

BECOMING A SOCIAL DETECTIVE: OBSERVATIONAL AND PROBING STRATEGIES FOR ELICITING HONEST INTERVIEW DATA

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the persistent challenge of social desirability bias and the presence of “social masks” in interview interactions, which often obstruct the acquisition of authentic and truthful data. Conventional question-and-answer techniques frequently fail to penetrate respondents’ defensive filters. This research aims to develop a systematic framework for adaptive observational techniques through a “social detective” approach to enhance the validity of qualitative data. This study employs a qualitative ethnographic design, where the researcher serves as the primary instrument. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, investigative probing, and participant observation, and analyzed inductively using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings reveal that data honesty can be enhanced through three key techniques: (1) establishing strategic rapport to reduce respondents’ defensiveness, (2) employing strategic silence to stimulate self-disclosure through the psychological mechanism of *horror vacui*, and (3) conducting nonverbal cross-checks to identify behavioral leakage and inconsistencies between verbal statements and body language. The study concludes that this investigative approach effectively mitigates information bias by accessing respondents’ “backstage” realities while maintaining strict adherence to research ethics.

Keywords: *Social Detective; Data Honesty; Strategic Silence; Nonverbal Communication; Research Ethics.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh tantangan yang terus-menerus terkait bias keinginan sosial (social desirability bias) dan keberadaan “topeng sosial” dalam interaksi wawancara, yang seringkali menghambat perolehan data yang autentik dan jujur. Teknik tanya-jawab konvensional kerap gagal menembus filter defensif



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responden. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengembangkan kerangka sistematis untuk teknik observasi adaptif melalui pendekatan “detektif sosial” guna meningkatkan validitas data kualitatif. Studi ini menggunakan desain etnografi kualitatif, di mana peneliti berperan sebagai instrumen utama. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, probing investigatif, dan observasi partisipan, serta dianalisis secara induktif dengan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kejujuran data dapat ditingkatkan melalui tiga teknik utama: (1) membangun hubungan strategis untuk mengurangi sikap defensif responden, (2) menggunakan keheningan strategis untuk merangsang pengungkapan diri melalui mekanisme psikologis horror vacui, dan (3) melakukan pemeriksaan silang nonverbal untuk mengidentifikasi kebocoran perilaku serta ketidaksesuaian antara pernyataan verbal dan bahasa tubuh. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendekatan investigatif ini secara efektif memitigasi bias informasi dengan mengakses realitas “backstage” responden, sekaligus tetap menjaga kepatuhan ketat terhadap etika penelitian.

Kata Kunci: *Detektif Sosial; Kejujuran Data; Strategic Silence; Komunikasi Non-verbal; Etika Penelitian.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of increasingly open and digitally mediated communication, the issue of honesty in social interactions has become more complex and paradoxical (Heitmayer & Schimmelpfennig, 2024; High et al., 2023; Kroencke et al., 2023; Stieger et al., 2023; Teng et al., 2023). While the rapid flow of information suggests greater transparency, it does not necessarily guarantee the accuracy or authenticity of the information produced. Individuals tend to construct socially acceptable self-representations rather than reveal their genuine experiences, particularly in evaluative or formal interaction contexts such as interviews. This phenomenon is closely associated with social desirability bias, defined as the tendency of individuals to present themselves in a favorable manner in accordance with perceived social norms (Helbing & Krumpal, 2025; Krumpal, 2023).

Social desirability bias remains a persistent challenge in qualitative research, particularly in interview-based data collection. Even in in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich and authentic narratives, respondents often provide normative, defensive, or strategically filtered responses. This condition is largely influenced by psychological mechanisms such as impression management and self-presentation, whereby individuals consciously or unconsciously regulate the information they disclose to maintain a positive image (Brosy et al., 2024; Iqbal & Shahid, 2024). As a result, the data obtained may not accurately reflect respondents'

lived experiences, raising significant concerns regarding the validity and credibility of qualitative findings.

A fundamental limitation of conventional interview approaches lies in their overreliance on structured or semi-structured verbal questioning. Although these methods provide flexibility, they often fail to penetrate respondents' defensive filters, particularly when addressing sensitive or personal topics. Empirical studies have shown that individuals frequently exhibit discrepancies between what they say and what they actually experience, especially under conditions of social pressure or evaluation (DePaulo et al., 2003). Consequently, interviews that rely solely on verbal responses risk producing superficial and socially desirable data rather than authentic accounts.

Moreover, communication research highlights the critical role of nonverbal cues in revealing underlying psychological states. Facial expressions, gestures, eye movements, and vocal tone often convey information that is more spontaneous and less controllable than verbal communication (Burgoon, Guerrero, et al., 2021; Gordon & Druckman, 2025; Vrij et al., 2019). In many cases, these nonverbal signals expose inconsistencies between verbal statements and internal experiences, a phenomenon commonly referred to as behavioral leakage. This suggests that qualitative interviews should not be treated merely as verbal exchanges but as complex interactional processes involving multiple layers of communication.

In addition to nonverbal dynamics, the role of silence in interview settings has received increasing attention in qualitative methodology. Silence is not merely an absence of speech but a communicative strategy that can stimulate reflection, cognitive processing, and elaboration of responses. From a psychological perspective, individuals often feel compelled to fill communicative gaps, a tendency linked to the concept of *horror vacui* (Jaworski, 1992). When used strategically, silence can function as a non-confrontational probing technique that encourages respondents to provide more detailed and authentic information.

Previous studies in qualitative interviewing have emphasized the importance of techniques such as rapport building and probing to enhance data quality (Kvale & Brinkmann, S., 2009). Establishing rapport, in particular, has been widely recognized as a crucial factor in reducing social distance and fostering trust between interviewer and respondent. However, most existing approaches remain predominantly focused on verbal strategies and question design, with limited integration of psychological dynamics and nonverbal behavior into a comprehensive methodological framework.

Furthermore, much of the literature on social desirability bias tends to position respondents as passive sources of bias, while overlooking the active role of the interviewer in shaping interactional dynamics. In reality, the quality of qualitative data is not solely determined by respondents' willingness to disclose information but also by the interviewer's ability to create a psychologically safe environment, manage communication flow, and interpret subtle behavioral cues. This indicates a significant gap in the methodological literature, particularly in developing adaptive and interaction-based strategies for improving data authenticity.

To address this gap, the present study proposes a "social detective" approach as an integrative framework for qualitative interviewing. This approach conceptualizes the researcher as an active observer and interpreter who simultaneously engages in verbal interaction, nonverbal observation, and real-time validation of responses. It integrates three core components: strategic rapport to establish psychological safety, strategic silence to stimulate deeper reflection and elaboration, and nonverbal cross-checking to detect inconsistencies and validate data.

Unlike conventional interview methods that prioritize question structure, the social detective approach emphasizes the dynamic and reflexive nature of interviewer–respondent interactions. It draws on interdisciplinary insights from qualitative methodology, social psychology, and nonverbal communication to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how data honesty is constructed during interviews. In doing so, it offers both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of qualitative research methods.

Based on this framework, the primary research question of this study is: How can the "social detective" approach be utilized to enhance the honesty and validity of data in qualitative interviews? The objective of this study is to develop a systematic framework that integrates observational techniques, probing strategies, and nonverbal analysis within the data collection process. The central argument advanced in this study is that data honesty is not solely determined by the quality of questions posed but also by the researcher's ability to manage interactional dynamics and interpret unspoken behavioral cues.

By reconceptualizing qualitative interviewing as a multidimensional and interaction-driven process, this study aims to contribute to the advancement of more adaptive, reflective, and context-sensitive research methodologies. Ultimately, it seeks to enhance the credibility and depth of qualitative data by bridging the gap

between verbal narratives and the underlying psychological realities of respondents.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of social interaction dynamics and the process of meaning construction within interview contexts. The ethnographic approach was selected as it enables researchers to observe participants' behaviors, expressions, and interactions in their natural settings, thereby capturing the phenomenon of data honesty in a more authentic manner (Crabtree & Miller, 2023). Furthermore, this design aligns with the study's objective, which not only focuses on what participants say but also on how meaning is constructed through both verbal and nonverbal interactions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The researcher acted as the primary instrument (human instrument), directly engaging in the processes of data collection and interpretation, thus allowing flexibility and sensitivity to field dynamics.

The study was conducted within social interaction contexts involving interview practices, such as higher education environments and professional training settings in Palembang City. This setting was selected due to its high intensity of interpersonal interactions and the significant potential for the emergence of social desirability bias. The research was carried out from January to March 2025. The participants consisted of 12 informants, including final-year university students, job training participants, and individuals with prior experience in formal interviews. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique that involves deliberately choosing participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The selection criteria included: (1) having participated in at least one formal interview, (2) willingness to provide information openly, and (3) the ability to reflect on their communication experiences. This sampling technique was employed to obtain rich and in-depth data from individuals considered most representative of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data collection was conducted through three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to provide flexibility in exploring participants' subjective experiences, while also enabling the researcher to conduct investigative probing on ambiguous or inconsistent responses (Brinkmann, 2022). Participant observation was employed to capture nonverbal behaviors, such as facial

expressions, gestures, and vocal tone, which serve as important indicators in detecting data honesty (Burgoon, Wang, et al., 2021; Mapala, 2020). Additionally, documentation in the form of field notes and interview recordings was used as supporting data to strengthen interpretation. These data collection techniques were designed triangulatively to ensure comprehensive and in-depth data acquisition.

Data analysis was conducted inductively using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction phase, interview and observational data were coded and categorized based on relevant themes, such as strategic rapport, strategic silence, and nonverbal cross-checking. The data were then presented in the form of thematic narratives to facilitate interpretation, followed by the drawing of reflective and contextual conclusions. To ensure data validity, this study employed source and method triangulation by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation (Miles et al., 2014). Additionally, member checking was conducted to confirm the alignment between the researcher's interpretations and participants' experiences, while peer debriefing was used to enhance analytical objectivity (Cutler et al., 2021). Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to achieve a high level of credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Strategic Rapport in Enhancing Data Honesty

In this study, strategic rapport is conceptualized as the researcher's ability to establish an interpersonal relationship that is egalitarian, non-judgmental, and non-threatening, thereby reducing respondents' defensive mechanisms. Its operational indicators include a relaxed communication atmosphere, the use of empathetic language, and the positioning of the researcher as a collaborative dialogue partner rather than an evaluator. This approach enables respondents to experience psychological safety, which in turn encourages greater openness in sharing their experiences.

Findings from interviews indicate that the level of respondent openness is strongly influenced by the quality of interpersonal interaction. One participant, a final-year university student, explained:

"When the interviewer is relaxed and non-judgmental, I feel more confident sharing my experiences—even those I initially tried to hide."

This statement suggests that strategic rapport plays a crucial role in lowering psychological barriers, allowing respondents to disclose information more authentically.

A similar pattern was observed in responses from a job training participant, who stated:

“At first, I tend to give surface-level answers. But once I feel comfortable with the conversation, I start sharing more honestly.”

This finding indicates that honesty in qualitative data is not immediate but develops progressively as interpersonal comfort increases. Rapport, therefore, not only facilitates access to information but also encourages deeper self-reflection among respondents.

Observational data further support these findings. When rapport was successfully established, respondents displayed more open and relaxed nonverbal behaviors, such as steady eye contact, natural body posture, and more expressive facial gestures. In contrast, during the initial stages of the interview, respondents appeared tense, guarded, and less expressive. This demonstrates that rapport influences both verbal and nonverbal dimensions of communication.

Overall, the findings confirm that strategic rapport is a fundamental prerequisite for eliciting honest data. A clear pattern emerges: the greater the level of interpersonal comfort, the higher the likelihood of obtaining authentic responses. Thus, rapport functions as a foundational element in enhancing the validity of qualitative data.

Strategic Silence as a Nonverbal Probing Technique

Strategic silence in this study refers to the deliberate use of pauses by the researcher following a respondent's answer, with the intention of encouraging further elaboration. Its operational indicators include the presence of communication pauses, minimal verbal intervention, and the use of attentive nonverbal signals indicating continued engagement.

Interview data reveal that silence generates distinct psychological effects. One respondent noted:

“When I finish answering and the interviewer remains silent, I feel the need to add more explanation.”

This response indicates that silence creates a subtle communicative pressure that encourages respondents to fill the conversational gap with additional information.

Another respondent similarly stated:

"Sometimes I realize that my answer is incomplete when the conversation becomes silent."

This suggests that strategic silence not only prompts elaboration but also stimulates self-reflection and reassessment of previously given responses.

Observational findings reinforce these insights. During moments of silence, respondents frequently exhibited signs of cognitive processing, such as shifting their gaze, pausing to think, taking deeper breaths, or reformulating their statements with added details. These behaviors indicate that silence facilitates deeper cognitive engagement.

Overall, the data demonstrate that strategic silence serves as an effective non-confrontational probing mechanism. Compared to direct questioning, silence tends to produce responses that are longer, more detailed, and more closely aligned with respondents' actual experiences.

Nonverbal Cross-Checking in Data Validation

Nonverbal cross-checking is defined as the process of validating data by identifying inconsistencies between verbal statements and nonverbal cues. Indicators include variations in tone of voice, eye contact patterns, body movements, and facial expressions.

Findings reveal that discrepancies between verbal narratives and internal states are common among respondents. For instance, one participant admitted:

"I said I felt confident, but in reality, I was actually nervous."

This illustrates a clear mismatch between expressed statements and internal emotional conditions.

Another respondent stated:

"Sometimes I give a 'safe' answer first, and only later, after being asked again, I tell the truth."

This suggests that respondents often filter information before disclosing their genuine experiences, reflecting the influence of social desirability considerations.

Observational data provide further evidence of such inconsistencies. Respondents who expressed positive or confident statements frequently displayed contradictory nonverbal signals, such as avoiding eye contact, exhibiting restless hand movements, or showing fluctuations in vocal tone. These patterns were

interpreted as instances of behavioral leakage, where underlying emotions unintentionally surface through nonverbal behavior.

Collectively, these findings indicate that nonverbal cross-checking functions as a critical validation mechanism. It enables researchers to detect discrepancies between what respondents say and what they actually feel. The data suggest that authenticity is often more accurately revealed through nonverbal cues than through verbal statements alone.

Table 1. Integrative Pattern of Data Honesty in Interview Findings

Informant Category	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Final-year student	<i>“When the interviewer is relaxed, I tend to be more open.”</i>	Strategic Rapport
Job training participant	<i>“When there is silence, I feel the need to add more to my answer.”</i>	Strategic Silence
Final-year student	<i>“I said I was confident, but in reality, I felt nervous.”</i>	Nonverbal Cross-check
Job training participant	<i>“I initially give a ‘safe’ answer, and only later do I become more honest.”</i>	Combined Indicators

The table above illustrates that data honesty emerges from a complex interaction between the researcher’s communication strategies and the psychological responses of the informants. Strategic rapport plays a crucial role in facilitating initial access to information by reducing respondents’ defensiveness and fostering a sense of trust. In contrast, strategic silence encourages deeper elaboration, allowing respondents to reflect on and expand their answers. Meanwhile, nonverbal cross-checking functions as a validation mechanism, ensuring the consistency and accuracy of the data obtained.

Furthermore, the integration of these three indicators demonstrates that the validity of qualitative data cannot be achieved through a single methodological technique. Rather, an integrative approach is required—one that combines verbal communication, nonverbal observation, and psychological sensitivity. This multidimensional perspective enables researchers not only to capture what is explicitly stated by respondents but also to interpret the underlying psychological dynamics that emerge during the interview process. Consequently, this finding reinforces the concept of the “social detective” approach as a comprehensive and adaptive framework in qualitative research.

A central pattern identified in this study is that data honesty develops progressively over time. At the initial stage of the interview, respondents tend to adopt a defensive stance and provide cautious or socially desirable answers. However, as rapport is established, strategic silence is applied, and nonverbal cues are carefully observed, respondents gradually exhibit higher levels of openness and authenticity. This indicates that honesty in qualitative data is not produced by a single question or technique, but rather emerges through a dynamic and evolving interactional process between the researcher and the respondent.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that data honesty in qualitative interviews should not be understood as a static attribute, but rather as a dynamic outcome of interaction between the researcher and the respondent. This aligns with contemporary qualitative research perspectives, which conceptualize interviews as processes of meaning construction rather than mere instruments of data extraction (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2024). In this context, the quality of interaction becomes a determining factor in the authenticity of the data produced.

The role of strategic rapport, as identified in the results, confirms prior theoretical assumptions regarding the importance of interpersonal relationships in qualitative interviewing. The findings show that respondents become progressively more open as psychological comfort increases. This supports the argument that rapport reduces defensive communication and facilitates self-disclosure. From a psychological perspective, this is closely related to impression management and self-presentation mechanisms, where individuals regulate their responses to maintain a socially desirable image (Meyer & Schermuly, 2024; Brody et al., 2024). By creating a non-judgmental and egalitarian interactional environment, the researcher effectively reduces social desirability bias, as discussed in the introduction (Krumpal, 2023; Helbing & Krumpal, 2025).

Thus, the findings reinforce the idea that honesty does not emerge spontaneously but is socially constructed through interactional conditions that foster trust and psychological safety.

The findings related to strategic silence further extend existing literature on qualitative interviewing techniques. While silence is often treated as a passive element, this study demonstrates that it functions as an active and deliberate probing strategy. Consistent with probing theory (Brinkmann, 2023), silence creates space for reflection, allowing respondents to reconsider and elaborate on their responses. This is supported by cognitive processing theory, which suggests

that individuals require time to access and organize information before articulating it (Theile & Beall, 2024).

Moreover, the observed tendency of respondents to fill conversational gaps confirms the relevance of the *horror vacui* concept discussed in the introduction. Silence, therefore, operates not as a communication barrier, but as a psychological stimulus that encourages deeper disclosure. Compared to direct questioning, this approach appears more effective in eliciting detailed and authentic narratives, particularly in contexts where respondents may initially provide guarded or socially desirable responses.

The findings on nonverbal cross-checking provide strong empirical support for theories of nonverbal communication and deception detection. As outlined in the introduction, nonverbal cues are often less controllable and more spontaneous than verbal expressions (Nguyen & Pedersen, 2025; Van Kleef & Côté, 2024). The presence of behavioral inconsistencies observed in this study—such as mismatches between verbal confidence and nonverbal signs of anxiety—confirms the phenomenon of behavioral leakage.

From a cognitive perspective, this can be explained through cognitive load theory, where individuals attempting to manage impressions or conceal information experience increased mental effort, reducing their ability to control nonverbal behavior (Meyer & Schermuly, 2024). These findings validate the argument presented in the introduction that reliance on verbal data alone is insufficient for ensuring data validity. Instead, qualitative interviews should be understood as multimodal interactional processes, where meaning is constructed through both verbal and nonverbal channels.

Furthermore, the integrative pattern identified in the results—combining rapport, silence, and nonverbal observation—can be interpreted through Goffman's dramaturgical framework, which distinguishes between *frontstage* and *backstage* behavior. In interview settings, respondents often present socially acceptable versions of themselves (frontstage), while their authentic experiences remain concealed (backstage). The “social detective” approach proposed in this study enables researchers to access backstage realities by strategically managing interactional dynamics.

This demonstrates that data honesty is not solely related to the content of responses, but also to the researcher's ability to navigate and interpret the process of self-presentation.

In addition, this study contributes to the literature on social desirability bias by shifting the analytical focus from respondents as passive sources of bias to the

interactional process itself. Previous research has largely emphasized respondents' tendencies to provide socially acceptable answers. However, the findings of this study highlight the active role of the researcher in mitigating such bias through adaptive communication strategies. This supports emerging perspectives that emphasize the co-constructed nature of qualitative data and the importance of researcher reflexivity.

Overall, the findings indicate that data honesty emerges from the interaction of three interconnected elements:

1. Psychological safety (strategic rapport)
2. Reflective stimulation (strategic silence)
3. Behavioral validation (nonverbal cross-checking)

These elements form an integrated system that enhances both the depth and credibility of qualitative data. This integrative perspective is consistent with the view that validity in qualitative research depends not only on methodological rigor but also on the researcher's interpretive competence and sensitivity to interactional dynamics (Crabtree & Miller, 2023).

By synthesizing these findings, this study strengthens the conceptual foundation of the "social detective" approach as a multidimensional and adaptive framework for qualitative interviewing. It offers a more comprehensive understanding of how data honesty is constructed, bridging the gap between verbal narratives and the underlying psychological realities of respondents.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that data honesty in qualitative interviews is not merely determined by the quality of questions, but rather emerges from dynamic interactions between the researcher and the respondent. The findings confirm that the "social detective" approach—integrating strategic rapport, strategic silence, and nonverbal cross-checking—effectively enhances the depth, authenticity, and credibility of qualitative data.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the advancement of qualitative research methodology by shifting the focus from instrument-centered approaches toward an interaction-centered perspective. By emphasizing the integration of verbal, nonverbal, and psychological dimensions, this study extends existing frameworks and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how data authenticity is constructed within interview settings.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer valuable implications for researchers and practitioners. Strategic rapport fosters psychological safety,

strategic silence encourages deeper reflection and elaboration, and nonverbal cross-checking strengthens data validation. Together, these techniques form an adaptive and applicable framework for improving the accuracy of interview-based data across various professional contexts.

However, this study is limited by its relatively small sample size and the contextual specificity of the research setting. Additionally, the interpretation of nonverbal cues remains subject to researcher bias. Future research is therefore recommended to involve more diverse participants, explore different contexts, and integrate technological tools to enhance objectivity. Overall, this study highlights that data honesty is a situationally constructed outcome, reinforcing the role of the researcher as an active “social detective” in qualitative inquiry.

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