Using Frameworks of Social Desirability to Teach Subjectivity in Interviews

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Abstract

Qualitative methods courses lack tools for teaching students how to capture and analyze the nuanced ways participant subjectivity shows up in interviews. This article responds to the call for greater depth in qualitative methods instruction by offering teachers a series of discussion questions and an in-class worksheet that will help students more deeply probe and understand their data. These practical in-class tools leverage one theoretical lens that we find is well suited for unpacking participant subjectivity: social desirability. In this article, we present four speculative questions for instructors and students to more fully consider interviewees' working frameworks: (1) What does your respondent consider a sensitive subject? (2) What does your respondent perceive to be norms of socially desirability? (3) Which audiences are the target audiences for your respondent's presentation of self? and (4) How do you think your respondent's relationship to the interview context influenced the account created during the interview?

Keywords

qualitative methods, interviews, data analysis, subjectivity, social desirability

Understanding the subjective myths, beliefs, emotions, tastes, classification systems, and realities of groups of people is a core strength of interviewing as a method (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Pugh 2013). Yet analysis of talk alone—a mistake student-researchers are particularly apt to make—can fail to capture these important aspects of participant subjectivity (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). This article responds to the call for greater depth in qualitative methods instruction (Charmaz 2015) by offering teachers practical tools with which to help undergraduate and graduate students more deeply probe and analyze their data. We do so through one analytical lens that we find is underutilized in qualitative methods instruction but well suited for unpacking participant subjectivity: social desirability. We show how purposefully considering an interviewee's working frameworks of what is and what is not socially desirable offers a fresh window through which new interviewers can better access interviewee subjectivity and more fully analyze their data.

By and large, instructors currently lack frameworks similar to the one provided in this article, and new researchers are sometimes left to figure out how participant subjectivity shows up in interviews on their own, often long after the course has ended. Such an approach means student-interviewers will miss out on important analytical opportunities until they amass enough practical experience to "know it when they see it." Take the now-classic example from *The Second Shift*, in which Arlie Hochschild and Annie Machung (2012) describe the hostile and prolonged struggle between married couple Nancy and Evan Holt to reach an agreement about how to handle the cooking, cleaning, and

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Table 1. Traditional Syllabus Formula for Sociology Qualitative Methods Courses.

Week	Topic
1	Introduction to the course and qualitative versus quantitative methods
2	Choosing a research question
3	Defining a population
4	Gaining access to the population
5	Formulating interview questions
6	Conducting interviews
7	Participant observation and writing field notes
8	Ethics and human subjects requirements
9	Coding and data analysis
10	Data analysis, positionality, reflexivity
11	Special issues
12	Writing qualitative work
13	Presentation of student projects
14	Presentation of student projects

childcare following long days in their full-time careers. One day, however, Nancy reported that the problem had been solved. Hochschild (Hochschild and Machung 2012:46) recounts, "[W]hen I asked Nancy to tell me who did which tasks from a long list of household chores, she interrupted me with a broad wave of her hand and said, 'I do the upstairs, Evan does the downstairs.'" Nancy described their new arrangement as fair, "like 'half and half'" (Hochschild and Machung 2012:46). A naive interviewer might have taken Nancy's statement at face value, but Hochschild's expert wielding of the interview method reveals that the Holts' "resolution" was not a resolution at all but rather a family "myth." Nancy was still left with the overwhelming work of the second shift, but presenting this myth in the interview allowed her to maintain her sense of self as a feminist in an equal partnership, and the Holts were able to walk back their marriage from the brink of divorce. As Hochschild (Hochschild and Machung 2012:46) writes, "I think they believed it because they needed to believe it, because it solved a terrible problem." In a more inexperienced researcher's hands, Nancy Holt's subjective reality may have gone unexamined, and the deeper meaning and purpose behind the couples' "new" arrangement would not have been uncovered.

As this example illustrates, neopositivist approaches to interviewing that focus exclusively on what is being said in an interview, rather than

why it is being said (Roulston 2011), miss critical dimensions of subjectivity and so fail to leverage the strength of interviews as a source of data. While most qualitative researchers have advanced past neopositivist approaches to interviewing (Egon and Lincoln 1994), student-researchers are likely to miss out on the deeper level of understanding exemplified in *The Second Shift* in part because qualitative methods instructors lack tools for teaching students how to capture and analyze the nuanced ways subjectivity shows up in interviews. Consider this evidence: In a call to the top 20 sociology programs, we amassed 17 syllabi from graduate-level qualitative methods courses taught over the past five years. In these documents, we coded weekly topics, their ordering over the course of the semester, and the assigned readings to more deeply understand the state of qualitative methods instruction. We found several trends across universities, represented in a mock syllabus (Table 1). First, we find that instruction primarily focuses on the global project of how to design and execute research projects at the expense of more meticulous instruction around understanding an interviewee's subjective experience. Speaking to this tradition of focusing on introductory-level skill building, grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz (2015) explains, "[T]he form and content of qualitative methods courses contribute to [a lack of analytical development] because . . . instructors focus on an overview of data collection rather than analysis." We agree with Charmaz's claim;[1] the syllabi we analyzed follow a traditional progression that leaves out deeper and higher-level questions related to analysis. Most syllabi proceed with research design and question design, followed by coding, a form that fails to provide specific tools to support students in considering the *unspoken* dimensions of the participant's subjectivity. Similarly, the lion's share of articles used in the qualitative methods syllabi we analyzed are designed for beginners and, thus, describe how to ask thoughtful questions, probe subjects, and otherwise extract information from a respondent through technical approaches (e.g., George 2013; Healey-Etten and Sharp 2010). But after these important lessons, to what extent do students of qualitative methods know how to consider both content and meaning as sources of data? Overall, what tools do students currently lack for considering all that participants bring to the interview? While participant subjectivity is often the student's object of analysis, what is said during the interview is more concrete than what is meant, so novice interviewers may gravitate toward a purely surface-level analysis.

In this article, we offer qualitative methods instructors a series of discussion questions and an in-class worksheet (available upon request) to help undergraduate and graduate students unpack participant subjectivity through the lens of social desirability. While social desirability is typically associated with quantitative methods, we propose a renewed consideration in qualitative methods courses for three reasons. First, when students attend to social desirability, they gain insight into critical subjective meanings, including what interviewees see as desirable and undesirable, sensitive and not sensitive, normal and abnormal, and good and bad. Uncovering interviewees' working frameworks of social desirability allows student-researchers to center participant subjectivity and benefit from the full strengths of interview methods. Second, asking students to think about social desirability requires them to attend to concepts qualitative methods instructors already teach. For example, when students consider why an interviewee has represented themselves in a certain way during the interview, students must also practice reflexivity and positionality because their own social location and their relationship to the interviewee influence the interviewee's self-presentation. As a result, teaching about social desirability reinforces other common learning objectives in the qualitative methods classroom. Finally, instruction that incorporates social desirability requires students to more seriously consider the interviewee's agency, motivation, and agenda compared with standard approaches. While qualitative methods instructors have many tools (such as positionality, reflexivity) for analyzing the position of the researcher and their relationship to the research (e.g., Etherington 2004; Hsiung 2008; Krieger 1985; Lichterman 2017), students are less often asked to explicitly consider the interviewee's relationship to the research itself. As a concept, social desirability takes the interviewee's relationship to the research topic, the researcher, and the interview situation seriously and identifies how and why the interviewee's agenda might support or conflict with the researcher's (Jacobsson and Åkerström 2013; Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001). As a result, instruction on social desirability also asks students to conceive of the interview as a truly co-constructed interaction, not one guided solely or even primarily designed by the interviewer (Charmaz 2006; Koro-Ljungberg 2008; Mazeland and ten Have 1996; Mishler 1986).

In this article, we advocate for a renewal of social desirability in the teaching of qualitative methods and attempt to assist both instructors and their students in considering it more fully. We provide four speculative questions for instructors to pose to students to help them identify interviewees' working frameworks of social desirability: (1) What does your respondent consider a sensitive subject? (2) What does your respondent perceive to be socially desirable? (3) Which audiences are the target audiences for your respondent's presentation of self? and (4) How do you think your respondent's relationship to the interview context influenced the account created during the interview? In asking students to consider these questions, we believe that students gain a new tool to analyze their data and more seriously grapple with the concerns, experiences, and perspectives of their interview participants. As we describe the use of these four questions, we provide examples taken from actual qualitative methods projects of how frameworks of social desirability commonly reveal themselves: as omission and contradiction, exaggeration and understating, excuses, and code-switching. The exercise of identifying such instances of social desirability prepares students to make new inferences and probe further about the respondent's subjective experience. We constructed these questions and the included exercise so they are useful to instructors of both undergraduate- and graduate-level courses.

WHAT IS SOCIAL DESIRABILITY?

Harkening back to work by Erving Goffman (1959), sociologists have long theorized the human need to present a positive image of themselves to others. Goffman's (1959) work suggests that instead of presenting their most vulnerable truths, actors engage in performances according to how they would like to be perceived. In-depth interviews, which ask individuals to report information about themselves, are inherently subject to these dynamics of self-preservation (Baumeister 1982). Social desirability bias, or "the tendency on behalf of [subjects] to deny socially undesirable traits and to claim socially desirable ones, and the tendency to say things which place the speaker in a favorable light," originated as a term for measurement error that negatively impacted social science research (Nederhof 1985:264).

Rather than thinking of social desirability as a matter of bias—something that prevents the researcher from accessing their object of analysis—we consider social desirability an asset for qualitative researchers. What we call frameworks

of social desirability are key to determining how individuals understand the world; that is, they are critical for understanding subjective experience. A subject's frameworks of social desirability are their mental constructs for locating and perceiving attitudes, behaviors, people, events, and circumstances as desirable or undesirable, normal or abnormal, good or bad (Goffman 1974; Young 2010). As we will show, frameworks of social desirability are incredibly useful for the qualitative researcher. As deeply socialized cognitive processes, frameworks of social desirability inform not just how we make sense of things ourselves but also how we frame them to and for others (Millham and Kellogg 1980).

SEARCHING FOR FRAMEWORKS OF SOCIAL DESIRABILITY IN INTERVIEWS

Identifying frameworks of social desirability in interviews allows students to access new and valuable data. We recommend educators open a classroom discussion and pose the following four questions to help students uncover participants' frameworks of social desirability:

1. What does your respondent consider a sensitive subject?
2. What does your respondent perceive to be norms of social desirability?
3. Which audiences are the target audiences for your respondent's presentation of self?
4. How do you think your respondent's relationship to the interview context influenced the account created during the interview?

We review the implications of these four central questions and offer ways researchers have attempted to respond to them next. Integrated throughout this section, we also provide a typology describing how social desirability commonly shows up in qualitative interviews (see Table 2). As we highlight in this section, considering frameworks of social desirability can draw students' attention to how the interview functions as an interaction and how accounts produced in interviews are co-constructed, reveal interviewees' subjective understandings of the social world to students, and help students better understand interviewees' subjective experiences. While these questions and techniques are relevant to both data collection and

analysis, we recommend instructors hold this discussion and use the worksheet we have, which centers our four guiding questions, when teaching about analysis because social desirability offers students a different and deeper framework for coding data and revealing participant subjectivity. Thus, instructors might incorporate social desirability into their existing lessons on coding. We have designed these questions and the accompanying worksheet so they are sufficiently scaffolded for use in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

Throughout this section, we rely on examples from the experiences of sociologists in the field. In a request to a listserv of qualitative methodologists, we asked a single question: "From interviews you've conducted, do you have any experiences where a respondent has misrepresented the truth or perhaps done something in-between that speaks to desirability bias?" We received replies from five researchers, who submitted to us via email 12 examples of social desirability, and we combined these written experiences with numerous examples from our own work. We then coded and categorized these examples, finding themes and essential differences to develop the typology we provide. Because we collected anonymized, secondary accounts of the research process, we did not seek institutional review board approval for this project. To protect the confidentiality of the original research participants, we did not ask researchers for direct quotes from their participants. Additionally, we mask some details of the research projects and the participants in our excerpts, which provides an additional layer of confidentiality. In our email request, we informed researchers that we planned to write a paper drawing on their responses, and we confirmed with the researchers that they consented to their responses being excerpted.

Question 1: What Does My Respondent Consider a Sensitive Subject?

The dynamics of social desirability often emerge in response to sensitive questions (Krumpal 2013). Thinking through or discovering what subjects a respondent believes to be sensitive illuminates useful insights about their inner world. This is because social desirability bias is likely to occur when the interviewee has a strong desire for social approval, believes there is a nonzero probability they will experience negative social sanctions, and perceives that there is a difference in the desirability of possible answer choices (Näher and Krumpal 2012). Interviews commonly present these types of

Table 2. Tools to Observe Social Desirability in Interviews.

Aspect of Social Desirability	Evidence of Aspect	Definition	Questions for the Student-Interviewer to Consider
Sensitive questions	Omission or contradiction	Withholding undesirable information or presenting false accounts	Are the respondent's answers consistent across interview questions? What might motivate or explain inconsistencies?
Norms of social desirability	Exaggeration or understating	Adding or removing emphasis to elements within an account	When does the respondent answer briefly versus in detail? What does the respondent find meaningful? What experiences does the respondent minimize? What experiences does the respondent emphasize?
	Excuses	Providing a justification to explain an action or behavior	How does the respondent justify outcomes, behaviors, or beliefs? What alternative interpretations for a respondent's account are possible?
Audience	Code-switching	Changing mannerisms (speech, body language) and using symbols (clothing)	How does the respondent dress, speak? How do the respondent's tone and language change throughout the interview?

situations; paying attention to frameworks of social desirability can provide new interviewers with insight into when and why participants fear negative social sanctions and perceive certain responses as "better" than others. In other words, identifying frameworks of social desirability offers data on what the interviewee considers sensitive, stigmatized, or private. For example, public health practitioners warn about questions related to sexual behaviors, drug use, and mental illness due to the stigma associated with these sensitive topics (Krumpal 2013). One interviewer told us,

> I interviewed a woman and her mother [separately] for my project, and I asked them both about mental health. The daughter told me about how other people in her family, like her brother, had received treatment. But when I interviewed her mother [later], I found out that the young woman had actually had a suicide scare and been through a round of family therapy herself.

The omission on the part of the first interviewee suggests that the question about mental health was sensitive for her. One might reasonably deduce that she did not wish to be associated with suicidality. The researcher now knows that the interviewee believes others see "suicide scares" as socially undesirable. In other words, this tells the researcher about the subjective meaning the interviewee associates with suicide and mental health treatment. This particular insight on the interviewee's working framework of social desirability gives the interviewer new data about her subjective understanding of the world.

Techniques to reflect on sensitive questions. Recognizing which questions are sensitive during an interview requires the student-researcher to pay attention to clues. These include the interviewee's body language (do they position their body as if to protect themselves from the question, or do they appear nervous or uncomfortable?), the length of their answer (do they answer briefly and avoid

providing details?), and the cadence of their answer (do they take long pauses or use more filler words, like "um"?). Student-interviewers can rely on several techniques once they identify which questions are sensitive to an interviewee. First, they might ask probing questions to elicit any details the interviewee did not provide in their answer to the original question. The interviewer might circle back to the question later on, when they sense that the interviewee is more comfortable or once they have developed more rapport with the interviewee. The interviewer might ask the question in a different way. One option is to word questions in a way that allows the subject to project a positive self-image or reduce embarrassment. In the preceding example, asking a respondent if they have ever *overcome* a mental health challenge may open opportunities for further questioning (Schaeffer and Presser 2003). Jiménez and Orozco (forthcoming) recommend asking controversial questions with a short preface that indicates respondents would not be unique no matter how they respond. They give an example of how interviewers might ask respondents about their views on abortion:

> "On one end of things, I have heard people say that abortion should be legal in every circumstance. On the other end of things, people have told me that abortion should be illegal in every circumstance. And, I have heard lots of views in between. What do you think about these ideas?" By pointing out the most extreme views and by stating that the researcher has heard these opinions before, the researcher communicates that no response is off-limits.

As student-interviewers create interview protocols and conduct pilot interviews, they should try out different ways of wording questions and compare the responses they receive. In class, students could discuss what they observed and share tips.

In some instances, recognizing sensitive questions may be obvious, but in other interview contexts, it may take additional reflection to explore which questions are sensitive. What are ways a student-researcher might uncover which subjects are sensitive to their respondent? In the previous example, the respondent's omission worked as a useful indication of a sensitive question. *Omission* is when a respondent withholds information that might make them appear unfavorably, and *contradiction* is when a respondent offers information that directly conflicts with other information that the interviewee has provided or that the interviewer has obtained elsewhere (see Table 2). In an example of omission, a researcher determined that a father failed to mention he had a child when explicitly asked by an interviewer. The researcher wrote,

> At the first interview, we asked the respondent how many kids they had. At each subsequent interview, we asked if they'd had any new children since the last interview. We'd ask a proxy respondent about the focal respondents' kids as well. At one proxy interview with a mother [of the focal respondent], the mother reported that the respondent had one more biological child than he'd told us about. The focal respondent never mentioned this child—possibly because paternity was contested, but we're not exactly sure why.

If the interviewee believed himself to be the father of this child, this is a clear example of omission and suggests there may be some sensitivity around this topic. It is worth considering why. In the excerpt, the researcher suggests one possibility (paternity was contested), but there are others that, if uncovered, could reveal much about the respondent's subjective experience around fatherhood.

As these examples illustrate, triangulation is helpful in finding omissions and contradictions. When triangulation is not possible, one can also consider the consistency of an interviewee's responses across the entirety of the interview. As one example, one of the authors of this article interviewed participants about how they and their spouses manage work and family responsibilities. One participant described how she and her husband prioritize her paid work; according to the participant, this was logical because she has a higher and more stable income than her husband. But at other times during the interview, she admitted to doing most of her family's housework and nearly all of the childcare. The researcher believed the contradiction might indicate that a gendered logic, in addition to an economic one, was influencing their division of labor. Noticing this contradiction during the interview would allow the researcher to ask probing questions (e.g., "In what ways does your family prioritize your career?") that might reveal more about the interviewee's subjective experience, including whether there is a "family myth" at play à la *The Second Shift* (Hochschild and

Machung 2012). The researcher might also notice this contradiction during coding. We recommend that student-researchers add and apply codes for contradictions and omissions and, when they apply these codes, that they write a corresponding memo describing what they noticed and proposing possible reasons as to why. When comparing memos across transcripts, student-interviewers may be able to identify larger patterns across the sample.

What is the lesson for the student-interviewer? Conducting interviews and coding transcripts with an eye for omissions and contradictions can help one better understand the interviewee's subjective experience of the interview topic, whether that is mental health, parenthood, or the household division of labor. This is because, once such sensitive subjects are identified, the interviewer can start to consider why they are sensitive. This allows the student-researcher to center the interviewee's motivations and agenda throughout the interview, more seriously contemplate the interviewee's relationship to the research, and thus deepen the level of inquiry. It is also a first step in gathering more and desired information (e.g., by asking follow-up questions about the interviewee's own history with mental health crises or their relationship to the unmentioned child).

Question 2: What Does My Respondent Perceive to Be Norms of Social Desirability?

Even when questions are not particularly sensitive, how participants respond in interviews depends, at least in part, on what they perceive as socially desirable or undesirable. Consider the following example from an interviewer who asked families about their dietary habits:

> People believed that they should be eating healthy, so they presented their diets as healthier than they were. Some respondents said that they never drank soda or ate fast food, but when pressed for details, these behaviors would reveal themselves later in the interview. One thing people did all the time was call what seemed like common behaviors "exceptions." Like, if I asked them what they ate the day before, they would say they went to Burger King, but then tell me that was really unusual.

From the researcher's description, respondents typically exaggerated their "healthy" eating and understated "unhealthy" eating. This example exposes a framework of social desirability provoked by ideas around what people should be eating. In recognizing the contradiction between what they actually ate and how they described what they typically ate, this interviewer was able to pinpoint an important dimension of interviewees' understandings of the social world: what they considered "good" and "bad" eating. Thus, recognizing moments when respondents expose their frameworks of social desirability can be powerful for interviewers whose goal is often to understand participant subjectivity.

The naive interviewer engaged in this project about eating habits might assume that, generally, people agree on what constitutes "healthy" and "unhealthy" eating. In reality, interviewees hold different reference points for what ideas, attitudes, and behaviors society deems acceptable. One benefit of attending to social desirability is that it illustrates that perceptions of what is "normal," "good," or "deviant" can vary in systematic and unexpected ways. Norms, like those around eating, may be shaped by the respondent's social location, identities, and group memberships or more individual-level factors, like personality. Likewise, respondents might belong to a community that has norms different from the researcher's or other interviewees' (Kim and Kim 2017; Merton 1940). Consider the imperative that men construct a normative masculine identity in the interview context (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001). Because certain foods are associated with masculinity and femininity (Rothgerber 2013), men may misrepresent their eating habits in order to perform masculinity during the interview. Noticing that a man emphasizes his meat consumption and deemphasizes his vegetable consumption, for example, would indicate to the interviewer what the interviewee sees as "appropriate" eating for men. An interviewer attuned to frameworks of social desirability could thus reveal interesting patterns in the norms of social desirability across gender.

Techniques to reflect on norms in the field. Student-interviewers can draw from a variety of techniques to identify norms of social desirability. When developing their interview guide, they can formulate questions that ask how the respondent thinks "most people" feel or would react to something. For the preceding example, an interviewer might ask what a respondent thinks most people eat, what people should eat, and where they learned those norms in an attempt to understand the interviewee's frames

of reference. Additionally, interviewers should consider how the broader social and political context can impact norms. After a national election or a school shooting, for instance, interviewees may need to grapple with new norms. One of the authors of this article saw how, immediately following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, Democrat-identified respondents were very likely to present themselves as civically engaged, perhaps in an effort to distance themselves from individuals who did not vote. Educators should encourage new interviewers to immerse themselves in the communities that are of interest to them to stay apprised of such shifts in social norms. During an interview, questions to identify important recent events within a community and the respondent's awareness and reaction to those events may shed light on norms of social desirability.

Again, reflection on what a participant finds socially desirable may not be obvious. To uncover norms around eating, the researcher in the preceding excerpt paid particular attention to exaggerations and understatements about diet. Exaggerations and understatements are another way social desirability shows up in interviews. They reveal when a respondent wishes to bring an account into (better) alignment with what they perceive to be socially desirable. For instance, a researcher interviewing management consultants about their work experiences described feeling that many interviewees exaggerated their happiness and understated their level of work-related stress. She wrote,

> I've also had numerous occasions where I get the sense consultants are not only lying to me, but also potentially themselves, about how happy they are. They'll say things about how interesting/enjoyable their work is, but then they'll also tell me heartbreaking stories of times the intensity of the work got in the way of their personal lives.... One such interviewee didn't break down until the end.... I could even hear in the interview, the whole time she seemed kind of guarded/stuffy, and then when she thought she was "off the hook" and the interview was essentially over, she got more real with me about the difficulties she was facing.

The researcher was able to identify the subject's frameworks of social desirability by comparing the interviewee's accounts during the majority of the interview and toward the end of it. This

juxtaposition highlighted for the researcher how the interviewee's primary account exaggerated her positive experiences in the workplace and minimized her work-related stress. In recognizing this discordance, the interviewer gathered new, important data. Primarily, she made an inference about what the interviewee's agenda during the interview might have been: to represent herself as happy. This provides context about how the interviewee thinks she should feel about her work—content—as opposed to how she actually feels—overwhelmed—and suggests what the interviewee understands it means to be a "good" consultant.

Students who learn to pay attention to exaggeration and understating as a potential indicator of social desirability can observe how subjects hedge, emphasize, or modulate their statements and can consider the potential goals of such qualification. In the worksheet, we therefore recommend students look at interview transcripts with an eye for coding potential instances of exaggeration and understatement. As when coding for omissions and contradictions, we recommend that students write memos describing what they notice and possible reasons why when coding for exaggeration and understatement. Memo writing is helpful in identifying larger patterns and developing themes. In her project on spouses' division of household labor, one of the authors of this article wrote a memo describing how an interviewee understated how much of her family's childcare and housework she did, for example, by asking whether certain tasks (like transporting her child to activities) really counted as labor. Writing this and other related memos allowed the researcher to recognize an emergent theme: how women understated their household work to portray their marriages as more egalitarian than they were.

Another way respondents align themselves with social norms—and another way social desirability shows up in interviews—is through excuses (Scott and Lyman 1968). In one example provided to us, a researcher described how interviewees—women in sororities—admitted to behavior that may be seen as undesirable but explained that behavior as reasonable because of social pressure and other factors. These types of excuses allow interviewees to save face. The researcher wrote,

> I interviewed sorority women about the sorority recruitment process and the extent to which attractiveness was an important criterion potential new members were

evaluated on. Nearly all my respondents described attractiveness as seeming incredibly and unfairly important when they were being evaluated as potential new members, but when I asked them if they evaluated other potential new members on their attractiveness once they were in the sorority, they would either say so in a very hesitant/apologetic way, say that they were forced to by their organization, say that they or their sorority were an exception to judging women on attractiveness in contrast to the broader norm in which most did, or else frame attractiveness as something that could be earned and/or a sign of respect, and therefore a reasonable thing to judge.

Sorority women used attractiveness as a criterion for choosing new members—that is, for choosing with whom they wished to associate. The interviewer suggests that interviewees recognized that doing so (explicitly) is frowned upon and that interviewees, therefore, used a variety of excuses to explain why it was "reasonable" in order to manage the interviewer's evaluation of them. In noticing how interviewees utilized excuses, the interviewer identifies a social norm among this particular population (using attractiveness as a criterion for membership) that conflicts with social norms outside the population (that attractiveness is not a fair criterion for friendship). Thus, she gained new insight into participants' subjective understandings and their sense of norms related to what is socially desirable. Instructors of qualitative methods know there are significant lessons to be gained in exploring excuses. Doing so requires students to analyze how respondents justify outcomes, behaviors, and beliefs. In order to better consider these elements of participant subjectivity, we recommend coding transcripts and memoing around accounts that may serve as excuses. Asking students to consider what their respondents consider norms of social desirability can bring excuses to light.

Question 3: Who Are the Target Audiences for My Respondent's Presentation of Self?

Millham and Kellogg (1980) characterize social desirability bias as the result of either other-deception or self-deception. *Other-deception* describes when a participant recognizes one characterization of themselves as accurate but is unwilling to admit it

and so misrepresents themselves to the researcher. *Self-deception*, on the other hand, occurs when a research subject believes a characterization of themselves is correct when it is inaccurate. The desire to gain approval and avoid disapproval—the two motivations underlying social desirability bias (Crowne and Marlow 1960)—may therefore be directed toward the interviewer, other audiences, and the interviewee themselves. By considering frameworks of social desirability, student-researchers might begin to ask, Whose approval is my respondent seeking? What are the consequences of disapproval for them (and from whom)? When interviewees wish to be perceived in a favorable light, the way social desirability shows up will depend on whose perception they care most about. In interview contexts, the audience may include the interviewer, the respondent themselves, the respondent's social circle, the respondent's perception of who will engage with the interview content, and bystanders. Consider the following example:

> I interviewed a [man] at the same time as his fiancée. Usually, I did the interviews 1-on-1, but she happened to be there too.... In the course of the interview, he described the anticipated and ideal scenario about what they would do once they had kids. His ideal clearly consisted of her staying home with the kids. Full stop. Her ideal was clearly more mixed, with her continuing to work but also spending time with the kids. So he would say something like "she'll stay home with the kids" (not a direct quote), and she would cut in and offer a more mixed perspective, [like] "well, maybe I'll keep working too," and then he would offer a clarification intended to smooth things over like, "we both want whatever's best for the kids."

We might imagine that without the presence of his fiancée, the respondent may have answered the questions with more certainty, and the interviewer might never have known that there was disagreement between the couple. However, the presence of another party changed the audience his responses needed to please. The researcher described him as deemphasizing his initial comments to smooth over tensions with his partner. Thus, the researcher learned about the differing (and gendered) expectations within the couple and how the couple negotiates these differences. This example illustrates the

distinction between norms of social desirability and audiences. We can imagine that the interviewee perceived the notion of a stay-at-home mother as an acceptable norm for many, hence his readiness to offer it up as his first, preferred option. The resistance from his fiancée (one of his audiences), however, caused him to reframe his plan for the future.

Techniques to reflect on audience in the field. Educators who train new interviewers likely already discuss the importance of picking a location to the quality of the interview (in terms of the sound quality of the recording, the comfort of the respondent, and the safety of the interviewer). In addition, educators should ask interviewers in training to consider how other people's presence (in a café, at the interviewee's home or workplace) might influence the account constructed during the interview because of social desirability (Shiner and Newburn 1997). Doing so can help the interviewer in training understand the interview as an interaction. Additionally, new interviewers should consider how their self-presentation and identities may influence how they are perceived by the interviewee and thus they influence the account as one of its audiences (Fontana and Frey 2000). To do so, we recommend expanding the notion of pilot interviews to gauge how an interviewer is viewed by the population of interest. During pilot interviews, an interviewer in training can ask their "consultants" how the population of interest might perceive them—as trustworthy, engaged, personable, professional, or judgmental. They might ask whether most people would be comfortable talking about certain topics with a person of their age, race, gender, class background, political views, and so on. In different pilot interviews, the interviewer in training can try on different personas (for example, by changing their style of dress) to see how they might alter their self-presentation to fit their goals. While potentially uncomfortable, using pilot interviews to this end can provide new interviewers with information about how they, as the interviewee's primary audience, influences the interview account, something many of us learn only over the course of years of experience.

Additionally, considering the respondent's presentation of self and instances where their presentation of self may change is one way to interrogate target audiences. *Code-switching* refers to a respondent's choice of mannerisms and symbols and is another way social desirability might reveal itself in interviews. This might include when the participant changes their speech, dresses for an interview in atypical attire, or conveys an atypical persona. A long literature suggests that code-switching is a tactic actors use to shape how others perceive them (Doss and Gross 1994; Nilep 2006). When interviewees move in and out of particular ways of speaking, being, or doing, they may be imagining distinct audiences for their accounts. In interviews, self-presentation tactics begin long before the recorder is on and may persist throughout the meeting. Over the course of the interview, one might notice an interviewee code-switch through changes in their body language (like posture) or demeanor (like the use of slang). In other cases, the presentation of self may remain consistent through the end of the interview, which can also be revelatory. As one example, one of the authors interviewed self-identified feminist men about how they came to their gender activism. She noted the careful and formal tone of one interviewee in particular. Once the interview was over, and the recorder was off, his tone became much more casual, and he asked, "How did I do?" In seriously considering the meaning of this moment, the interviewer gained new data and insight. Paired with additional clues from their interaction, this moment suggested that the (man) interviewee was seeking approval from the (woman) interviewer, perhaps because he saw her as an expert on gender inequality who was judging his commitment to and knowledge of feminism. In identifying this possibility, the interviewer could better contextualize other aspects of the interview, like his hesitation throughout. As this example illustrates, students should work to describe not just the content of an interview but also the interviewee's presentation of self as data. This means explicitly noting the respondent's self-presentation in field notes, coding for changes in their speech or language style, and even asking explicitly about the meaning of symbols in their clothing and so on.

Question 4: What's My Respondent's Relationship to the Interview Context?

Once students learn how to identify common ways social desirability appears in interviews—such as code-switching, exaggeration and understating, excuses, and omission or contradiction—and considered questions of sensitive subjects, norms of social desirability, and audience, they will be better prepared to assess their respondent's relationship to the research itself. As is reflected in the structure of our worksheet, we see this as the final question in a series of scaffolded questions educators should

pose to students. At this point, students will be better able to determine how the interviewee shaped the account produced in the interview and to infer why they did so, whether because certain topics were sensitive to them, they saw certain responses as better or more desirable, or they were appealing to particular audiences. In concert with other approaches that many qualitative methods instructors already teach their students (such as positionality and reflexivity), this question asks the new interviewer to center the respondent's agency, motivations, and agenda and thus more seriously consider their subjectivity.

Techniques to reflect on the respondent's relationship to the interview context. We envision this as the culminating step in a student-researcher's analysis and believe the other questions and techniques described earlier will prepare them for it. To reflect on the respondent's relationship to the interview context, we recommend students write a memo on each of their respondents following coding. During memo writing, student-researchers can consider several guiding questions: Did I observe any myths in action? What does my respondent believe, and what beliefs do they take for granted? On what classification systems does my respondent rely to understand their experience and the world around them? And, most importantly, what purpose do these myths, beliefs, and classification systems fulfill? In other words, what might have been my respondent's agenda during the interview, and how did that influence the account that was produced?

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that social desirability should be more fully and explicitly incorporated into undergraduate and graduate qualitative methods training and have described opportunities for doing so. This article offers two significant contributions. First, we provide a theoretical lens through which to think about an interviewee's subjective reality: frameworks of social desirability. By reclaiming social desirability as an ally to the qualitative interviewer, we support budding sociologists in more deeply understanding their data. Indeed, frameworks of social desirability are uniquely positioned to uncover subjectivity beyond the words that are said in an interview to their meaning and underlying motivation. Our second contribution lies in the practical tools developed throughout this article, which support students in conducting and, in particular, analyzing their interviews. Through the development

of our four questions and their accompanying tools to excavate frameworks of social desirability in the field, we contribute a tangible resource to be used in qualitative methods classrooms. We find that deliberate attention to the questions respondents' deem sensitive, the norms they adhere to, the audiences they wish to impress, and their overall relationship to the research endeavor offers previously inaccessible insight into interviewee experiences, worldviews, prejudices, and beyond.

Attending to frameworks of social desirability can illustrate several key lessons for new interviewers. First, focusing on social desirability in the context of interviews allows students to better understand the interviewee's subjective understanding of the social world. It can reveal what an interviewee sees as desirable/undesirable, sensitive/not sensitive, normal/abnormal, and good/bad. Said another way, attending to frameworks of social desirability gets new interviewers better and more data that brings them closer to (what is often) their object of analysis: the interviewee's subjectivity. Second, bringing social desirability into the qualitative methods classroom reinforces other key concepts and frameworks, like reflexivity, positionality, and the interview as interaction. Finally, really considering social desirability requires new interviewers to more seriously center the interviewee's relationship to the research, particularly their motivations and agenda. There are many other analytical frameworks qualitative researchers might use to approach their data. In defining and articulating frameworks of social desirability as one lens through which data can be interpreted, we contribute to the professionalization of qualitative methods as well as the tools available to qualitative methods instructors around analysis specifically. It is our hope that incorporating more explicit conversations about social desirability into the classroom will strengthen and augment existing qualitative methods training and add to the tools budding sociologists can leverage throughout their careers.

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NOTE

1. We also agree with Charmaz (2015) that the lack of depth in qualitative instruction is often due to insufficient qualitative course instruction hours and a scarcity of in-depth qualitative courses in graduate programs.

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