CONDUCTING RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

This document is intended to provide guidance on identifying and addressing ethical issues associated with conducting interviews for research. Ethics approval is needed, in advance, for research interviews if the information gained from the interview will be used as research data to evidence research findings. If the information provided during the course of the interview is not the subject of the research, ethics approval is not necessary[1]. Ethics approval would not normally be needed when asking someone for their opinion or advice on research design or when conducting practice interviews as part of a training exercise where no use will be made of the information collected.

Maximising benefits and minimising burden and harm

It is important to consider the benefits and risks to individuals, including both participants and researchers, as well as weighing up the benefits and risks of the overall research project. These include both short term and long term consequences. For example, in the short term, interviewees might value being able to contribute to research on a particular topic and have someone listen to their views. On the other hand, participating could be time-consuming and interviews covering sensitive topics could be uncomfortable or upsetting. Researchers must identify predictable long term consequences for individuals or groups, either through participation or through the research findings and consider whether steps could be taken to minimise harm.

Research design

Is conducting research interviews an effective way of addressing the aims and objectives of the research? Consider how many people need to be interviewed in order to collect sufficient data. Too few interviews and there is a risk that not enough data is obtained to answer the research questions. Too many interviews, on the other hand, and there is a risk of wasting participants' time and the researchers finding themselves with more data than necessary or than there is time to analyse and write up. In the same way, consideration will also need to be given to other aspects of the interviews including their format, length and frequency.

It may be helpful to share the interview questions with participants in advance of the interview so that they are aware of the questions or in case it is helpful for them to start to think through their answers ahead of the interview. There will be other types of interview where this is not necessary or appropriate.

If the research will, or could, involve more than one research method, e.g. interviews and focus groups, or approach to conducting the interviews, e.g. online and in person, then the ethics application must provide details of each approach. Explain what will determine which approach will be followed, and for each approach, clarify the process for obtaining participants' informed consent and provide supporting documents (such as recruitment materials, information sheets and consent forms) to enable the committee to consider each approach during the ethics review.

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[1] See also FAQ A6.

Participants' well-being

In addition to deciding what data is needed for the research, it is important to take the participants' own needs into account. Participation must be voluntary and participants should be provided with the information they need to be able to make an informed[2] decision about taking part. Participants must be treated with dignity and respect, including if their views are counter to those of the interviewer. If it is necessary to withhold information about aspects of the research or deceive[3] participants about the true aims of the research (because this might affect their responses), this must be explained and justified within the ethics application. As well as making it clear to interviewees that they are able to stop or pause the interview at any point, the interviewer should look out for clues during an interview that an interviewee is becoming tired or is in need of a break. If the interviews are likely to take some time, participants may appreciate being offered a break and/ or refreshments.

Accessibility

It is important to make sure that accessibility is addressed throughout the research, from the research design stage to dissemination of the findings. For example, this could include consideration of:

- *Recruiting interviewees*: The interviewees should be representative of, and reflect the diversity of, the population being studied, particularly for quantitative research.
- *The location of any in-person interviews*: Could there be any difficulties accessing the venue and the space in which the interviews will take place? Do participants have any special requirements which might need to be considered in relation to the interview arrangements, for example, in the case of disability, access to and use of the venue and its facilities (e.g., noise levels, proximity to accessible toilets). How straightforward would it be for participants to access the venue? Could it be reached by public transport? Is parking available? Could travel expenses be reimbursed?[4]
- *The means of conducting the interviews*: Ensure that all information and materials used for the interviews are provided in accessible format(s) and that breaks are offered.
- *The means of conducting remote interviews*: Will participants be able to access the platform used for online interviews? Consideration should be given to access to technology, digital literacy and disabilities, e.g., visual impairment, deafness.

Sensitive topics

Sensitive topics could include questions relating to Special Category data or questions that could be upsetting or embarrassing for the participants, for example, participants' sexual behaviour, their illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, abuse or exploitation, their mental health, or their gender or ethnic status. Data protection legislation defines Special Category data as data that relates to race or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biomedical data, physical/ mental health, sex life or sexual orientation.

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[2] Guidance on obtaining informed consent.

[3] Approved Procedure 07 Deception of Adult Participants provides further guidance on addressing the ethical issues associated with deception.

[4] Refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 05 on Payments and Incentives in Research

The ethics application should explain why the questions are necessary and how the risk of harm to the interviewees and interviewer will be minimised. Wherever possible, interviewees should be made aware of the possibility of sensitive[5] topics in advance so that they can bear this in mind when deciding whether or not they want to take part. Participants should be reminded that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to. Participants' silence, or refusal to answer a question, should be respected. The information offered should be appropriate to the context. It may be helpful to provide sources of further information or support, either ahead of the interview or during an interview if a participant were to become distressed, such as the contact details of relevant support organisations. The interviewer should remain aware of the limits of their role as interviewer (e.g., rather than therapist or counsellor). If it is possible that there may be a conflict between roles, e.g., between the interviewer's role as a researcher and another professional role, then it may be helpful to consider how to address any potential conflict ahead of the interviews.

Vulnerable groups, including young people

Consideration should be given to whether it would be possible to conduct the research without involving vulnerable[6] participants. If it is essential to involve vulnerable participants, particular care must be taken to minimise any harm or burden to them. Vulnerable participants might like to have someone else present (e.g., carer/ guardian/ family member). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain a Disclosure and Barring Service Check if one is required.

If interviews are to be conducted with young people, a parent or guardian will normally need to provide informed consent on their behalf. It may be appropriate to ask them to be present during the interview.

Participants' rights and power differences

In contrast to questionnaires where it is relatively easy for participants to avoid completing and submitting their answers, the nature of the interview format means it can be more difficult for a participant to say if they do not want to answer a question or if they want to withdraw. Researchers should bear this in mind when designing the consent process and make sure participants are aware of their options and rights. Any time limits to when participants can withdraw any information they have provided, for example once the data has been anonymised and/ or submitted for publication, should be made clear to participants in advance of the interview.

Particular care must be taken in situations where there are power differences to make sure that the participants do not feel under any obligation to take part and that they provide fully informed consent[7]. Particular care is needed in situations where participants are recruited via a gatekeeper (i.e. a person or institution that acts as an intermediary between a researcher and potential participants) or where other people, such as parents or interpreters, are present to ensure that participation is voluntary and informed.

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[5] The ESRC provides the following examples of sensitive topics: participants' sexual behaviour, their illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, abuse or exploitation, their mental health, or their gender or ethnic status.

[6] The ESRC provides guidance on conducting research with vulnerable participants.

[7] Guidance on obtaining informed consent.

Identifiability of research participants

It is important that participants understand how identifiable they will be from the data and the research outputs. In some situations it may be appropriate to give participants a choice about how identifiable they will be, in other situations removing any information that might make participants identifiable might be essential because of the risks associated with being identified.

Management of interview data

Interviews may result in the production of notes, video or audio files, transcripts (anonymised, non-anonymised) and records of the participants' consent. For advice on how to manage and store interview data, please refer to CUREC's best practice guidance on research data collection, anonymisation and identifiers (BPG09), and on internet-based research (BPG06). Please also refer to the Research Data Oxford website and the Information Security website for advice on how to minimise these risks. In addition, refer to the University's guidance on the General Data Protection Regulation, including guidance about Data protection and Research.

Conducting interviews remotely or online

There are many reasons why researchers may decide to conduct interviews remotely or online rather than in-person. Conducting interviews remotely raises ethical as well as methodological challenges.

Researchers will need to plan a process for obtaining interviewees' consent that is suited to the risk involved. The interviewees' consent should be documented in an auditable record and stored securely in line with the University of Oxford's information security policies and guidelines. Audio-recorded verbal consent may be suitable if the project is deemed to be low risk, but obtaining consent should not be used as a reason for audio recording an interview where such a recording would not have been required if the interview were held in-person. For higher-risk projects it may be necessary to obtain completed and signed consent forms from the interviewees. Further guidance on obtaining informed consent is available via the Research Support website.

Microsoft Teams is the University's approved platform for virtual meetings and currently the only platform approved for conducting meetings where confidential or sensitive subjects will be discussed. Practical considerations when planning interviews to be conducted online include taking into account varying degrees of digital literacy and access to technology. It may be more difficult to tell if the location is suitable, ie whether the participant is in a safe place or if they could be overheard. Researchers must also consider the arrangement at their end. If the interviewer is working at home, for example, are they somewhere private where they are unlikely to be interrupted with a suitable background?

The physical separation between the interviewer and interviewee may also affect communication. It might be harder to tell if a participant needs a break or is upset when conducting interviews remotely. Checking if a participant is alright to continue part-way through the interview might be appropriate, particularly where sensitive issues are being discussed.

Recording interviews

Consideration should be given to the need and proportionality of any recording, whether the interviews are conducted in person or remotely. In line with the principle for data minimisation, interviews should only be recorded if there is a clear need. Recording an interview and deleting it after transcription may be the best way to obtain a complete and accurate de-identified record. However, recording participants' informed consent is not in itself a reason to record an interview. If recordings are necessary, steps should be taken to minimise the amount of personal data collected. For example, consider whether audio rather than video recordings would be sufficient. If the interviews are taking place online, could other people be identified in the background if video is required? Justification for the recording should be provided within the ethics application, this should include the length of time the recording needs to be kept and the storage arrangements. If you will be making audio or video recordings or capturing images, familiarise yourself with the University's research data management guidance and policies and refer to the guidance for researchers working remotely with participant data. The Research Data Oxford team can provide advice on keeping data secure.

Transparency

It is considered good practice for interviewees to be made aware of the purpose of the research, why they have been invited to take part and also the intended use of their data and the overall results. Interviewees should understand who is conducting the research and in what capacity, be able to contact a member of the research team for more information and know what to do if they want to raise a concern or make a complaint. In some cases it may be appropriate to share interview transcripts with participants in order to give them an opportunity to clarify or withdraw content.

Risks to the researcher team and others involved in the research

The well-being of the people carrying out the interviews must not be overlooked. Interviews should be conducted in a setting that is suitable for the research and safe for the interviewer as well as the interviewee. In some situations it may be helpful to have another person present at the interview. A fieldwork risk assessment may need to be undertaken. CUREC's Best Practice Guidance (BPG 01) on Researcher Safety provides further guidance on researcher safety, including interviewing in non-public places and considerations when employing local or casual staff. If interviews are to be conducted by other people, e.g., fieldwork assistants, they must receive appropriate training and guidance on the issues covered in this document and within the ethics application.

If the interviews are likely to cover topics that could be distressing, the research team should think through how to support the interviewer, including interpreters and translators who are not University researchers. If it is likely that interviewees could disclose harm to themselves or others there should be a plan in place to deal with this eventuality. Researchers may also find experiences more difficult if they are away from the support networks of their friends and family. Researchers may find it helpful to refer to the Social Science Division's guidance and training on vicarious trauma.

Further guidance

- Guidance on obtaining participants' informed consent, including template information sheets and consent forms.
- CUREC's Best Practice Guidance on topics including: researcher safety; elite and expert interviewing; payments and incentives; data collection, protection and management.
- CUREC's Approved Procedure 02 on studies involving administration of interviews/ questionnaires on sensitive and/ or medical topics for testing and/ or recruitment of participants.
- Guidance for researchers working remotely with participant data.
- Guidance on conducting oral history interviews.
- British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics.
- Danchev, D and Ross, A. (2014) 'Research Ethics for Counsellors, Nurses and Social Workers'.
- The Department of Education's Qualitative Methods Hub.
- ESRC guidance on conducting research with potentially vulnerable participants.
- Research ethics guidance from professional associations.
- The Social Science Division's guidance for researchers.
- UK Data Service Introduction to qualitative interviews.

Change history

Version No.	**Description of changes**	**Previous version No.**
1.0	New document	N/A