



Elite and Expert Interviewing

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Introduction

Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities may involve interviewing people who are famous or in senior roles, often known as elite interviewing. Prominent or ‘elite’ public figures could range from senior government officials, Chief Executives of large companies and community leaders, to individuals famous for their activities in academia, the arts or sport. ‘Expert’ participants may be individuals chosen by virtue of their role or expertise (e.g. editors of national newspapers, high court judges, heads of NGOs, tax lawyers, top-level managers). Anyone who is responsible for and has privileged access to the knowledge of specific groups of people or decision-making processes can be seen as an expert. It is acknowledged that this guidance may not be appropriate in all settings involving interviews with participants who could be considered experts or elites. In ethnographic fieldwork it may not always be immediately clear who the ‘experts’ are and such status can be contested. In some settings it may not be the researcher who is best placed to decide who is and is not the expert.

Research staff or students undertaking elite interviews need to be particularly aware of the issue of and limits to confidentiality and anonymity through all stages of a research project, including anonymity in publications, and will need to have received appropriate training or guidance on how to conduct elite interviewing. Your Department may offer training on conducting elite interviews.

This guidance may also be useful for researchers conducting other types of interview, including oral history interviews.

Recruiting participants

Although initial contact may have been made through professional or social networks, request for access should normally be through a formal letter or an email requesting the interview, which should include information that will help the participant make an informed decision about participation. CUREC's [recommended informed consent templates](#) may be adapted for this purpose. The invitation should include:

1. the name of the study
2. the name and status of the researcher carrying out the study and how to contact them
3. a brief rationale for the study, including its purpose and value
4. why the individual is being invited to take part in the research
5. a timeframe for when and how interviewees can withdraw any information they have provided to the research.
6. an explanation of what the participant will be asked to do, where the interview/ survey will be conducted and how long it might take
7. assurances about the option of confidentiality and use of data, including who will have access to the data, how it will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the study.
8. An explanation of whether the interviewee's direct quotations may be used in any research output.
9. An explanation, if desired, of how participant data will be anonymised and how this anonymisation will be effected.
10. If appropriate, a statement clarifying whether interviewees will have the opportunity to check their transcripts for factual accuracy, especially when anonymity is not desired.

If recruitment is via personal contacts any conflicts of interest or potential for coercion should be acknowledged and addressed within the ethics application.

While, on the one hand, it is widely advised that respondents ought to be given a chance to check the transcripts for accuracy or review reports prior to publication and be offered the opportunity to withdraw from a study within a reasonable and agreed timeframe, some "interviewees may claim their rights in a study as far as censoring the writings"¹. So, while interviewees may be offered the opportunity to view interview notes/ transcripts on request, it should be made clear that they may not alter the interpretation of the transcripts.

If an organisation commissions a research report from a researcher, a written agreement should be put in place at the outset of the project, which limits the commissioner's influence on the report outcome, and how the research findings will be published. Please contact the relevant [Research Services' divisional contracts team](#) for advice. The participants should be made aware of the commission.

Researchers should also check whether translators or interpreters will be used, how they will be briefed and whether their transcripts need to be double-checked by back-translation². CUREC's [Best Practice Guidance \(01\) on Researcher Safety](#) contains guidance on employing local/ casual staff for research projects/ fieldwork, and [template confidentiality agreements](#) are available.

¹ V. Obelene, 'Expert versus Researcher: Ethical Considerations' in *Interviewing Experts*, p. 186

² C. Williams, *Researching Power, Elites and Leadership*, Sage Press, 2012, p. 13

Practical considerations

As with any interviews, thorough background research and preparation for the interview is important to ensure good use of the participants' time.

If interviews are taking place remotely consideration will need to be given to the location of both the interviewer and interviewee. Interviews via telephone, video call (Microsoft Teams is the University's preferred platform) or email need particular thought, as "any upsets are hard to put right at a distance"³. Communication is often easier face-to-face. Without the aid of visual cues, researchers need to pay particular attention to signs that the interviewee might be uncomfortable, need a break or want to stop the interview altogether. Further guidance is available within [CUREC's Best Practice Guidance \(10\) on Conducting Research Interviews](#).

Consent of participants

Written consent

The consent process should be proportionate and tailored to the research. A [written informed consent process](#) is generally recommended for elite and expert participants, so that both the participants and the researchers have a record of what has been agreed (including any limits to confidentiality and anonymity, how data will be used, and a clarification of the participants' right to comment on or possibly correct factual inaccuracies in material.) Explicit consent is needed for the use of quotations in research outputs and whether or not these will be directly attributed to the interviewee. The interviewee may appreciate being given the opportunity to check these. Elite and expert interviewees may expect a degree of control over what is reported by the researcher. It is important to clarify with interviewees whether or not they will be able to check the accuracy of what is reported. However, interviewees should not be offered the opportunity to change the transcript in any significant way (other than to correct factual inaccuracies).

Oral consent

An [oral consent process](#) is permissible if there are strong reasons why a written consent process is not possible (for example, if the interviewee is unwilling to provide written consent), however, this should not be used without the following:

1. Sending a full information letter or email as outlined above.
2. Reiterating the content of the letter verbally before the start of any interview and recording the acceptance of this, ideally either as an audio recording or as a written note in the interview notes.
3. Ideally, the interview itself also should be recorded.
4. If the interview is **not** recorded some written evidence of agreement between interviewer and interviewee on levels of confidentiality and attribution of quotations should be provided. This should include a simple statement of agreement with anonymity/confidentiality conditions offered by the researcher.
5. A clarification of the degree of control over what is reported by the researcher (i.e. possibly offering the opportunity to correct factual inaccuracies in the notes or transcript, but not allowing for significant changes to be made to the transcript or output).

³ C. Williams, *Researching Power, Elites and Leadership*, Sage Press, 2012, p. 11

Data protection and confidentiality/ anonymity issues

The benefits of identifying the interviewees in the data and the research outputs should be considered in conjunction with the risks of harm to the research participants and to their privacy. In accordance with the GDPR principle of [privacy by design](#) it is good practice to protect the identity of participants unless there are good reasons to do otherwise.

Qualitative elite interviews may not be easy or possible to anonymise. As well as the normal careful data protection processes, if elite interviewees do not want to be identifiable, extra care must be taken. During the pseudonymisation/ anonymisation process it is important to ensure that contextual information does not make the interviewee identifiable⁴. If interviewees do not wish to be individually identified, views may be used in a more aggregated way and the maintenance of confidentiality should be possible to achieve using the standard procedures of qualitative studies.

Guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity may, in some cases, be unrealistic when interviewing high profile individuals, who may be easily re-identified or when the comments are in relation to a specialist field. In this case, it may be appropriate to offer to name the participant and interview them “on the record”. Elite interviewees may choose not to seek anonymity. Regardless of whether they do or not, participants should be made aware of how the data will be used and how identifiable they will be from any research outputs.

All negotiations need to be approached with care ensuring that academic freedom is maintained while keeping within the laws of libel and as far as possible meeting interviewees’ legitimate concerns. It is important for the interviewer and interviewee to establish in advance whether comments from the interview may be quoted and publicly attributed to them, quoted in anonymised form or not included in any research outputs at all. In some cases it may be helpful for the researcher to make a note of comments made in confidence for context within their personal notes, but not include these in any written up materials. In other cases the interviewee may prefer there to be no record of these comments at all.

It is important that researchers consider the security of the re-transmission of the data if it is to be shared with the interviewee for the purpose of checking the accuracy of a recorded statement. For special category/ sensitive data, email is not a secure enough mode of transmission. The [Research Data Oxford](#) team should be contacted for advice on more secure options.

It is important to ensure that both de-identified and identifiable data are managed in accordance with the University’s IT Security and Information Compliance requirements. The data should be securely stored in the department or faculty after the completion of the study. Some funders require the deposit of data in data archives and their conditions should be met if at all possible without compromising the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents.

For sensitive material, please ensure your audio recording device and other devices (e.g. laptop) are encrypted and please do not use cloud services to store the data. Please refer to the [Information Security website](#) for further information, in particular:

- [Protect my computer](#)
- [Secure my mobile device](#)

⁴ Note that personal data that has been pseudonymised still falls within the scope of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), refer to the [best practice guidance on research data management](#) and the University’s [guidance on the GDPR and research](#) for further information.

- [Guidance on encryption](#)

Further guidance on the management of research data is provided in CUREC's [Best Practice Guidance 09 Data collection, protection and management](#).

Please consult the [Research Data Oxford website](#), the University's [data protection & research pages](#) and/ or contact the [Research Data Oxford team](#) for research data management advice.

Complex ethical issues raised in research fieldwork

This guidance is generally aimed at lower risk research projects that involve interviewing experts in their fields or elite participants. Please note that research methodology, ethics and interview training is extremely important if research will be conducted in (or with representatives from) authoritarian states, highly politicised environments or in the case of ethnographic research conducted in difficult or dangerous places. The general approach recommended in this document (regarding recruitment of participants and the preference for a formal written consent process or a more formalised oral consent process) would **not** be appropriate or feasible in these particular circumstances. For example, an overly formal recruitment or consent process could hamper the relationship building necessary to cultivate sources over a long period of time. Similarly, sending interview transcripts to interviewees in authoritarian states for fact-checking may well put these participants (and possibly the researcher) in jeopardy. In order to build trust, reduce formality and enable relationship building, negotiating consent informally may be more appropriate in these cases.

In addition, there may be security concerns because of the profile of the interviewees. The measures taken to protect the data and the individuals involved should be proportionate to the risks. Researchers are encouraged to seek advice from the Research Data Oxford team if this applies.

If the research study falls within this more complex area, the overall approach would need to be discussed with the supervisor (if applicable) in the first instance; the methodology and ethics approach would need to be informed by relevant departmental teaching modules or training sessions, and then should be addressed accordingly in the research ethics application and supporting documents.

Duty of care issues/ potential risks/ power imbalance

It is important to consider the nature of unequal relationships between the interviewer and interviewees and to put measures in place to address any associated ethical issues. Less experienced researchers need to be well supported and trained in preparation for elite interviews. The types of risks associated with elite interviewing chiefly involve the researcher as there usually will be a power imbalance between researchers and their elite interviewees, and researchers should be prepared to handle these imbalances when planning their research. Sometimes, powerful participants may try to control an interview. Researchers therefore will need to be "extremely flexible, allowing interviewees to lead the conversation, yet not losing sight of the information they are actually interested in"⁵.

Potential emotional and physical risks to participants, researchers, and risks to the reputation of the University should also be considered. These should be addressed in the researcher's [travel risk assessment](#), and also in the research ethics application. The Social Science Division's fieldwork resources include [guidance on conducting fieldwork safely](#), including on [sexual harassment](#).

⁵ B. Littig, 'Interviewing the Elite – Interviewing Experts: is there a difference?' in *Interviewing Experts*, p. 105

Monitoring and reporting of adverse or unforeseen events

It is important to report any unforeseen or adverse events of a serious nature to a supervisor or senior colleague and get their advice and support

Further reading

- Baez, B. (2002). 'Confidentiality in qualitative research: Reflections on secrets, power and agency'. *Qualitative Research*, 2, 35–58. [10.1177/1468794102002001638](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794102002001638).
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- Goldstein, K. (2002). '[Getting in the Door: Sampling and Completing Elite Interviews](#)'. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 35(4), 669-672. doi:10.1017/S1049096502001130.
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