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3 A NOTE ON QUALITATIVE  
5 METHODS IN EXPERIMENTAL  
7 ECONOMICS<sup>1</sup>

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15 **ABSTRACT**

17 *John and Storr (this volume) make the case that quantitative methods help*  
19 *establish whether culture matters, but do not tell us how culture matters. To*  
21 *better understand how culture matters, social scientists must use qualitative*  
23 *methods like interviews, in-depth case studies, and archival research.*  
25 *Currently, experimental economists engage qualitative methods through the*  
27 *coding of “chat” transcripts and informal talks with subjects while payments*  
*are arranged. Experimental economists do this because they know that it is a*  
*good idea to talk to the people they seek to understand and learn from their*  
*thought process. The goal of this chapter is to build on the insights from John*  
*and Storr about the importance of qualitative work and to provide experimen-*  
*tal economists with some concrete ideas about qualitative methods that can*  
*improve their research.*

29 **Keywords:** Qualitative methods; experimental methods; experimental  
economics; culture; interviews; natural language

31  
33 **INTRODUCTION**

35 John and Storr (this volume) (JS hereafter) make the case that while quantitative  
37 methods help establish whether culture matters, they do not tell us how culture  
39 matters. On the other hand, qualitative methods like interviews, in-depth case  
studies, and archival research can help establish a mechanism that produces the  
observed outcomes.<sup>2</sup> This argument should make sense to most economists who

41 \_\_\_\_\_  
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1 use experimental methods. At the end of an experimental session, we often ask  
 3 participants about their approach to the game. We understand that we should  
 5 ask questions to the people we seek to understand. And, I believe we do this  
 because the information we glean, can help us understand the meaning a partici-  
 pant attaches to her decision. Herbert Simon states the idea as follows,

7 If [...] we accept the proposition that both the knowledge and the computational power of the  
 decision-maker are severely limited, then we must distinguish between the real world and the  
 9 actor's perception of it and reasoning about it. That is to say we must construct a theory (and  
 test it empirically) of the process of decision. Our theory must include not only the reasoning  
 processes but also the processes that generated the actor's subjective representation of the deci-  
 11 sion problem, his or her frame. (Simon, 1986, pp. S210–11)

13 Simon's notion of a "frame" dovetails with the JS description of culture as, "the  
 lens through which individuals see and make sense of the world." We ask ques-  
 15 tions of our experimental participants because it seems likely each of them carry  
 their frame or culture with them into the experiment (whether that is lab, lab-in-  
 17 field, field, etc.). For an early treatment of this idea, see Hoffman, McCabe, and  
 Smith (1996, p. 655), who write of their hypotheses related to the dictator game,  
 19 "In laboratory experiments we cannot assume that subjects behave as if the  
 world is completely defined by the experimenter." In other words, a subject's  
 21 lens affects how constraints, beliefs, decisions, and the evolution of strategy is  
 understood. As economists become more interested in the effect of culture on  
 23 economic behavior, how we understand the lens through which subjects make  
 decisions becomes essential for developing and testing theories. And, that under-  
 standing might be better attained using qualitative methods.

25 Even though economists acknowledge the important role of frames and seek  
 to pry open the "black box" of subject decision-making through open-ended sur-  
 27 veys,<sup>3</sup> or other methods like eye-tracking, there remains some unease about  
 qualitative work. Some experimental economists have been discouraged regard-  
 29 ing the usefulness of information provided by free-text responses to questions  
 like, "What was your strategy during the game?" This may reinforce skepticism  
 31 of qualitative methods that JS discuss and is related to economist's concerns  
 about incentive compatibility.<sup>4</sup> How can you ask someone a question (survey or  
 33 open-ended) and expect the interviewee to have thought deeply (or to even tell  
 the truth)?<sup>5</sup> JS also touch on how qualitative methods cannot establish causal  
 35 connections (in the same way as quantitative work) or generalize. But, econo-  
 mists should not think qualitative methods are all cost and no benefit. The goal  
 37 of this comment will be to build on JS to further develop thoughts about the  
 usefulness of qualitative research to experimental economists.

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## POST-EXPERIMENT INTERVIEW

43 Some experimental labs vary show-up fees according to the length of the experi-  
 ment (e.g., 60, 90, or 120 min). Often experimental economists are conservative  
 45 in the length of time needed to complete the experiment, allowing for the possi-  
 bility that there could be more subject questions in a particular session, a pro-  
 gram error that needs corrected, etc. What is important is that there is often

1 significant unused time at the end of an experimental session. This is a great opportunity for a post-experiment interview.

3 Post-experiment interviews improve on inadequate responses to questions like, “What was your strategy?” in the following ways. First, if answers aren’t  
5 informative there are opportunities to follow-up, reduce confusion about the participant’s interpretation of the question, challenge contradictory statements,  
7 etc. Second, it seems plausible that subjects would take a face-to-face interview more seriously. Of course, there will still be problems of incentive compatibility,  
9 but, there are also benefits. A post-experiment interview can be helpful to find out whether instructions were unclear, a post-experimental survey question was  
11 interpreted differently than expected,<sup>6</sup> a priming instrument worked as expected,<sup>7</sup> or there are different motivations or constraints present for decision-  
13 making than anticipated.<sup>8</sup> In the pilot stage of an experiment, this can be useful to improve future experiments. Alternatively, this method can be used to vali-  
15 date that subjects were thinking similarly across sessions.

With respect to understanding decision-making, a researcher could follow-up  
17 with subjects in either a general or specific way. The general way of following up would involve generic questions about their approach to decision-making, how/  
19 whether their approach evolved across time, and whether there was something particularly memorable that happened in the experiment. The specific way of fol-  
21 lowing up might involve actually tracking behavior in the experiment and asking questions about particular decisions that were made. Sampling for interviews  
23 could be random or intentional. A researcher might want intentional sampling if they want to select unique cases that could open opportunities to explore new  
25 mental models and extend theory (Small, 2009). On the other hand, the researcher may not want to admit to subjects that their selection for interview is nonrandom.  
27 The experimenter could select subjects randomly to start the experiment, follow their decisions throughout, and construct questions based on their decisions.

29 There are at least two concerns someone might have with interviews. First, one concern is that asking specific questions (random or nonrandom) is that specific  
31 questions reveal you are watching participants. Such a question could induce Hawthorne effects in subsequent experiments and may spillover into the  
33 broader subject pool. The second concern is that each interview is path-dependent and will evolve in different ways. This makes it more difficult to compare  
35 responses across subjects. One potential solution to both of these problems is to construct a computer interview that everyone receives but is populated with  
37 data from the experiment. For example, in a public goods game, a general question might be, “The first decision you made in the game was to contribute [X].  
39 Your next contribution decision was [Y]. What motivated you to make [a different decision vs the same decision]?” Moreover, the experimenter could restrict  
41 the number of possible paths the interview could take. This style of interview would alleviate the Hawthorne effect, since the experimenter could tell subjects  
43 the questions were all constructed in advance, without the knowledge of what subjects would do in the experiment. Restricting the number of paths an inter-  
45 view can take makes responses more comparable. That said, although the free-text responses allow for more expression and nuance from the subject, this

1 method would suffer from a problem similar to surveys. Surveys imply that the  
2 person asking questions knows the relevant questions *ex-ante*. With finite path  
3 interviews, rather than open-ended interviews, the experimenter loses the ability  
4 to follow-up with a subject in potentially meaningful ways about their response.  
5

## 7 CONDUCTING A QUALITATIVE POST-EXPERIMENT 8 INTERVIEW

9 I now turn to the practical matter of how to administer an interview. This seems  
10 necessary because most economists have not received training in qualitative  
11 methods. I have culled the following advice about doing interviews from the  
12 book *Learning from Strangers* (Weiss, 1990). The advice in this book also seems  
13 to conform to other introductory qualitative research methods texts.

14 A good interview starts with a goal: what do you hope to learn? Craft your  
15 questions into an “interview guide” that helps you learn about the topic of interest.  
16 Questions should be jargon-free, open-ended, and one at a time. Finally,  
17 even though you have a script, the conversation will flow more naturally if you  
18 have your script memorized.

19 To start the interview, consider stating the purpose to the interviewee, let  
20 them know about your time constraints, whether you plan to record the interview,  
21 and ask if they have questions. You can also start with a rapport-building  
22 question. At the Experimental Lab in Florida State University, you could start  
23 with a question, “How do you like the window view?” (everything is in the base-  
24 ment and the only window is into the lab).

25 During the interview, use active listening techniques to show you are listening  
26 and you care about the contribution the participant is making to your research.  
27 Common phrases used are, “Tell me more about that”, “That is really interesting”,  
28 or repeating back to them what they said. You can also ask clarifying  
29 questions like, “What did you mean by [...]” or “Do you mean that [...]” or if a  
30 participant makes contradictory statements, challenge them, “Two statements  
31 you made stand out [...] Can you help me to reconcile those ideas?” Because  
32 you are having a conversation with your experimental participants, the interview  
33 might go in an unexpected direction. This can be good because you will have an  
34 opportunity to be surprised at what participants found interesting or salient  
35 about the decision situation. For example, economists who are familiar with  
36 their own models may overestimate how well subject’s understand the structure  
37 of the game or that subjects were using heuristics not previously considered by  
38 the experimenter. But, you can also steer the conversation back to your script  
39 with transitions like, “I really appreciate you helping me understand that.  
40 I would like to move on to a different topic [...]”

41 At the end of the interview, provide some closure for the participant. Thank  
42 them for their honest and thoughtful responses and let them know this has been  
43 helpful for your research. You may also ask them if there is anything about this  
44 experiment that they want to comment on or ask a question about. The goal is  
45 to leave them feeling glad they talked to you.

1 At a minimum, post-experiment interviews should serve to improve your  
2 experiments at the design stage where the rewards are likely greatest for experi-  
3 mental economists. I do think qualitative methods become more important in  
4 the realm of experiments on culture. Introspection about the mental models of  
5 our subjects would likely perform even worse when our subjects come from cul-  
6 tures that are more different than our own.

## 7 8 **LANGUAGE AS DATA**

9 The idea of language in interviews as data seems foreign to economists working  
10 with numerical data. But, language choice, and themes used, count as observa-  
11 tions and can provide insight that helps the researcher hypothesize about differ-  
12 ent relationships (Small, 2009). In fact, some experimental economists have  
13 noted that chat communication can provide an excellent window into what  
14 Simon (1986) calls the “frame”:

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16  
17 Our original motivation for conducting the team’s treatment [where two individuals act as a  
18 team playing a signaling game] was to obtain direct insight into the learning process underly-  
19 ing the development of strategic play through analyzing the team dialogues. These dialogues  
20 are a natural part of the experimental task and are clearly relevant to the task at hand, thereby  
21 providing an unbiased, albeit noisy, window into the underlying learning process. (Cooper &  
22 Kagel, 2005, p. 497)

23 Moreover, this improved understanding about the “frame” can also be used to  
24 develop new theories. As Hennig-Schmidt, Li, and Yang (2008, p. 375) write of  
25 their video-capture of participants playing the ultimatum game, “Our research  
26 might prove important for model building. Subjects’ discussions might not only  
27 corroborate existing models of social preferences but also reveal other important  
28 motives that are not captured yet.”

29 Still, whatever method is used to gather language (chat or interview) structure  
30 must be imposed to make it sensible. Economists often impose linear structure  
31 on quantitative data through OLS. Scholars using qualitative methods impose  
32 structure on language-based data through classification into different categories.  
33 The question for this section is how information can be gleaned and structured  
34 from chat communications or post-experiment interviews so it enhances  
35 understanding.

## 36 37 **CLASSIFICATION OF NATURAL MESSAGES**

38 If we focus first on categorizing chat communications, the two most common  
39 methods to code chat are self-classification and content analysis. In self-  
40 classification, researchers often read through a subset of the text, create categories  
41 of interest, (e.g., did a person misrepresent the truth, did a person make a promise,  
42 did a person make a proposal for a price, effort, or contribution level, did the  
43 person reference feedback from previous rounds, etc.), and code accordingly. In  
44 content analysis, researchers also create these categories but then assign independ-  
45 ent research assistants to perform the coding. While the authors in these studies  
do not provide a rationale for content analysis over self-classification, they do

1 report correlations between reviewers which suggests there is some concern about  
3 the classification process being subjective (Brandts & Cooper, 2007; Cooper &  
5 Kagel, 2005; Hennig-Schmidt et al., 2008; Sutter & Strassmair, 2009). Using  
independent reviewers may reduce bias and give confidence, especially with lan-  
guage that is difficult to categorize.

7 Houser and Xiao (2011) summarize papers using the aforementioned classifi-  
9 cation systems and advance a new method to code chat that is a coordination  
11 game where  $N > 2$  evaluators are given a list of messages and  $K > 1$  categories  
into which messages can be sorted. With this new method, evaluators are pro-  
vided with experimental instructions, take a comprehension test, and classify  
13 each message into a category. Once all messages are classified, a subset of those  
classified messages are chosen to be pay-off relevant. For each pay-off relevant  
messages, a participant was paid if her classification matched the most popular  
classification.

15 Houser and Xiao (2011) test how this method compares to content analysis<sup>9</sup>  
when evaluators are asked to code chat transcripts from a recent experimental  
17 paper on promises. They find that their proposed method for classification is  
more powerful in picking up subtleties than standard content analysis. This  
19 method has been used now in a number of experimental studies that rely on chat  
communications.

21 All these methods require the sorting of language communications into pre-  
defined categories. As Houser and Xiao (2011, p. 4) note, “The XH game pro-  
23 vides an approach to message classification that is especially appealing when  
scholars are either unwilling or unable to specify rules linking the words that  
25 comprise a message to that message’s meaning.” Importantly, the coding of  
themes can be converted into numerical values. Language can be compared  
27 across treatments with a simple comparison of means or can be used as an inde-  
pendent variable in multivariate regression. Finally, it is worth noting that all  
29 these techniques can also be applied to interviews.

31

## CONCLUSION

33 If we want to understand human behavior, we need a window into the thought  
35 processes of our subjects. At present, experimental economists attempt to gain  
insight through post-experiment free-text responses and review of chat commu-  
nications. We do this because we want to understand what Simon called the  
37 “frame” or how the subject understood their decision situation (Simon, 1986).  
What I have aimed to do in this comment is to help us improve on current uses  
39 of qualitative methods and to see additional uses.<sup>10</sup>

41 JS make an excellent case for qualitative methods in their article. If we run  
an experiment, we may establish differences in outcomes without a well-  
informed rationale for how those differences happened. To develop better  
43 theories and tests, we need to understand how the mechanism is interpreted by  
the subjects. Furthermore, introspection might be reliable for understanding  
45 what people similar to ourselves think about a decision situation, but it becomes  
less reliable when the experimental subjects come from a culture different than

1 our own. Therefore, at a minimum, qualitative work seems to be an important  
 3 complement when it comes to cross-cultural experiments (e.g., Henrich, 2000;  
 5 Henrich et al., 2001; Roth, Prasnikar, Okuno-Fujiwara, & Zamir, 1991). But,  
 7 I think the lessons from John and Storr (2018) apply more broadly to other  
 9 experiments.

**AU-1**

## 7 NOTES

9 1. Thank you to the attendees at the Florida State University experimental economics  
 11 seminar for their comments and suggestions. In particular, I would like to thank Mark  
 13 Isaac, John Hamman, Ellis Magee, and Sebastian Goerg. Thank you also to Virgil Storr  
 15 for reading an earlier draft of this comment and providing feedback.

17 2. Economic theory also tells us “how” or whether some feature of a decision problem  
 19 factors into decision-making. Even with theory, qualitative research is still useful with the  
 21 “how” question because *good theory* should do more than introspect about what the relevant  
 23 variables and parameters are.

25 3. These results are often used to inform the experimenter. The actual post-  
 27 experiment responses are rarely published.

29 4. For example, in their article, JS cite Gächter, Herrmann, and Thoni (2010) comment  
 31 on the likely divergence between selfish behavior in economic games versus self-  
 33 identifying as a selfish person. Interestingly, Pugh (2013) notes that other cultural scholars  
 35 favor surveys and have leveled criticisms similar to those of Gächter et al. (2010) at scholars  
 37 doing open-ended interviews. These critics also argue we do not learn much from  
 39 interviews because people give superficial accounts of past events, seek justification, manage  
 41 their impressions, and sometimes provide contradictory accounts. But, Pugh (2013)  
 43 argues that the impressions people seek to manage are informative about their ideals and  
 45 that contradictory accounts can be reconciled through emotions. In short, interviews can  
 be a useful tool, but, it is important to know how to interpret the data.

5. Smith and Walker (1993) survey 31 lab experiments and find that increased rewards  
 lead to a central tendency in the data that is closer to equilibrium prediction. Moreover,  
 data from experiments with higher rewards have a lower variance. This may be interpreted  
 as increased rewards leading individuals to think more deeply.

6. Experimental economists often conduct multivariate regressions with a host of  
 independent variables. Sometimes these variables are meant to measure difficult concepts  
 like culture. Even with tests to cross-validate survey questions (e.g., construct validity,  
 criterion validity, content validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity) interviews  
 can still give us insight into whether measurement error is random or nonrandom.

7. Priming instruments are especially important with respect to lab experiments on  
 culture. Often working with a model of identity economics (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000),  
 primes cause individuals to place greater weight on the decisions prescribed by some facet  
 of their identity. These primes have been used to illustrate the role of social identity  
 (Benjamin, James, & Strickland, 2010), religion (Benjamin, James, & Fisher, 2016), and  
 individualism/collectivism (Bostashvili, 2015) to name a few. A post-experiment interview  
 could help to validate a priming instrument. For example, in the individualism/collectivism  
 prime one could count the number of times during that post-experiment interview a  
 person used individualist words like “I” and “me” versus more collectivist words like  
 “we” or “us”. If the elapsed time from prime to interview was short enough, one should  
 expect there to be a difference in the language the subject used.

8. In a presentation at the XS/FS experimental workshop, Mark Isaac commented  
 that when he assisted Charles Plott on experiments that Plott would chat with subjects  
 about their decision-making while payments were arranged. Plott writes about one of  
 those past experiments (Cohen, Levine, & Plott, 1978) in Chou, McConnell, Nagel, and  
 Plott (2009, p. 177) writing, “subjects explained choices as their attempt to change the  
 game to one that they thought made more sense given the descriptions of the variables.”

1 9. With content analysis evaluators are provided with experimental instructions, take  
 2 a comprehension test, paid a flat fee for their time, and classify each message into a  
 3 category.

4 10. More investment will likely be needed to improve the use of qualitative methods in  
 5 economics. But, the good news is that experimental economists are likely not excavating  
 6 vast and complex emotional landscapes with our subject pools. Hopefully that affords us  
 7 a lower cost to implementation. Still, the larger the role for qualitative work, the more an  
 8 experimenter may consider adding a coauthor with comparative advantage in qualitative  
 9 research.

## 11 ACKNOWLEDGMENT

**AU:2**

12 Thank you to the attendees at the Florida State University experimental economics semi-  
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 14 John Hamman, Ellis Magee, and Sebastian Goerg. Thank you also to Virgil Storr for  
 15 reading an earlier draft of this comment and providing feedback.

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