier years under the Kuomintang rule.
4. Stacey (1983) used the term patriarchy’s female deputy to describe mothers-in-law in Chinese societies. She argues that mothers-in-law are given the responsibility to socialize their daughters-in-law into their designated inferior position in a patriarchal household, through which they gain power over the young women. In other words, mothers-in-law contribute to the persistence of patriarchy in Chinese families.
5. I did not plan to settle in the United States when I wrote my first book, based on my dissertation research. For family reasons, I returned to Taiwan while writing my dissertation. At that time, I did not anticipate that my family would immigrate to the United States a few years later.
6. Like my subjects, I was unable to work because of the restrictions of my dependent visa during the first 2 years after immigration. Like my subjects, I have also encountered racial prejudice in professional contexts and in the larger society.

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