

**In-Depth Participant Interviews: Studying Social
Support Among Obese and Overweight Young Adults
Attempting to Lose Weight**

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Pub. Date: 2017

Access Date: March 16, 2017

Academic Level: Postgraduate

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: London

Online ISBN: 9781526419347

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526419347>

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Abstract

As a graduate student, I became interested in understanding how people talk with their friends and family when they want to lose weight. Talking about a desire to lose weight can be quite difficult, but previous research has made a very strong case for the importance of receiving social support from friends and family in achieving success when attempting to lose weight. The bulk of this research, however, focused on social support received through a doctor- or researcher-supervised intervention. For most people, this type of support is not very common, and instead, they rely on social support from their friends and family to try and achieve their goals. This case study provides an account of how I recruited individuals dealing with a sensitive issue (their desire to lose weight) to participate in the study as well as how I conducted in-depth interviews with participants to understand their efforts to get their friends and family to support them when trying to lose weight. This case sheds light on the advantages and challenges of using in-depth interviews to collect data about a relatively understudied topic and how researchers can preemptively manage some of these challenges through careful research design and implementation. Particular attention is paid to the creation of the interview protocol as well as the use of probing to elicit more information from participants.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case students should be able to

- Understand the challenges and benefits of conducting in-depth interviews for health research purposes
 - Distinguish between the three broad types of interviews and evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of each
 - Identify practical strategies for preparing for interviews and improving interviewing techniques
 - Describe the essential tools of a successful interview, including *interview protocols* and *probing questions*
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Project Overview and Context: Asking for Support When Trying to Lose Weight

When I began this study in the spring of 2011, the majority of research examining the effects of social support on achieving weight loss showed that it is incredibly important and helpful. Social support is a broad term that refers to acts that communicate caring and concern for another individual. Social support provides assistance and communicates that individual is loved, valued, and an integral part of a larger community (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008). Social support can take many forms (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), such as emotional support

(e.g., telling someone that they are loved for who they are), informational support (e.g., offering a person advice or tips about healthy eating behaviors), or tangible support (e.g., providing someone with a healthy snack or a gym membership). Usually, individuals seek support from their close network of friends and family, although formal support providers (such as doctors, physical trainers, or nutritionists) can also provide support to individuals attempting to lose weight. Historically, individuals who received more support from informal networks (friends and family members) often experienced better weight loss and health outcomes. In fact, one important study using a randomized control trial found that participants who were assigned to receive more support from friends and family as part of their involvement in the study experienced greater weight loss and were able to sustain the weight loss for longer periods of time when compared with individuals who did not have this same level of support (Wing & Jeffery, 1999). Because obesity and overweight are significant public health crises across the globe, any understanding of how individuals can more successfully lose weight and then maintain that healthier weight is valuable.

Unfortunately, interventions that rely on a research team or a medical professional to initiate and supervise the provision of support are uncommon and very expensive. Most people who desire to lose weight never have the opportunity to access resources such as a dedicated team of medical and research professionals who can provide advice, follow-up, and controlled conditions for their weight loss attempts. Instead, they have to rely on their preexisting social network of friends and family to support them when attempting to lose weight, and part of this reliance means that they have to talk with their friends and family about their goals, insecurities, and what they believe would be most helpful for them.

Of course, relying on friends and family can be complicated. Oftentimes, people who are close to one another say encouraging and uplifting things when someone they love faces a health challenge like trying to lose weight. For example, a friend might tell someone how great she looks after losing 5 pounds, or a parent might express how proud they are to see their son working out more. Unfortunately, network members can also say the wrong things, leaving the other person feeling discouraged and hurt. For example, a friend might encourage someone to indulge in a piece of cake, sabotaging that person's efforts to gain weight. Parents might joke that their son is looking a little thick around the middle, potentially discouraging their son's weight loss efforts. In addition to experiencing uncertainty about exactly what their friends and family might say, there is ample stigma around being obese and overweight that might make it difficult for an individual to open up and share candidly with their loved ones about their perceived struggles. To understand how people manage the social support they receive from friends and family when trying to lose weight and how they navigate this terrain that can be

awkward and uncomfortable, I decided that I needed to talk with individuals who had recently experienced these types of interactions or were currently experiencing them.

Ultimately, I completed 60 in-depth interviews with young adults (on average, participants were 21 years old). I chose to interview young adults for a few reasons: First, I was working at a university at the time and accessing young adults who would be willing to participate in a research study was easier and more cost-effective than reaching out to other populations. Second, and more importantly, college students often find themselves on their own for the first time in college. This new independence comes with the freedom to eat and drink whatever they want. As research has shown, it is not uncommon for college students to gain unnecessary, undesired weight because of this freedom (this is often referred to as the “freshman fifteen pounds” in the United States). Finally, in addition to being readily available for the research study and susceptible to weight gain, university students are often under significant pressure to maintain an attractive appearance. This pressure surely causes some students to pursue weight loss, and because university students are often living with members of their peer groups, it is likely that they will have talked with at least one other person about their desire to lose weight. All of these factors influenced my decision to focus on this population.

In the end, more than 100 individuals expressed an interest in participating in this study. From the long list, about 60 participants met the inclusion criteria (they had tried to lose weight in the past year and believed themselves to be overweight or obese). However, of these 60 participants, some were not medically classified as obese or overweight as determined by calculating participant’s body mass index. In these incidents, participants felt that they were overweight even though they were medically classified as healthy. Because these individuals likely experienced different circumstances than individuals attempting to lose weight who medically should lose weight, I did not include participants whose weight fell in the “normal” range in the final analysis. Instead, I choose to focus only on those participants whose body mass index indicated that they were medically overweight or obese. The final sample size for this study was 25 individuals. Interviews revealed that participants were oftentimes quite strategic in who they talked to about their desire to lose weight. Many participants indicated that they chose to seek support from individuals who were also losing weight. Friends and family who had previously achieved weight loss success were especially valued sources of information, providing healthy recipes, workout tips, or other healthy living tricks. Similarly, if participants felt that a certain person would not understand their struggle or would be critical of their weight, they tried to avoid discussions of the weight loss attempts with that person.

Through the interviews and analysis, I identified six distinct communication strategies that participants used in attempts to gain additional support from their network members. The

simplest of these strategies was a *direct request* or simply asking another person for help. Participants also sought support through *coengagement*, encouraging a friend to participate in healthy activities with them. In some cases, participants sought support in the form of *accountability requests*. They would ask friends and family members to keep them accountable in their efforts. In addition, some participants would engage in *incentivizing*, asking friends and family to withhold certain rewards from them until specific milestones had been achieved. All of these support-seeking strategies were fairly direct: Participants made it clear to their friends and family that they were trying to lose weight, and they also made it clear that they were seeking support for their goals. Along with these four direct support-seeking strategies, participants also used two indirect strategies. Participants would sometimes use *complaining* as a way to gain support and encouragement for their efforts. They might also choose to *broadcast* their intent to lose weight indiscriminately to large groups of people through postings on social media. Using these strategies, participants could seek support without putting their network members on the spot. Participants who used these indirect strategies often saw them as lower risk because they would not have to directly admit and discuss their weight concerns nor would they have to feel hurt if friends and family did not help them in the way they desired.

In addition to the six support-seeking strategies, participants identified six strategies that they used to try and stop their network members from communicating in unhelpful ways. Some participants engaged in *deceptive behaviors* around unhelpful network members. They might lie about why they were changing their eating habits or going to the gym more frequently. They might also try to hide their efforts to prevent any criticism or sabotage. Other participants discussed using *confrontation* or directly talking with their unsupportive network members about their unhelpful behavior and its effects on their weight loss efforts. In direct contrast to confrontation, some participants engaged in *avoidance*, choosing to simply spend less time around unsupportive individuals, or *ignoring* behaviors. Finally, several participants discussed their efforts to avoid unsupportive interactions before they could even take place. This took the form of *preemptive planning* or *self-restraint*. For example, one participant discussed how he preempted unhelpful situations by offering to have his friends over for dinner and cooking a healthy meal for everyone rather than face the difficult choice of going out to eat and trying to find a healthy meal. Similarly, other participants talked about using self-restraint to prepare for potentially unhealthy situations, such as working out an extra hour if they planned to attend a birthday party the next night. Through all of these strategies, participants made it quite clear that they frequently talked to network members about their weight loss goals and that certain supportive behaviors were perceived to be more sensitive and helpful than others.

Research Practicalities

This research project was carried out between February and June 2011. I did not receive any external funding for the research and primarily used resources made available to me as a graduate student at the University of Washington. All of my participants were current undergraduate students at the University of Washington, and they received extra credit for participating in my study. All of the participants included in the final study sample were classified as medically overweight or obese (as indicated by their body mass index). In addition, to be involved in the study, all participants had to have actively tried to lose weight within the past year and have discussed their weight loss efforts and goals with at least one friend or family member.

In-depth interviews served as the only source of data for this study. I chose in-depth interviews for several reasons. First, the research questions I investigated in the study were highly exploratory. That is, I knew from previous research that individuals benefited from receiving social support when trying to lose weight, but no previous research had specifically addressed the question about whether individuals actively manage the support they receive from network members in this context and how they would do so. In-depth interviews are a good methodological choice when seeking to understand a topic without much previous research to rely upon. Second, in-depth interviews allowed me to gain a lot of rich, deep information from participants regarding their experiences. Participants could tell me stories and provide long examples of their interactions with network members—something difficult to gain through other methods. Finally, the interviews allowed me the flexibility to tweak and adjust my line of questioning as patterns and interesting points of discussion emerged during the interview itself. For example, in the context of one interview, a participant made a comment about someone she no longer was in contact with because of a fight they had. Because I was interviewing the participant, I could ask her pointed follow-up questions about that fight, ultimately uncovering interesting and important information about their interactions and how the participant's experience of unhelpful support from that friend led her to terminate the friendship. It would have been hard to probe and follow up a comment like this when using another method.

Although there were many benefits to using in-depth interviews for this study, several significant challenges also manifested during this study's data collection. Some of these issues included the following.

Sampling

How does one find people to participate in a study about a sensitive topic such as this? It is rude (not to mention unethical!) to find people who appear obese or overweight on the street and ask them to be involved. In addition, as a researcher, it would be unwise to exclude all

participants who have a normal or healthy weight, because it is possible that these people used to be overweight but achieved weight loss success so that their weight currently falls into a healthy range. To manage these issues, my strategy was to recruit participants widely. I shared announcements regarding the study in many undergraduate courses, asking individuals who perceived themselves as overweight/obese, had actively tried to lose weight in the past year, and had interacted with friends and family around their weight loss to be involved in the study. I received dozens of interested responses and ultimately completed 60 in-depth interviews. For final analysis in the study, my sample was whittled down to 25 participants as I chose to focus solely on the experiences of individuals who were currently obese and overweight. Obese and overweight individuals are more likely to experience stigma around their weight, potentially making support an even more essential resource when trying to lose weight. This stigma also leaves them vulnerable to receiving negative responses from network members. It is likely that the conversations obese and overweight individuals experience when trying to lose weight are different than when someone of a healthy weight is attempting to lose weight. As such, it made logical sense to focus solely on the experiences of obese and overweight individuals for the purpose of this study.

Interview Design

What questions should one ask in an interview like this, and how should one order them to get the best responses? As I was interested in learning not just about the interactions and support that were positive but also the interactions that were less successful, I decided to divide my interview protocol into four broad sections, each addressing a larger research question. I started with easier, less sensitive questions. For example, I began by asking the participants for basic demographic information, such as their age and gender. I then moved on to talk about their perceptions and experiences trying to lose weight. I began by asking about their most recent attempt to lose weight, posing questions such as: How long have you been trying to lose weight? Can you please explain any specific behaviors you have tried when attempting to lose weight? With whom have you discussed your desire to lose weight? After asking questions to gain better insight into their most recent efforts to lose weight, I moved on to ask them specific details about the positive support they had received from friends and family during their weight loss attempt. For example, I asked participants to explain any supportive behaviors they had received, such as encouragement, advice, or tips. I also asked them to describe specific conversations they remembered having as well as to explain why these supportive behaviors felt good and helpful to them. I then asked participants to discuss the negative interactions they experienced. I asked participants whether they ever felt like someone they knew was intentionally or unintentionally sabotaging their efforts. I also asked them to describe any situations where people said things that were unhelpful or even hurtful with regards to their

weight loss behaviors. Finally, I asked participants to evaluate, broadly, their success at managing their supportive interactions with others. For example, I asked them to talk about any conflict they had with people they perceived as being unhelpful or unsupportive. I also asked them to explain how they chose whom to solicit support from. In structuring the interview this way, I sought to ease participants into the interview process.

Recall and Details

How can a researcher elicit the richest, most detailed data possible during these interviews? For some participants, remembering examples of conversations they had was challenging, whereas other participants felt reluctant to share specific details about the interactions they had experienced when talking with others about their weight loss attempts and goals. Some participants felt embarrassed to openly discuss their efforts, as they viewed their previous weight loss attempts as failures and, thus, difficult to talk about and potentially threatening to their overall self-presentation. Part of my job as a researcher was to create an environment where individuals would feel comfortable truly opening up to me about their experiences. I made extensive efforts to explain the rights and protections afforded to participants in the study, including a detailed discussion of the confidentiality of the information they shared. When participants struggled to remember, I worked with them by going through each individual network member they identified as someone they received support from and asking pointed questions related to that relationship. These efforts were mostly successful in helping overcome the barriers of recall and gleaning detailed responses from participants.

Staying on Topic

How can one redirect the conversation when it veers off-topic? Although some participants had difficulty opening up, others were terrifically chatty—though not always on the appropriate topic. In these situations, it was important to balance treating the participant with politeness and respect while also redirecting them back to the main topic of conversation. I found that acknowledging participants' stories and then prompting them with a question were effective strategies for returning participants back to the essential question. Simple statements such as "That's really interesting. I'd like to go back to the question I posed earlier to make sure I understand your experience. Can you tell me a bit more about ..." worked well.

Research Design

Using in-depth interviews to collect data seems straightforward. An interview is just a series of questions, right? Although it is true that interviews involve posing a series of questions to participants, a good researcher should put substantial effort and consideration into the form

and flow of the interview itself. A researcher only has one chance to set the tone and gather as much relevant information as possible with each participant, and due to the time-intensive nature of this method, it is important not to waste any opportunity with participants.

Because of the one-shot nature of conducting interviews, it is important that the researcher establish a clear idea of what type of interview, exactly, they want to use. There are three broad types of interviews. The first, *structured interviews*, involves asking every participant the exact same questions in the exact same order. With structured interviews, there is no opportunity for improvisation or probing. The researcher essentially uses the interview questions as a script and does not diverge from it. Structured interviews are very good at establishing consistency in the interview process, although this might come at the cost of pursuing interesting lines of questioning not originally accounted for in the interview protocol. On the opposite end of the spectrum are *unstructured interviews*. In an unstructured interview, the researcher has no preset list of questions and instead allows the researcher to improvise and pose new questions in any order as the interview proceeds. The goal of these interviews is often to let the participant tell a story about their experiences with less prompting from the researcher. Although this method allows for great flexibility and the opportunity to explore unexpected lines of questioning, it can vary greatly in its consistency, and if not executed carefully, it can result in the researcher forgetting to explore key concepts of interest. The final type of interview, a *semi-structured interview*, combines elements from both structured and unstructured interviews. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher enters the interview with a set list of questions that she plans to ask. However, the researcher is able to diverge from the order of the questions and can also ask probing questions to explore potentially interesting points. This combination of some structure with some flexibility can work well in offsetting some of the drawbacks of the other interview types while simultaneously maximizing their benefits.

In-Depth, Semi-Structured Interviews in Action

For this study, I chose to use a semi-structured interview process. Because I knew the specific topics that I wanted to understand with each of my participants, I created an interview protocol that featured four different sections. One set of questions specifically asked participants basic demographic information, including their age, gender, height, weight, and how long they had been trying to lose weight. The second set of questions asked participants to describe their perceptions and experiences trying to lose weight. These portions of the interview served to ease the participant into the interview process while also priming their thinking to remember their specific experiences around their weight loss journey. The third set of questions asked participants to discuss the conversations they had with friends and family around trying to lose weight. I asked them to identify things that they thought were helpful and things that they

thought weren't particularly helpful. Some of the specific questions I asked included the following:

- “When losing weight, did you try and get someone to help you?”
- “Can you describe in detail what you did or said to get this person to help you try and lose weight?”
- “When losing weight, did someone try to help you, although you found their help ineffective or unhelpful?”
- “Did you ever feel like someone tried to sabotage your weight loss efforts, either intentionally or unintentionally?”

Direct questions like these were, on the whole, very helpful. Nearly every participant had an example of a helpful and an unhelpful interaction, although most participants did not believe that anyone had ever intentionally sabotaged them. The fourth and final set of questions asked the participants to evaluate the success of their efforts in getting the type of help they needed. This line of questioning was a bit tricky, as participants sometimes had trouble acknowledging the difference between managing their supportive interactions successfully and losing weight successfully. This was the line of questioning where they use probing questions, and having flexibility in the interview process became particularly important, as I often had to approach the idea of “success” from multiple angles to help participants realize the difference between getting the help they wanted and losing all of the weight they wanted. Oftentimes, asking participants to elaborate on their ideas was helpful in gathering more information about their notion of success. I also found it extremely helpful to ask participants whether there might be multiple ways of defining success, and, if so, how their evaluations of their own progress changed depending on the definition of achievement they used. Overall, this way of organizing the semi-structured interview process was quite successful at eliciting information relevant for the study's aims and in keeping participants talking for a significant amount of time.

In-Depth Interviewing: Practical Lessons Learned

I have focused thus far on the broad process of conducting in-depth interviews. Now, I want to offer a few practical tips that delve more deeply into the nuts and bolts of conducting these interviews and interacting with participants. You can find much good advice on the interview process and completing successful interviews through several different books (see, for example, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* by Svend Brinkman and Steinar Kvale or *The Sage Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft* edited by Jaber Gubrium et al.). It is important to read as much as you can about the interview process, from designing your interview protocol to making decisions about analyzing

the data you gather, before you try to conduct interviews with participants. Remember, you only have one chance to interview each participant, and you want that interview to be as productive and successful as possible. Here are a few tips from my experiences that might also help prepare you to be a successful researcher.

1. *Practice your interviews before you begin meeting with participants.* It might sound silly to practice your interviewing technique, but it is essential. The more familiar you are with the ordering of your questions and the flow of your interview, the more comfortable you will be during the interview itself. And the more comfortable you are, the more comfortable and at ease your participants will be, giving them confidence to open up about their perceptions and experiences with you. If possible, ask a friend or family member to participate in a mock interview with you. You might also ask a more experienced researcher for feedback regarding your interview protocol and technique, as their insight is often invaluable.
2. *Prepare the space and equipment before the interview.* Before your interview, make sure that you set up your interview space appropriately. The space you choose should be relatively comfortable and inviting. Make sure that it is a space that will be quiet so that you and your participant will be able to hear and understand one another easily. If you are interviewing participants somewhere outside of your control (say, the participant's house or a public setting), be sure to arrive early enough to scope out the best location for completing the interview. It is also important to test any equipment that you plan to use during the interview. Most research interviews are either audio- or video-recorded for future analysis, and it is essential to make sure that you are comfortable using your equipment. Test any recorders to understand how close they need to be to you and your participant to easily capture what everyone is saying. Bring spare batteries in case a piece of equipment runs out of power. And make sure that you understand how to properly start and stop the recorder. Trust me—there is nothing worse than completing a wonderful, insightful interview only to discover that it was not recorded properly!
3. *Clearly explain the purpose and goals of the interview to your participants.* When interacting with participants before the interview, it is important to explain the overall purpose and goals of your study. Both you and your participant will be frustrated if they participate in the interview and ultimately have little to offer because they misunderstood the point of the research. So, before scheduling an interview, verify with your participant that they understand the topic and purpose of the interview. You should also remind your participant of this information at the beginning of your interview as it will help them stay on topic and focus their sharing on information that is most relevant.
4. *Warm up your participants gently.* The beginning of an interview can feel awkward for both the interviewer and the interviewee. It is important not to ask the most important, sensitive

questions at the beginning of the interview. Instead, start with questions that are fairly low risk and easy to answer. This can help your participant become more comfortable with the interview process and setting. You might also consider sharing a bit about yourself before the beginning of the interview. For example, explaining why you are interested in the particular topic of study can give the participant additional insight on your goals for the study while also helping them feel more comfortable with you as an interviewer.

5. *Create a protocol and use it.* When conducting a semi-structured interview, it is a good idea to have all of your interview questions written down and accessible during your interview. This can ensure that you do not accidentally miss crucial questions or become flustered during your interview. The protocol should be thought out long before the first interview and rehearsed through ample practice (see Tip 1).
6. *Listen to your participant and take notes.* It should go without saying, but it is absolutely essential to pay close attention to your participant during the interviews. Make sure to eliminate anything that might prove distracting for you. Be careful not to interrupt the participant. You should also work to avoid the pitfall of thinking ahead to your next question or point rather than fully listening to what your participant says in the moment. I would also encourage you to take some notes during each interview. Note taking can help you keep track of your own thoughts. If your participant said something interesting that you would like to follow up on, jot yourself a quick reminder so that you can focus on what they are sharing. Notes can also come in handy should something happen to your recording, and it is a good idea to write down a few of your thoughts and impressions immediately after the interview as well.
7. *Be prepared to deal with a participant's emotions.* Although this might not be relevant for all interviews, many interview topics (including the topics discussed in this case study) are quite personal and sensitive. By asking participants about these experiences, you might cause them to relive or share events that are emotionally distressing. As a researcher, you should be prepared to respond with kindness and sensitivity to any participant's emotional distress. If you know your topic is especially sensitive, you might consider bringing tissue to your interview for your participant's convenience, and you should not be afraid to pause the recorder and give your participant time to collect themselves should the need arise.
8. *Value your participants, their insights, and their time.* Being a participant in any research study takes time and effort. As a researcher, it is important to value them, the efforts they have made, and the insights they share. Although you have many things you want to accomplish in your interview, one of the most essential things should be to treat your participants with respect and dignity and to communicate your appreciation for their involvement. Thank them for being a part of the study and acknowledge the sacrifice of their time. Give them the opportunity to ask you questions both before and after the

interview is complete. These are small but important steps that can help you build goodwill with your research participants, ultimately creating an interview process that is not only effective but also ethically sound.

Conclusion: Using Semi-Structured, In-Depth Interviews to Understand Social Support Processes

Overall, the method I chose for this study worked well and allowed me to accomplish my goals successfully. Through the interviews I conducted, I gathered some interesting insights about how individuals interact with friends and family when trying to lose weight, and I was also able to draw some tentative conclusions about what people might do to more successfully support one another—an important finding with potential implications for large-scale studies and interventions on weight loss. The goal of this project was to gain insight into participants' experiences in such a way as to create potential jumping-off points for future research. Ultimately, through my interviews with participants, I gained a more complete understanding of how young adults interact with one another when trying to lose weight. In my opinion, the best research experiences are those where the researcher concludes the study feeling as though they have answered their primary questions of interest, and they have also gained or enhanced their skill set as a researcher. I am happy to say that through this process, I learned essential techniques for effectively conducting interview research and refined my skills, achieving a truly successful research experience.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. I talk about three broad types of interviews in this case study. Can you think of a situation or context where each different type of interview might be better suited than the others to accomplish a researcher's goals?
2. In this case study, I talk about some of the challenges I faced in completing my research. What are some additional challenges that a researcher might face when completing interviews?
3. In reading about some of the intricacies involved in conducting interview research, what surprised you most about the process and/or its challenges?
4. What other methods might I have used to capture information about how people manage the supportive efforts of their friends and family when trying to lose weight? What might be some benefits and drawbacks of these different methods?
5. I talk about the importance of treating participants with respect and valuing their contributions. Why do you think this is important? Is it more important in interview research than in research conducted using different methods? Why or why not?

Further Reading

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