

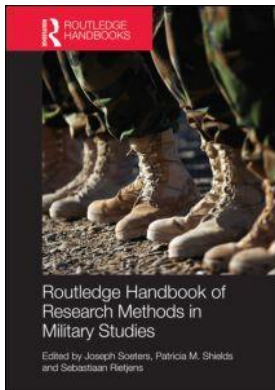
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203093801.ch11>

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Published online on: 09 Jun 2014

How to cite :- Brenda L. Moore. 09 Jun 2014, *In-Depth Interviewing from: Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 02 Oct 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203093801.ch11>

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IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

Brenda L. Moore

B.L. Moore (1996; 1998). *To Serve My Country, To Serve My Race: The Story of the Only African American WACs Stationed Overseas during World War II*. New York: New York University Press.

To Serve My Country is a qualitative study about women who served in the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion (CPDB). The unique factors of being African American, female, and in the United States Army during World War II are discussed throughout the book. The 6888th CPDB was the only unit of African American WACs (women serving in the Army Corps) that was stationed overseas during the war. The battalion was a result of civil rights activists pressuring the War Department to extend the same opportunity to African American WACs to serve overseas that white WACs had. Consisting of more than 800 WACs, the battalion was segregated by race and gender. Members of the 6888th came from all walks of life; some were professionals and others were unskilled. The unit reflected the diversity of African American women in the broader society. The book is about their lives before, during, and after military service. The study illustrates how members of the 6888th actively shaped their lives in an institution that mirrored race and gender biases found in American society during that historical period.

During the time this study was conducted, there was an established body of literature on the service of African American men during World War II. In addition, studies of the contribution of white women to the war effort and the gender inequality they encountered were mounting. However, there was very little documented about the military service of African American women. *To Serve My Country* would help to fill that void.

Moore began the study by reviewing scholarly literature and archival documents on changes in Army policies affecting the enlistment and assignments of racial minorities and women. An Army roster with the names of members of the 6888th surfaced during an extensive review of archival documents. After further investigation, Moore was able to locate a few of the former members. As the study progressed, a snowball sampling design was used to identify additional members. A total of 51 former members of the 6888th were interviewed for this study.

A few of the salient themes include (i) a controversial battalion resulting from a socio-political campaign to allow African American WACs to serve overseas; (ii) a desire on the part of members of the 6888th to meet their citizenship obligations through military service; (iii) unit cohesion; race and gender discrimination members experienced in the United States unified them, giving them the determination to perform beyond expectation; (iv) treated with dignity and respect; all of the respondents claimed that Europeans did not discriminate against them due to their race. Unlike race relations in the United States, all of the women spoke of their interactions with Europeans socially, as guests in their homes as well as socializing in public establishments such as recreational centers and pubs. This information could only be obtained through in-depth interviews.

There are several methodological concerns that accompany the use of in-depth interviewing as a primary source. Two major hurdles the researcher encountered from the outset were: (i) Obtaining information about the battalion, much of which was buried in archival records; and (ii) locating former members of the unit. After information about the battalion was gathered and prospective interviewees had been identified and interviewed, questions about authenticity surfaced. Were respondents able to remember events that occurred some 40 years prior to the interview? How reliable were their memories with regard to specific facts?

Qualitative methods provide valuable tools for analyzing human experiences and perceptions. Unlike quantitative research, those based on qualitative methods allow for full conceptualization of a phenomenon and a more complete understanding of social processes and complex cultural factors. A powerful technique used by qualitative researchers is the *in-depth interview*, which is often the preferred method of data collection for qualitative studies. My objectives for this chapter are to: (i) Show how the in-depth interview differs from other types of interviews used by researchers; (ii) examine the main steps involved in conducting in-depth interviews; (iii) discuss a few limitations with this methodological approach and ways of addressing them; (iv) illustrate how the technique of interviewing has been used extensively in research on military personnel and veterans; particularly narrative, phenomenological, oral history, ethnographic, grounded theory, and case studies; (v) finally, I discuss some factors that make studies of the military institution different from those of other societal institutions.

Categories and types of interviews

Structured, unstructured, or semi-structured

Interviews can be separated into three broad categories: structured, unstructured, or semi-structured. The structured interview is a quantitative method that is usually used in surveys. Such interviews are formal and consist of pre-established, closed-end questions. The questions are standardized and direct with a limited number of possible responses. Each respondent is asked questions in the same sequence and are prompted to give rational, rather than emotional responses. Interviewers are usually neutral and impersonal during structured interviews and are given little or no room to deviate from the pre-established script (Fontana and Frey 2000).

By contrast, unstructured interviews are used in qualitative studies. They are informal and consist of open-ended questions which allow respondents to elaborate on a topic. There are no pre-established questions with pre-set responses; nor is there a preexisting framework.

Unstructured interviews give researchers the flexibility to ask unplanned questions during the interview and to probe respondents for clarification (McCracken 1988; Fontana and Frey 2000).

The semi-structured interview contains both structured and unstructured questions; however it is more flexible than the structured interview but not as amorphous as the unstructured interview. Although there is a general framework of themes to be explored in semi-structured interviews, new questions arise during the interview based on something the respondent says. This was the case with my study of the 6888th. For example, some of the questions asked were as follows:

Let's Talk About Your Experiences with the Six-Triple Eighth

15. Describe the training that the group received to prepare for overseas duty?_____
16. How were you treated by white United States military personnel when you were in England and France during the war?_____
17. How were you treated by African American men in uniform when you were overseas during World War II?_____
18. How were you treated by the British and the French while you were overseas during World War II?_____
19. What social activities were available to members of the 6888th; and did you take advantage of those activities?_____

Each question, illustrated above, allowed the interviewee to expound on the topic in her own words. For the study, several lead questions were asked about respondents' lives before, during, and after military service thereby stimulating discussion and allowing the interviewee to elaborate. It is through this inductive method that I was able to examine themes that emerged from the interview data; rather than imposing a theoretical framework on the data.

One-on-one, telephone, or focus group

The in-depth interview is an unstructured or semi-structured method that may be separated into three types: one-on-one, telephone, or focus group. Each type has its advantages as well as its obstacles. Many researchers, me included, prefer to conduct in-depth interviews by using the face-to-face, one-on-one method. This method requires an interview setting in which interviewees are comfortable talking and sharing their views. Interviews of former members of the 6888th were usually conducted in a quiet area of their homes. During WAC reunions, I interviewed respondents in my hotel suite. These proved to be good venues for one-on-one interviews.

It is not always feasible for the interviewer to travel long distances to conduct one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. Sometimes the process of traveling, obtaining a venue, and conducting in-depth interviews can be cost prohibitive, requiring a fair amount of time and money. When one-on-one, face-to-face interviews are not possible, telephone interviews present a good alternative. Such was the case with my study of the 6888th. There were several women whom I interviewed by telephone, as resources were not available to travel to their homes. Gertrude LaVigne, who lived in Anchorage at the time of my study, is a case in point. I conducted multiple interviews with her by telephone after receiving her informed consent form by mail. All of the women interviewed by telephone consented to being interviewed by mail. They each

returned their informed consent to me by mail, along with a telephone number and best time to call them.

A possible challenge associated with the one-on-one interview method may occur if the respondent refuses to speak. Whether the interview is one-on-one, or one conducted by telephone, for it to be successful, respondents have to be articulate and willing to speak (Cresswell 2007). If a respondent is inarticulate, shy, or reticent, then the one-on-one interview may not yield sufficient data. An additional obstacle to the telephone interview is that the interviewer cannot see the non-verbal communication of respondents. This may make it difficult for interviewers to determine how the respondent feels about a question, and whether or not to probe. A researcher's careful attention to the voice tone of respondents during telephone interviews alleviates this problem.

Another alternative to the one-on-one interview is the focus group, where several people are interviewed simultaneously. Although some methodologists assert that the focus group interview is mainly a qualitative method (Madriz 2000), this approach may be used in quantitative or qualitative studies. The interview may be structured, soliciting answers to closed-ended questions. In this case, the focus group interviewer would be formal, requiring interviewees to stay rigidly on a topic. In other cases the focus group may be unstructured, and the interviewer may be flexible, asking open-ended questions and allowing respondents to speak freely. In either case, the focus group interviewer assumes an additional role of group moderator, and is responsible for managing the dynamics of the group (Fontana and Frey 2000).

Methodological steps

There are several steps researchers must take in preparing for an in-depth interview. These steps include: reviewing scholarly literature on the topic, designing an interview protocol and administering a pretest to refine the interview questions (Babbie 2007; Cresswell 2007). Additionally the researcher must identify interviewees, determine the type of interview to conduct (one-on-one, telephone, or focus group), and find a venue for conducting the interview (Babbie 2007; Cresswell 2007; Adler and Clark 2011). A further requirement in the United States is the informed consent form. Investigators must obtain informed consent from interviewees prior to starting the interview; as required by the institutional review board (IRB). All research involving human subjects are required by U.S. law to be reviewed by an IRB, a committee designated by the research institution to approve and monitor the study. The final steps in the methodological process are analyzing and writing. After the data have been collected, then the investigator must analyze it and write-up the findings.

Reviewing previous literature

As a first step, it is helpful to begin by researching existing literature on a selected topic and developing preliminary research questions. When I first decided to conduct a study on African American WACs who served overseas during World War II, I began by examining scholarly literature on African American men who served during that period (Lee 1966; Foner 1974; MacGregor 1981, etc.). There was a considerable amount of literature written about racial segregation in the American armed forces during World War II. There were not as many scholarly studies on women who served in the military during any period. There was only a dearth of information written about African American women's military service. Consequently, it was necessary for me to review several archival sources in order to learn more about the military experiences of women. The U.S. Army special studies of the Women's Army Corps, and other documents at the Center of Military History, were thoroughly examined.

My review of documents at the Military Reference Branch of the National Archives revealed information about the development of a Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (the precursor to the Women's Army Corps) in the United States. A careful investigation of military documents allowed me to learn more about the political circumstances that lead to the development of the 6888th. Further exploration disclosed exactly when each member of the 6888th was enrolled in the Army, the region of the country she entered the military from, and her duty stations. I eventually located a roster with the names of some of the African American women who had served in the battalion.

In addition, other documents from the archives of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) verified what so many of my informants had stated during interviews about the role of Mary McLeod Bethune in encouraging them to serve in the military. Several records of the NCNW show Bethune's endorsement of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Other documents revealed that Bethune conferred with the Director of the Corps, Colonel Oveta Hobby, and was assured that African American women who enrolled would be treated fair and equitably, and of the 450 officers, 40 would be African American. The documents also cited Bethune as stating that her endorsement of the WAACs was not an endorsement of its policy of racial segregation; integrating the military was yet another battle.

Refining the research question

During my review of archival documents it became apparent that the experiences of African American women in the military during the World War II era differed dramatically from those of African American men and white women. Yet, there was virtually nothing written in the scholarly literature on the African American women's experience. As observed by other scholars, academic studies about African Americans focused on African American men, and those about women focused on women of European descent (Hull et al. 1982). This was also true of military studies where the voices of African American women had been silent. African American women experienced both racial and sexual oppression in American society. The example study discusses the African American WAC experience during World War II revealing such objective facts as their occupational assignments and their duty stations. But it also discloses subjective information such as how they were received, what military service meant to them, and if they perceived the military to be a turning point in their lives.

Designing a protocol and obtaining IRB approval

As mentioned above, in the United States all universities are designated by the federal government to review and ensure that all research projects involving human subjects comply with federal regulations. The interview protocol and IRB review must be completed before researchers can begin interviewing respondents. Thus, another methodological step is to construct a protocol which is reviewed by an institutional review board (IRB). The IRB is responsible for protecting the rights and the welfare of research subjects. I developed a research protocol consisting of a research proposal and a semi-structured interview schedule, which was submitted to my university's IRB for approval. After obtaining IRB approval, I was ready to go out into the field.

Included in my protocol was a questionnaire consisting of a semi-structured research design, with both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions were used to ascertain specific facts, i.e. demographic information and data about each participant's military training, occupational specialty, and assignments. Several open-ended questions were asked in an effort to let respondents speak freely on a specific topic and thereby reveal unexpected

insights into their military experiences. Using this general framework, I encouraged participants to speak about their lives before they entered the military. Respondents spoke about what it was like growing up. They spoke about their family life, school, work experiences, and what motivated them to join the military. Interviewees were also encouraged to speak about their experiences in basic training, advanced training, and permanent duty stations. Participants were asked to make comparisons between their occupational assignments and quality of life at their stateside (CONUS) and European (ETO) duty stations. Respondents were also asked about returning home after service and effects that the military had on their post-service lives. Each respondent was encouraged to speak openly about what military service meant to them personally.

Selecting interviewees

Selecting interviewees is yet another step in the process of qualitative research. Interviewees for the example study were selected through a purposeful sampling method. In the early stages of the research process it is necessary for investigators to make initial contact with prospective interviewees. I mailed a letter of introduction to all of the prospective interviewees, specifying the purpose of my study and inviting them to participate. While a couple of women declined to be interviewed, the overall response rate was quite positive.

It is important for the researcher to establish a rapport with respondents, obtaining their trust and confidence early in the interviewing process. During the interview, respondents should be made to feel at ease. Researchers must be attentive listener, allowing respondents to talk freely. It is also imperative that the researcher does not superimpose his/her viewpoint on the interviewee's responses; views of the respondent should be represented authentically. I found my interviewees eager to share their experiences with me, and they were willing to introduce me to other women who had served with the unit. With each interview, the names of one or two additional women were revealed to me. This snowball process continued throughout the entire interviewing period.

Fifty-one women who served with the 6888th were interviewed for this book, 5 officers and 46 enlisted women. These women truly represented the diversity that characterized the unit. Respondents represented the different geographical areas, different socioeconomic backgrounds, and different educational levels of the more than eight hundred women assigned to the battalion.

Determining the type of interview

As mentioned above, investigators of qualitative studies must determine the type of interview they will use; whether they will collect data by telephone, focus group, or individually, face-to-face. For the example study, all three types of interviews were conducted. Some of the women were interviewed by telephone, and others were interviewed in person, and I also met and interviewed small groups of women at two national events held for women veterans. The first event, the Fiftieth Anniversary Convention of the Women's Army Corps, was held at Fort McClellan, Alabama in May 1992. The second was the Black WAAC-WAC Women in the Services Eighth Biennial Reunion held in September of the same year in Orlando, Florida. During these events, hotel suites were used to conduct informal focus group discussions with respondents about their service experiences. All of the in-depth interviews helped me to gain a perspective about serving in an all-black female unit during World War II that I would not have gotten otherwise.

Analyzing and writing-up the findings

The final methodological steps in qualitative research are analyzing the data and writing-up the study. Usually data collected by in-depth interviews are audio-taped and transcribed. This was the case with my study on the 6888th as well. After the data are collected and transcribed, it is necessary for the qualitative researcher to organize the text of transcripts through a process known as coding. Although the specifics of coding vary from researcher to researcher, the goal remains the same regardless of which approach is being used. Through the course of coding, the qualitative investigator moves from a lower to a more abstract level of understanding (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Strauss and Corbin 1998). There are several steps involved in the coding process. One step is to look for recurring themes that surface throughout the data. These themes will form the bases of theoretical constructs that are elaborated upon in the narrative.

For the *example study*, a grounded theory approach was used in both data collection and analysis. Using this methodological approach allowed me to analyze the data throughout the data collection process. Three levels of coding were used (*open*, *axial*, and *selective*) as illustrated in Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research*. In the first level of coding, *open coding*, each line of transcribed data was examined for frequently used words and phrases, and then grouped into categories. During this initial process of analysis, a comparison of words, phrases, and short passages of the text was done. Numerous memoranda were written about the concepts that emerged, taking note of similarities and differences occurring in the text. This was a very lengthy and often tedious process before codes began to cluster around emerging categories.

In the second step of my data analysis, I began to think of the frequently used words and phrases analytically, and to be more theoretically sensitive. In this step, which Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) refer to as *axial coding*, preliminary categories and subcategories developed during open coding were connected. Ways that these categories were related to each other began to surface. It was during this process that I was able to give meaning to the events occurring in the lives of members of the 6888th. This process was repeated many times until each category was fully conceptualized (*saturated*) and there was no additional information being learned. At that point, for example, the socio-political conditions under which the 6888th was formed were clearly understood. The involvement of political officials in advocating for an African American WAC unit to serve overseas, and the letter writing campaign on the part of private citizens toward this end had greater meaning as a result of *axial coding*. This coding process also uncovered meaning underlying some of the decisions members of the 6888th made while serving in the United States, while preparing to be deployed overseas, and later when they served in Europe. For example, axial coding gave meaning to such acts on the part of 6888th members as boycotting, refusing to use a water fountain marked "for coloreds only," refusing to use a recreational facility that was allocated to them in Europe, and performing their work duties beyond what was expected of them by some military officials.

In the final step of my data analysis, *selective coding*, a core category was selected and related all other categories to it. In this final step, relationships between categories were validated. Two salient themes that emerged from the data were: (i) the 6888th CPDB resulted from a social-political struggle for African American women to have the right to serve in all facets of the U.S. Army opened to women during World War II; (ii) the members of the 6888th were eager to serve overseas. During my interviews with respondents almost all of them mentioned that the 6888th was established as a result of a political campaign to allow African American WACs to serve overseas. This claim was verified in archival data, such as the Bethune Museum and Archives, the National Association of Colored People's (NAACP)

historical publication, *The Crisis* magazine, and such archival newspapers as the *Amsterdam News*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

In addition, the women expressed their excitement about the opportunity to serve abroad. This enthusiasm stemmed not only for a desire to travel, but from an expressed need to demonstrate to the United States that African Americans were ready, willing, and able to fulfill the obligation of citizenship. Moreover, these women were eager to dispel racial stereotypes and myths that pegged African American women as being biologically incompetent and inferior to white women. A couple of examples of how these themes are represented in the final analysis of the study are illustrated in the following quotes from the book:

Noel Campbell Mitchell was stationed at Fort Oglethorpe when she received a letter from a good friend informing her of the Army's plans to deploy "Negro" WACs overseas:

We had joined the Army together and she had been my commanding officer for nine months . . . We hadn't seen each other for over two years but had kept in touch . . . I read the letter and was dumbfounded. Edna said that it was true that colored WACs were to go overseas. The plans were being made at Des Moines and she had been informed that she would be commander of the troops, and if there were any women she wanted as her officers she could ask for them. She said she had thought about me, and if I was interested she would submit my name . . . I was excited because ever since I had heard the rumors I was sure if the opportunity came, I would certainly volunteer.

(Moore 1998: 17)

Similarly, Gladys Carter says that "when the word got out that there was going to be a group [of African American women] to go overseas, everybody wanted to go. I know I wanted to go. I think I would have climbed up a mountain to get on the list" (Moore 1998: 18).

These quotes do not only reveal an historic policy change allowing African American WACs to serve overseas during the war, but they also reflect the women's personal feelings about the change. Almost all of my interviewees revealed that they were excited about the opportunity to serve overseas and were ready to go. A synthesis of the data in the book shows that these women wanted to serve overseas to show that they too were American citizens and were willing to meet the obligation of citizenship by supporting the war effort and serving overseas. What is more, they expected to receive full citizenship rights in the United States after fulfilling their citizenship obligation of military service.

Why and when is it appropriate to use in-depth interviews?

In-depth interviews are best used when explanations are required. For the example study, the in-depth interview allowed me to collect explanatory data about members' military experiences in their own words. Questions requiring subjective answers can only be obtained through the in-depth interviewing method. For example: Who were these women and what were their individual backgrounds? Why did they join the military during a time in American history when they were denied the very rights they were willing to serve for? What were their personal living, working, and social experiences while serving in Europe? How did military service affect their lives when they reentered the civilian world, and later? What can their experiences teach us more broadly about social conflict and social change? These questions can best be answered through in-depth interviews.

Although oral histories were collected for my study on African American WACs, much of the data were obtained from archival documents such as government reports and newspaper articles, and in some cases personal diaries. Studies commonly referred to as *oral histories*, on the other hand, rely almost entirely on the in-depth interview. The purpose of interviewing for oral history is to present an unadulterated view of respondents, without the researcher's interpretation. Oral histories have traditionally been used to give voice to the voiceless, racial minorities in the United States (Tosee and Willams 2007) and women (Gluck and Patai 1991). It is also used to present varied views concerning war. A case in point is Carl Mirra's book, *Soldiers and Citizens*, which is a collection of oral histories of soldiers, veterans, military family members, political policymakers and pundits affiliated with the War in Iraq.

The in-depth interview is also the most appropriate form of data collection in phenomenological research as the primary objective is to learn how subjects perceive an event. For example, Marie Shaw and Mark Hector (2010) researched the experiences of American military members who had been stationed in Iraq and/or Afghanistan since the conflict began in 2003. Using phenomenological method, these researchers interviewed ten military men who had returned from the war zone since 2004. Interviews were necessary for this study as the researchers' objective was to understand the meaning of the experiences of military members stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Interview data provided information about whether or not respondents felt they should be deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Interviewees also were able to elaborate on the dangers associated with their military assignments and the impact of deployment on their families. Again, these data can only be obtained through in-depth interviews.

Researchers using the grounded theory approach rely greatly on the in-depth interview. In addition to my study of the 6888th CPDB, many scholars use a grounded theory approach in their research on military personnel. Laura Miller (1997) used grounded theory methods to examine resistance strategies used by Army men to target women in their units. To this end, she interviewed soldiers at work sites, during meals, in the field, on military convoys, and on air transport overseas to learn about gender relations in the U.S. Army. Interviews were critical to learn what type of conflict and cooperation occurred between female and male soldiers in the field. Miller also observed how soldiers manage work and family obligations, and what women's experiences were in deployment environments. To obtain this information, it was necessary for Miller to conduct in-depth interviews and ask open-ended questions.

In-depth interviews have also proven to be a valuable method of data collection for case studies. In her case study of Seaside, California, Carol McKibben (2012) interviewed former soldiers and government officials to illustrate the influence Fort Ord had had on fostering democracy in that city. Central to McKibben's argument is that soldiers of all races shared a high regard for authority, law, order, patriotism, and belief in family. McKibben argued persuasively that Seaside became a minority-majority city made up of soldiers who had experienced integration on base and challenged segregation in their civilian community. Studying the impact that the military had on race relations in Seaside, McKibben had to draw upon the daily experiences of its residents through the use of the in-depth interview.

Finally, ethnographic studies also depend upon in-depth interviews. This is evident in Gold and Friedman's ethnographic study of cadets. These researchers were particularly interested in how cadets cope with stress at the U.S. Military Academy. They conducted informal interviews with upper-class cadets from which they were able to learn about stress associated with leadership roles as well as stress associated with being a new cadet.

In all of these qualitative studies the researcher learns from the perceptions and the experiences of respondents. Each study represents a systematic inquiry concerned with understanding human interactions. Through the use of non-numerical data, patterns of social phenomena are

studied in an effort to uncover meaning. By using the in-depth interview, each researcher, in the studies mentioned above, were able to identify issues pertaining to military personnel organically, rather than with pre-defined answers.

A few limitations and ways of addressing them

Although the in-depth interview can be a powerful source of information, it is not without its limitations. An extensive discussion of the limitations of qualitative studies is beyond the scope of this chapter; however, a few are highlighted below. Three major limitations of qualitative research based on the in-depth interview include the lack of reliability, generalizability, and the problem of self-selection. The data collected by interviews are not always reliable and may not yield the same results when duplicated. Among the questions raised about data collected through interviewing are those having to do with the accuracy of respondents' reporting (see Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Is the respondent exaggerating or otherwise embellishing the truth? Does the respondent remember the details of past events?

One of the concerns I had about interviewing members of the 6888th CPDB is that much of the data relied upon their memory of lived experiences many years prior to the interviews. My concern about accuracy was somewhat assuaged by studies that showed the elderly to have accurate memory for events that have occurred in their past. There is some literature that suggests that people's memories actually improve as they get older and reflect upon their lives. Hence, some elderly individuals have been found to recall details about their past with accuracy and clarity (Butler 1964).

Still, other studies show that people tend to have poor recall of *interior events*, such as their motivations, intentions, aspirations and hopes about previous actions (Scott and Garner 2013). It is not that people fail to remember all aspects of their lives. According to Greg Scott and Roberta Garner (2013) *external events* that are memorialized in the "public record" of individuals' social lives are remembered best. Similarly, Barry Schwartz (1999) spoke of *biographical memory* as being a social process understood in terms of our experiences with others. This idea of a collective memory is also found in the work of Eviatar Zerubavel (1996) who claimed that social environments; such as family, profession, ethnicity, race, religion, or the like, affect the way individuals remember the past. These social environments formulate *mnemonic communities* those that shape individual thoughts through the process of socialization. Thus, these scholars argue that much of what people remember is filtered and interpreted through their social environment and is consequently distorted.

In a psychological context, an explanation for distorted memories of interviewees may be found in Dan McAdams' (1993) discussion of the self-narrative; or what he refers to as *personal myth*. McAdams argues that *nuclear episodes* (key events) are those that are special in a person's life story. For McAdams, it is normal for people to tell tales that they compose over the course of their lives in an effort to discover what is true and meaningful. In his words, "In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves" (McAdams 1993: 11).

What we can conclude from all of the studies mentioned above is that interviewees are not always able to distinguish between what is real and what is perceived. To the degree that members of the 6888th CPDB shared the experiences of serving overseas in a racially segregated battalion, during World War II, they may be viewed as being a mnemonic community. Surely, their recollections of events were often shaped by their collective memory and interpretation. Although there is no way for an investigator to eliminate all errors found in self-reporting, such errors can be minimized. I addressed the possible issue of inaccurate memory in my study

by examining archival documents from multiple sources to verify events. In addition to the research facilities mentioned above, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the Headquarters United States Air Force Historical Research Center at Maxwell Air Force Base are other examples. Additional sources like these helped me to confirm events and times discussed by the interviewees in my study.

Another limitation is that data obtained through the in-depth interviewing method is that it is not generalizable. This is to say that qualitative methods often lack the scope and variation necessary for study results to apply to populations and circumstances outside the original study. Common to qualitative study is the fact that nonprobability sampling is used to obtain respondents, and the sample does not reflect the larger population. There usually is not sufficient data in qualitative studies to make predictions based on probability. Generalizability is generally not an objective of qualitative researchers. This was not the goal for my study on the 6888th as I was not seeking to find statistical trends. My objective was to provide detailed information about a group of women who served in the Army during World War II for the purpose of understanding. However, some qualitative researchers address this issue of generalizability by employing a multi-method strategy thereby capturing both broad as well as individual perspectives. For example, Miller (1997) supplemented her ethnographic data by administering questionnaires to a more representative sample of the Army. This allowed her to obtain precise and detailed information from in-depth interviews as well as observe statistical trends.

A methodological issue closely related to that of generalizability is the problem of selection bias among respondents who volunteer for the study. The perceptions of those who volunteered may have differed from those who did not volunteer for the study. This is an issue associated with all interview data. It is an issue most often found in oral histories, like Mirra's study mentioned above, which depend almost entirely on subjective interviews. Surely, the question of selection bias surfaces in Mirra's as well as other oral history studies. Mirra addresses this issue by interviewing a variety of people, representing diverse perspectives concerning the United States involvement in the Iraq War. He interviewed active-duty military members, family members of soldiers, military veterans, as well as government officials. Many of his interviewees had opposing viewpoints about the Iraq War. By presenting multiple perspectives as to why the United States invaded and occupied Iraq, and the consequences of such action, Mirra was able to present a broad dialogue on the subject and drastically reduce the effects of sample bias.

Problems associated with reliability, generalizability, and selection bias are indeed valid critiques of many qualitative studies, to include that of the 6888th CPDB. However, in spite of these limitations, qualitative studies have been found to produce valuable findings for human research.

What makes studying the military special?

The military differs from other social institutions given its mission of national defense. By necessity, levels of security are high which often pose unique challenges for qualitative researchers. Military personnel sacrifice some of their civil liberties by joining the armed forces and the freedom of speech is one of them. Therefore, in order to interview military personnel, researchers must follow military protocol, seeking permission from the service's public relations office, who in turn will obtain permission from the commanding officer. There is no guarantee that permission to interview active military personnel will be granted.

It is not always possible for researchers to interview desirable subjects. This was the situation with Gold and Friedman's (2000) ethnographic study of cadets at West Point. Although their primary interest was to study how new cadets cope with stress at the United States

Military Academy, they were not permitted to interview new cadets due to military restrictions. Therefore, Gold and Friedman's analysis of new cadet was based on direct observations of such daily activities as mountaineering, drill competitions, weapon exercises, marksmanship, obstacle course maneuvers, and the like. These authors also elicited reflections of upper-class cadets to gain insight on what it is like being a new cadet.

It is not unusual for qualitative researchers studying the active military to acknowledge the highly secured environment and modify their methods accordingly. Miller's (1997) study is a case in point. Interviewing active-duty military members through discussion groups, one-on-one unstructured interviews, participant observation, as well as informal conversations with soldiers, she relied on note-taking rather than audio-tapes. She explained in her methods section that: "Given the military context and the sensitive nature of some of the issues, I relied on written notes rather than tape-recording."

If a researcher is conducting an historical study, as I did in my study of the 6888th, then the challenge is not obtaining permission from the command to conduct the interview, but locating the former military member after so many years of them being separated from service. Military services generally do not collect information on its members after they separate from active-duty. The whereabouts of some former military personnel is easier to trace when they are active in Veteran's organizations, and/or actively participate in reunions that are organized and held by former service-members. These sources were valuable to me when I was trying to locate former members of the 6888th.

Finally, the challenges of collecting data on active military personnel surface when the objective of the researcher is to collect primary data. There are perhaps fewer obstacles for quantitative researchers studying the military as the American armed services are required to publish a wealth of demographic data in annual statistical reports that are public access and invaluable for quantitative analyses. Given the requirement of accountability the U.S. military has to disclose information to the civilian populace through reports submitted to Congress, the General Accounting Office, and the U.S. President, as well as to other public agencies. Volumes of data are reported each fiscal year regarding demographic trends of active-duty personnel, reservists, and members of the National Guard each year. These data are published and available online at the Department of Defense, Office of Personnel Readiness official websites. Still, research involving survey data is further bolstered by qualitative studies which add meaning in a way that quantitative studies alone do not.

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