How Many Subjects?
A Quick Guideline for Interview Research

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Students often wonder how many interviews they need for their dissertations. The answer, of course, depends on what they want to accomplish, but that doesn't seem to be what has penetrated the Fielding culture. Instead, we find the magic number "12". No matter what the project, many students initially propose doing twelve "in-depth" interviews. I suspect that this number is found in some sacred text, which, like most such texts, obscures as much as it reveals.

The next page contains "Spickard's Interview Rule of Thumb": a flow-chart that I developed to help decide how many interviews one really needs. Though pretty clear, even this chart needs to be set in context.

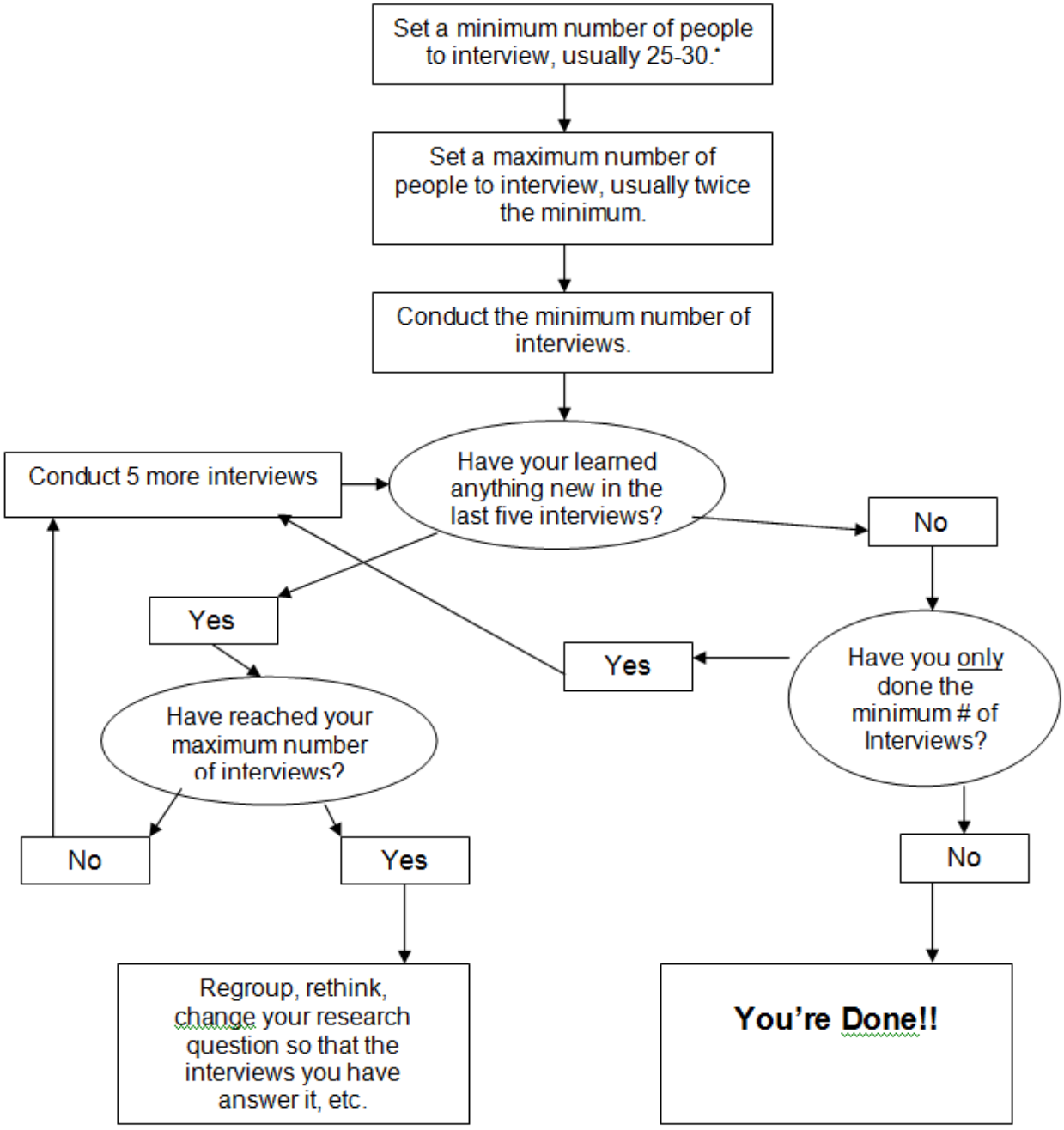
The key question is: "What are you trying to find out?" Here are three possibilities:

1. At one extreme: You want to learn the relative distribution of traits, experiences, etc., among a population. For example: What percentage of that population has experienced burnout? And what percentage of those had their burnout caused by factors "X", "Y", and "Z"?
   This question calls for a quantitative study of a true random sample of the target population. Depending on how large that population is and how detailed an analysis one seeks, one aims for anywhere between 50 to 1500 interview subjects, most likely using a questionnaire or structured interview. (1500 will model the entire U.S. population within a few percentage points.) Response rate matters a lot, as a low number of responses prevents one from generalizing to the population at large.

2. At the other extreme: You want to describe a universal or near-universal process, often an experiential one. One can interview a very small number for this, but the interviews must be both careful and deep: usually several hours spread over several sessions. Phenomenological, they must focus on the process itself, bracketing the meaning-systems by which the interviewees interpret the process. Any indication that the process is not universal nullifies this research design.

3. "Spickard's Rule" is designed for cases in between. These are cases in which you know that your population's experiences vary, their interpretations of those experiences vary, or both. You don't, however, know the range of possibilities. In fact, this is what you wish to discover. And you don't care (at this stage) what percentage of the population thinks "X" and what percentage thinks "Y".
   Thus, you need to do enough interviews that you are sure that you've found most of the possibilities, but you do not need to do them randomly. You are seeking a good spread, but few enough interviews that you can explore in depth.
   "Spickard's Rule" generates a good intermediate number.

Spickard's Interview Rule of Thumb
(for Non-Random Samples)



* My undergraduate students typically aim to interview this many people for their term projects.