



Understanding the Interviewer in Cognitive Interviewing: Reflexivity and Improving Data Quality

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The findings and conclusions in this presentation are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“We are not hemmed in by the **fixed scope, order, and wording** of items on a survey questionnaire...by being responsive to informants, we can **evade the restrictions imposed by our a priori thinking** about which topics are important and what they mean. By being a bit more directive, we can **pull the conversation back** to issues we need to address, even as we continue to encourage our interviewees to speak in terms that are their own. Throughout the interview, **we retain freedom to probe, follow up, challenge, double back, abandon a fruitless line of inquiry, ask if we have understood correctly, or simply express our fascination and ask the interviewee to say more.**”

- Soss, Joe, “Talking Our Way to Meaningful Explanations,” *Interpretation and Method* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 169

Outline

- Reflexivity: what is it?
- Applicability to cognitive interviews
- Study details and context
- Findings
- Preliminary recommendations

Reflexivity: what is it?



Reflexivity: definitions

“An awareness of how the **habits and experiences** that one is bringing to bear on a situation **shape and construct** that situation” (Jackson 2014: 271)

- Critical consciousness of own actions in research process (Crapanzano 2010: 56)
- Counter to objectivity: researcher as instrument/means; need to document and analyze researcher role (Schwartz-Shea 2014: 133)

“A **keen awareness** of, and theorizing about, **the role of the self** in all phases of the research” (Schwartz-Shea 2014:133)

Reflexivity: methodology and methods

“Centrally, it demands **the explicit articulation of how the research was actually done, why, and with what effects** for the resulting interpretation that is presented.” (Wilkinson 2014: 402)

Reflexive journal (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Roller and Lavrakas 2017)

Writing practices, member checks, methodological description, attention to researcher role in generation of evidence (Schwartz-Shea 2014: 138)

Roller and Lavrakas (2015: 42) ->

| EXAMPLE OF JOURNAL FORMAT | |
|--|------------|
| Study name/designation _____ | Date _____ |
| Location _____ | Time _____ |
| Participant or group name/designation _____ | |
| Broad Takeaways from the IDI, Group Discussion, or Observation | |
| What do I think I “know” from this/these participant(s)? | |
| How do I think I “know” it? | |
| At what point in the IDI, discussion, or observation did I arrive at that knowledge? | |
| Does this knowledge change or support my earlier assumptions or beliefs? | |
| Will this knowledge change the course of the research, in terms of objectives, methods, line of inquiry; and, if so, how? | |
| Specific Reflections on the IDI, Group Discussion, or Observation Experience | |
| Assumptions | |
| What assumptions did I make (what did I assume to be true) about the participant(s)? | |
| What assumptions did I make about comments/responses to my questions? | |
| How did these assumptions affect or shape the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior? | |
| Values, beliefs, life story, social/economic status | |
| How did my personal values, beliefs, life story, and/or social/economic status affect or shape the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior? | |
| Emotional connection with the participant(s) | |
| To what degree did my emotions or feelings for the participant(s) affect or shape the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior? | |
| How will my emotions or feelings for the participant(s) affect the analytical process and my ability to draw valid interpretations from the data? | |
| Physical environment and logistics | |
| How did the physical setting/location of the research event alter how I related to the participant(s), and vice versa? | |
| How did the physical setting/location impact data collection? | |
| What were the logistical issues (e.g., in gaining access) that contributed to the “success” or weakness of the outcomes? | |

Reflexivity: cognitive interviewing

“The goal is **not to take interviewers out of the process** or otherwise minimize their ‘footprint’ on the interaction, but to **clearly demarcate and understand their role** in it.” (Willson and Miller 2014: 33)

- Reduction of bias – undue distortion of research outcomes
- Reduction/interrogation of asymmetrical power relation (Kvale 2006)
- Transparency/credibility in cognitive interviewing report (Chepp and Scanlon 2014)
- Related to, but not identical with, literature on interviewer effects; potential for fruitful cross-epistemological dialogue (West and Blom 2017)

Study details and context



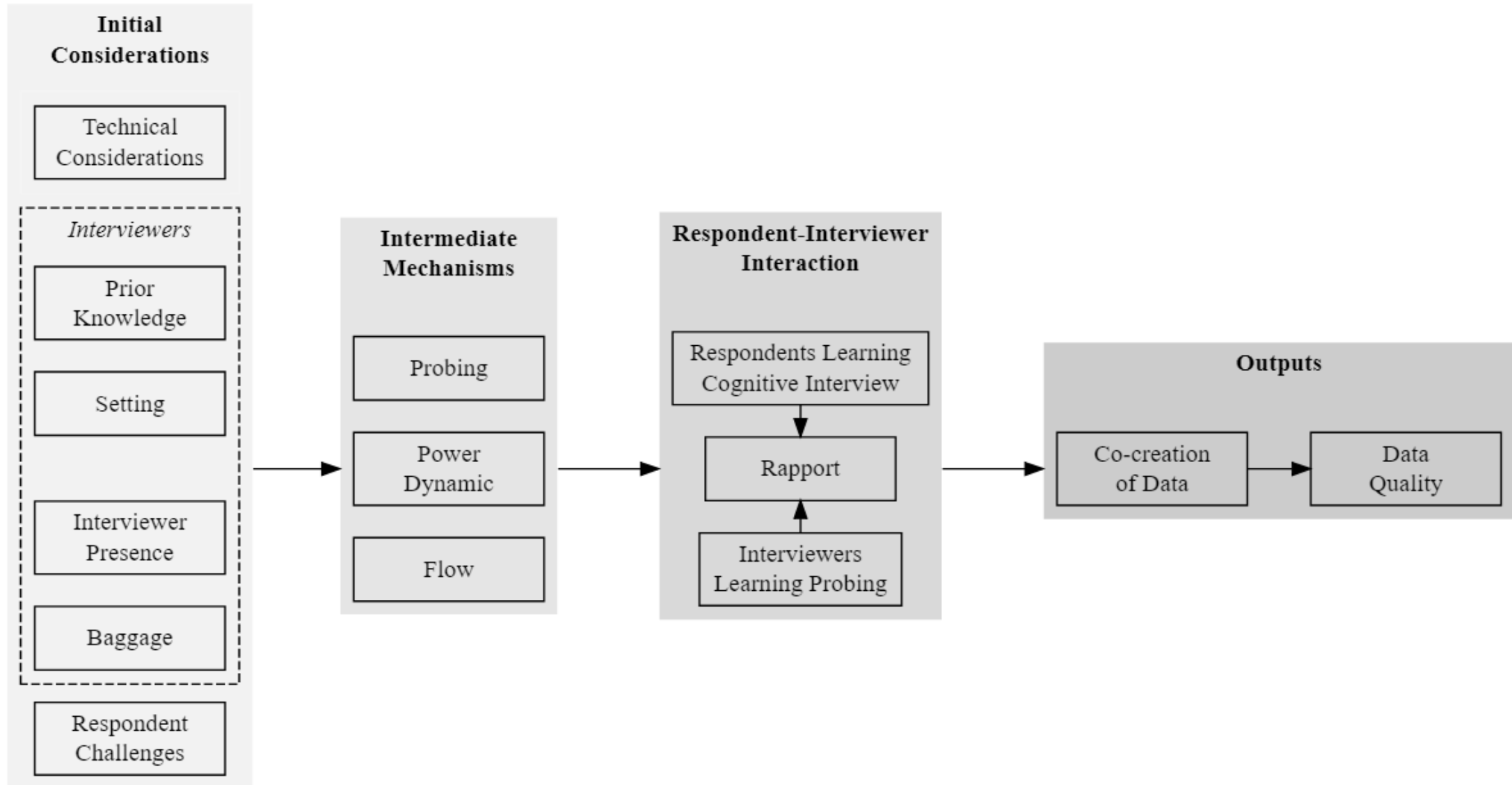
Reflexivity study: details

- Multi-mode: notes and in-depth interviews
- Summary notes:
 - In what ways did you feel you influenced the direction of and/or data gathered in the interview? Consider, for example, your positionality, the way you framed probes, whether certain topics were more or less comfortable for you, whether you had any difficulties with the questionnaire, or any other aspect of the interview you find relevant.
- In-depth interviews
 - Hour to two-hour interviews with each interviewer (n = 6)
- Study context: cognitive interviews evaluating questions on cannabis
 - Interviews n = 90; interviewer n = 7

Study findings



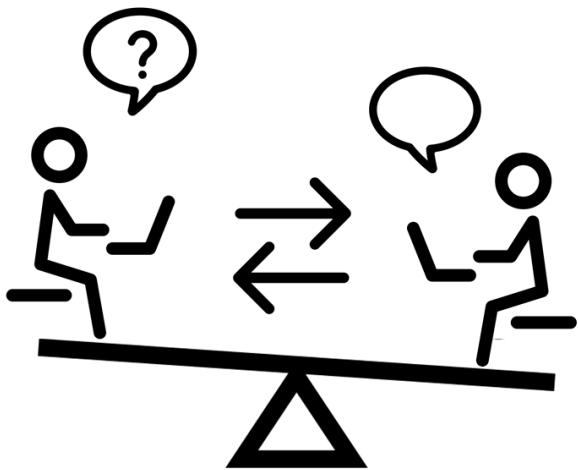
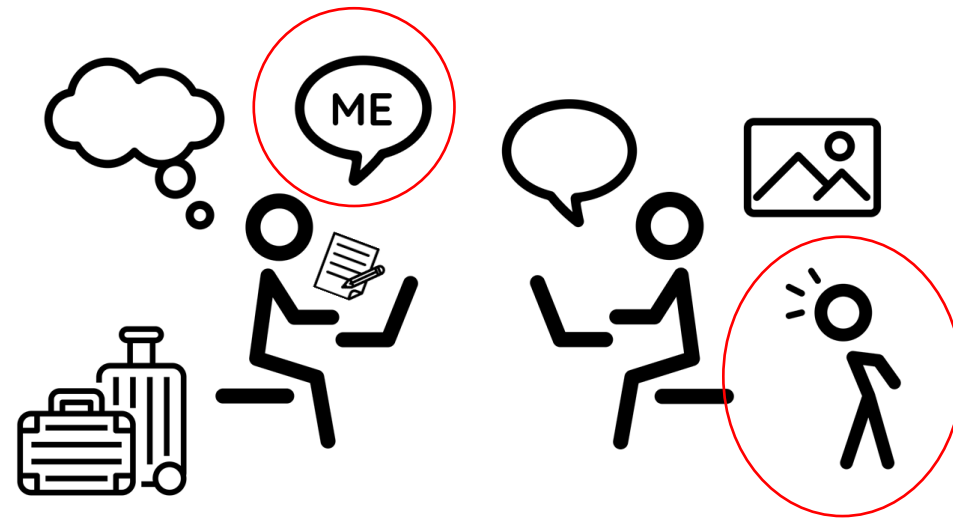
Findings: a framework for analyzing reflexivity



Findings: challenges and interviewer presence

“The respondent was a young new mother. She **had her baby with her for much of the interview. It was a little distracting from time to time** but the respondent was making an effort to pay attention and answer the questions, so **I did my best and proceeded**. She gave the baby to her brother about two-thirds of the way through, which gave us some completely uninterrupted time. She shared with me early in the interview that her mother had passed away a couple of years ago from cancer. It was in this context that she heard about CBD products for pain relief. **I offered my condolences and noted that this must have been very difficult**

for her to go through. Learning about that and **also being able to identify with the challenges of early motherhood** she must be going through made me **feel some emotional connection** with the respondent. I think that **this helped me to be patient and flexible** as the respondent juggled caring for her baby. **I felt uncomfortable** asking her about whether she used marijuana while pregnant but she seemed unfazed by the question, answering that she did not smoke while pregnant.”



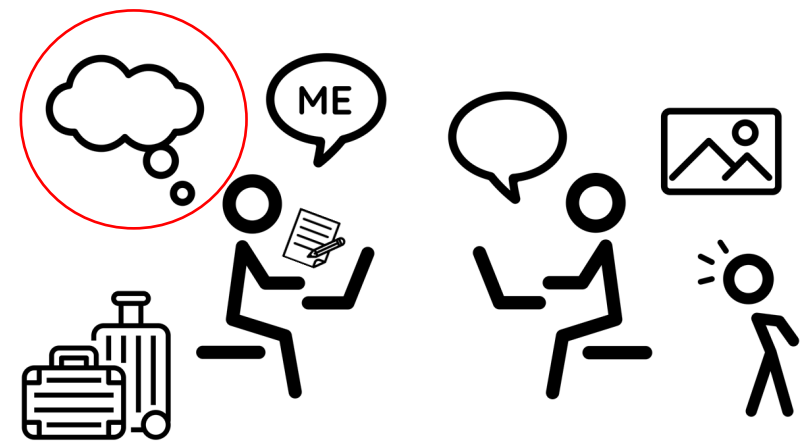
Findings: technical considerations

- Problems with instrument
- Probing style – concurrent or retrospective?
- From interview to summary notes



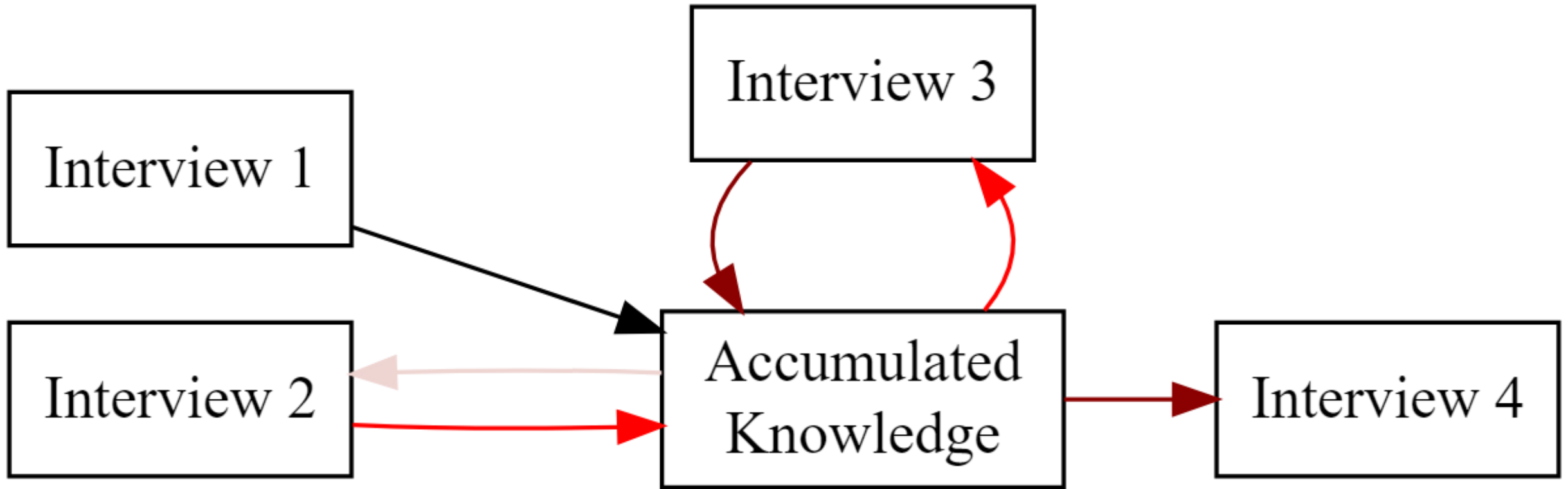
Findings: prior knowledge

- Different kinds of knowledge:
 - Of respondent directly
 - Positive: flow, digging deeper
 - Negative: off-limits topics, assumed shared knowledge
 - Of subject matter
 - Do we know the right questions to ask?
 - From prior interviews



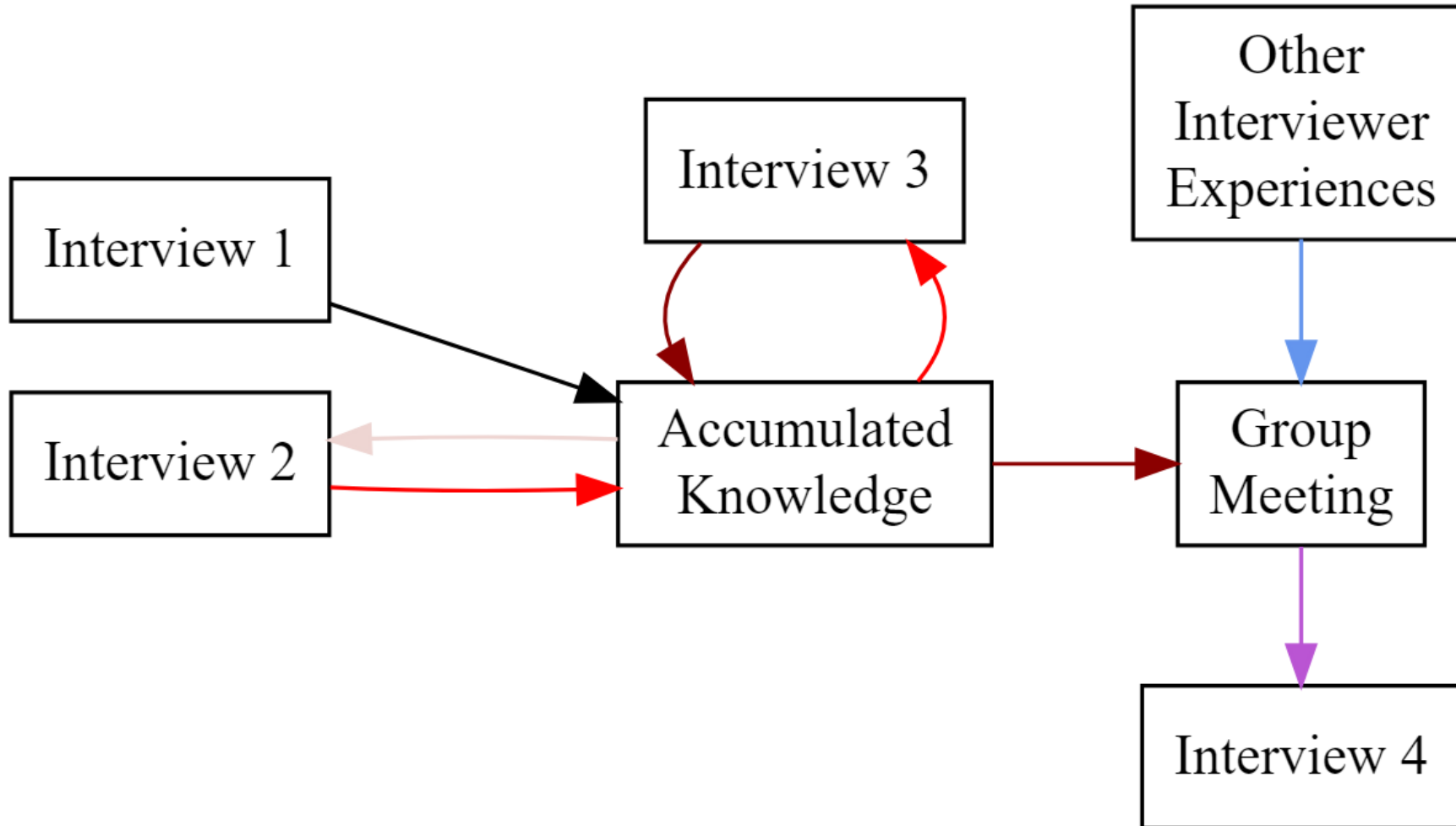
Findings: presence and challenges

- Unmediated interviewing process



Findings: presence and challenges

- Mediated interviewing process



Findings: setting and baggage

■ Setting:

- Location of interview, interviewer, and interviewee

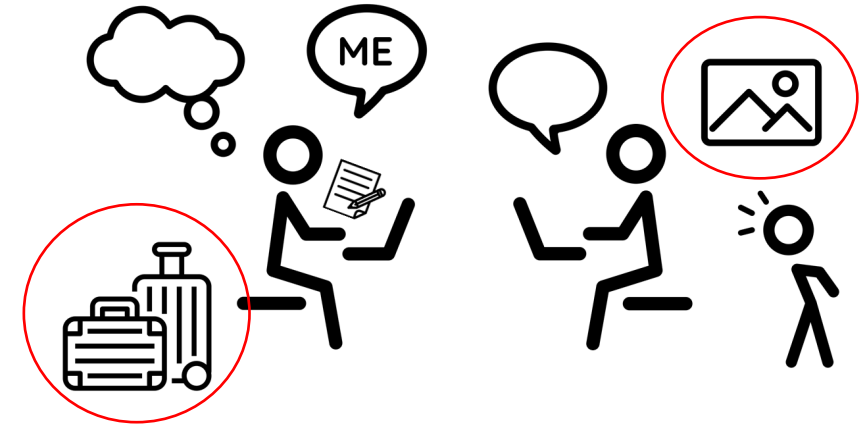
“R was **sitting cross-legged in a closet for privacy and was casually dressed in a hoodie**. I was also **at home in a soft armchair, no headset, no official background**. I think that our relatively casual and informal settings created an **informal, almost intimate setting** for the interview. This may have **helped the respondent to open up** about how marijuana helps her cope with anxiety and depression.”

■ Baggage:

- Assumptions about respondents
- Troubling respondent behaviors
- Personal views on cannabis

“I am a **proponent of legalizing marijuana** so I think it was easy for me to listen to and sympathize with her story. **I don't share these views with respondents, but I'm sure they bias me**. I may not have probed as much as I could have for some questions because of this.”

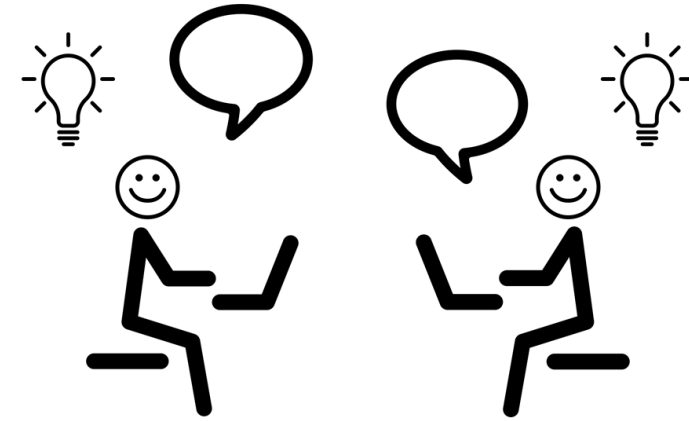
- Discomfort with topics or instrument



Findings: co-creation of data

“They’re not going to answer a question you don’t ask.”

- It’s not just getting the data, getting the narrative
 - “It’s not like I can **scoop the info out of the respondent’s head** without impact on the data at all.”
 - The respondent narrative is “**already framed by the [survey] questions** and **how I choose to ask** about them.”
- Respondents learning how to do a cognitive interview
- Interviewers learning how to probe
 - “Just as they’re learning how to do a cognitive interview, **you’re learning how to probe them**, for better or for worse.”



Preliminary recommendations



Preliminary conclusions and recommendations

- More than just minimizing bias
- Understanding constitution of data, broadly defined
- How to assess?
 - Use of single question vs. reflexivity journal
- Implications for analysis?
 - Tagging/coding respondents based on use of single question
- How to document?
 - Separate section of topline analysis on single question
 - Integration into question-by-question findings

Thank you!

For more information contact: Zachary Smith, zsmith@cdc.gov

Q-Bank: providing access to survey question evaluation reports, question design and performance <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/qbank/>

Q-Notes: designed to facilitate the management and analysis of cognitive interviews <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/ccqder/products/qnotes.htm>

For more information, contact CDC
1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)
TTY: 1-888-232-6348 www.cdc.gov

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