



Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC)

Best Practice Guidance 03\_Version 3.0

## Elite and Expert Interviewing

### Contents

Background.....	1
Complex ethical issues raised in research fieldwork.....	2
Recruiting participants.....	3
'Elite' participants.....	3
'Expert' participants.....	3
Negotiating access and information provided to participants.....	3
Consent of participants.....	4
Written consent.....	4
Oral consent.....	5
Data protection and confidentiality/ anonymity issues.....	5
Monitoring and reporting of adverse or unforeseen events.....	7
Duty of care issues / potential risks / power imbalance.....	7
Further Reading.....	8

### Background

Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities may involve interviewing senior/well known people, often known as elite interviewing.

Methods include any one or more of the following:

- Unstructured interviews, which may or may not be recorded
- Semi structured interviews, which may or may not be recorded
- Structured interviews, which may or may not be recorded
- Questionnaires

Research staff or students undertaking elite interviews need to be particularly alive to 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.

Guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity may, in some cases, be unrealistic when interviewing high profile individuals, who may be easily re-identified. In this case, it may be

safer to offer to name them and interview them 'on the record', though the information researchers gain will be different.<sup>1</sup>

Participants are likely to be very busy, so sound interview background research and preparation to enable a smooth and possibly short interview is important. Interviews via telephone, Skype or email need particular thought, as "any upsets are hard to put right at a distance".<sup>2</sup> In addition, researchers "cannot predict or control distractions, lapses in concentration or interruptions [...] Reducing the interaction to a purely linguistic level makes it more difficult to interpret, and the interviewee has far less room for development".<sup>3</sup>

Unequal relationships most likely will exist between researcher and the potential elite or expert participants. 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."<sup>4</sup>

### 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 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.

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.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Research Ethics Guidebook, <http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Limits-of-confidentiality-professional-and-elite-interviews-232> (accessed 5 April 2017)

<sup>2</sup> C. Williams, *Researching Power, Elites and Leadership*, Sage Press, 2012, p. 11

<sup>3</sup> A. Bogner, B. Littig, W. Menz, (eds.) 'Introduction: Expert Interviews – An Introduction to a New Methodological Debate' in *Interviewing Experts*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> B. Littig, 'Interviewing the Elite – Interviewing Experts: is there a difference?' in *Interviewing Experts*, p. 105

## Recruiting participants

Access to elite and expert participants may be more difficult than to other types of participants.

### ‘Elite’ participants

Elite participants are often defined “by their comparatively high social status and the associated privileges they enjoy”.<sup>5</sup> Prominent or ‘elite’ public figures could range from senior government officials, Ministers or Members of Parliament and Chief Executives of large companies, to individuals famous for specific activities in academia, the arts or sport. Recruitment is therefore usually by a specific request to named individuals to take part.

### ‘Expert’ participants

‘Expert’ participants may be individuals chosen not because of their particular role but because of their general position (e.g. editors of national newspapers, high court judges, heads of NGOs, tax lawyers, top-level managers). “Ultimately, 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”.<sup>6</sup> However, “people should only be referred to as experts if they also have a certain degree of power”.<sup>7</sup> Recruitment may be through a third party, e.g. PAs.

The roles of ‘elites’ and ‘experts’ can overlap and so they should be handled similarly.

If you have any doubt whether your potential interviewees are ‘elites’ or ‘experts’, please contact your [departmental research ethics committee \(DREC\)](#) or [IDREC](#).

## Negotiating access and information provided to 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 certain information. CUREC’s [recommended informed consent templates](#) may be adapted for this purpose. The letter 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 short statement reassuring the participant that they can withdraw at any time and without stating a reason
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

---

<sup>5</sup> B. Littig, ‘Interviewing the Elite – Interviewing Experts: is there a difference?’ in *Interviewing Experts*, p. 99

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, p. 100

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, p. 107

7. assurances about the option of confidentiality and use of data, including who would have access to the data, how it will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the study.
8. A statement that, if desired, how participant data will be anonymised and an explanation of how this anonymisation will be effected.
9. If appropriate, a statement clarifying whether interviewees will have the opportunity to check their transcripts, especially when anonymity is **not** desired. However, the expectation is that interviewees should only be offered the opportunity to correct any factual inaccuracy, **not** to change the transcript in any significant way, and that this opportunity should not be offered as a matter of course, but ideally only if explicitly requested by the interviewee.

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 at any point, some “interviewees may claim their rights in a study as far as censoring the writings”.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> It is crucial that the interest of **both parties** is considered.

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.<sup>10</sup> Please contact the relevant [Research Services’ divisional contracts team](#) for advice.

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-translation.<sup>11</sup>

## Consent of participants

### Written consent

A [written informed consent process](#) is generally recommended for elite and expert participants, so researchers have evidence that participants understand and accept all information given to them (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.) As mentioned above, 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).

---

<sup>8</sup> V. Obelene, ‘Expert versus Researcher: Ethical Considerations’ in *Interviewing Experts*, p. 186

<sup>9</sup> The Research Ethics Guidebook, <http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Limits-of-confidentiality-professional-and-elite-interviews-232> (accessed 5 April 2017)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> C. Williams, *Researching Power, Elites and Leadership*, Sage Press, 2012, p. 13

## 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).

## Data protection and confidentiality/ anonymity issues

As well as the normal careful data protection routines, if elite interviewees request anonymity, extra care must be taken. Qualitative elite interviews may not be easily anonymisable. Clearly, false names/ or code numbers should be used in any records but in using quotations or paraphrasing in any written material, it is important to ensure that contextual information does not immediately identify who said what.<sup>12</sup>

Elite interviewees may often choose **not** to seek anonymity. Regardless of whether they do or not, participants should be made aware of how the data will be used. If appropriate, elite interviewees may need to be made aware that text could inadvertently reveal who they are, and aware of the possibility of being misquoted.

Interviews are assumed to be “on the record” unless the participant explicitly requests to go “off the record” before any disclosures are made. If this is agreed, the researcher must ensure to note down clearly which parts of the interview are “off the record” for future reference.

**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.**

If ‘expert’ interviewees do not wish to be individually identified, views may be used in a more

---

<sup>12</sup> Note that personal data that has been pseudonymised – eg. key coded – can fall within the scope of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) depending on how difficult it is to attribute the pseudonym to a particular individual. See the best practice guidance on research data and collection at <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg>, and the University’s guidance on the GDPR and research at <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/policy/data>.

aggregated way and the maintenance of confidentiality should be possible to achieve using the standard procedures of qualitative studies.

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 sensitive (now called “special category”) data, email is not a secure enough mode of transmission. The [researchdata@ox.ac.uk](mailto:researchdata@ox.ac.uk) team should be contacted for advice on more secure options.

It will be important to ensure that both anonymised and non-anonymised data are properly handled and 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 see <https://www.infosec.ox.ac.uk/> for further information, in particular:

- [www.infosec.ox.ac.uk/want/mobile](http://www.infosec.ox.ac.uk/want/mobile) (how to secure e.g. mobiles)
- [www.infosec.ox.ac.uk/protect-devices](http://www.infosec.ox.ac.uk/protect-devices) (how to encrypt laptops etc.)
- <https://as.exeter.ac.uk/it/infosec/tips/recordingdevices/> (information from the University of Exeter on encrypting audio recording devices and cameras)

There is no time limit on retention of completely anonymised data. Regarding non-anonymised personal data generated as part of the project, please note that there are some exemptions to the General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018 for researchers:

“The GDPR does not specify how long personal data should be held for, although a specific retention period may be required under other legislation or as a result of regulatory, funder or policy considerations.<sup>13</sup> Personal data may be stored indefinitely insofar as the personal data will be processed **solely** for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes subject to implementation of the appropriate technical and organisational measures required by the GDPR in order to safeguard the rights and freedoms of individuals.<sup>14</sup> In all cases the retention period, or at least its basis and rationale (if not the precise detail), will need to be communicated to the research participants in order to satisfy the requirement for transparency under the first data protection principle.”<sup>15</sup> However, researchers should not hold on to personal data ‘just in case’ this might become useful for the above purposes in future.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, participants **must** be fully informed **before any** interview about what will be done with the data.

---

<sup>13</sup> Oxford University’s Data Protection and Research guidance at <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/policy/data/responsibilities> (accessed 25 April 2018)

<sup>14</sup> ICO GDPR guidance at <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/principles/storage-limitation/> (accessed 18 June 2018)

<sup>15</sup> Oxford University’s Data Protection and Research guidance at <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/policy/data/responsibilities> (accessed 25 April 2018)

<sup>16</sup> See ICO’s advice on this at <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/principles/storage-limitation/> (accessed 18 June 2018)

Please consult the University's research data website (<http://researchdata.ox.ac.uk>), the University's data protection & research pages at <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/policy/data>, and/or contact the research data team ([researchdata@ox.ac.uk](mailto:researchdata@ox.ac.uk)) for advice on any of the above data issues in the first instance.

### **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 as any difficulties which arise with 'elite' interviewees need to be treated with considerable care.

### **Duty of care issues / potential risks / power imbalance**

Junior 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. In face-to-face interviews, this might be easier through 'gestures such as handshaking, eye contact, body language and exchanging business cards', though of course these options will not be available in telephone interviews.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, there may be security concerns as a result of interviewing certain persons. 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 (required for any studies taking place outside the UK), and also in the research ethics application.

---

<sup>17</sup> W. S. Harvey, 'Strategies for conducting elite interviews', in *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, p. 439

## Further Reading

- Williams, Christopher, *Researching Power, Elites and Leadership*, Sage Publications, 2012
- Bogner, Alexander, Littig, Beate and Menz, Wolfgang (eds.), *Interviewing Experts*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009
- The Research Ethics Guidebook, <http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Limits-of-confidentiality-professional-and-elite-interviews-232>
- Harvey, William S., 'Strategies for conducting elite interviews', *Qualitative Research*, 2011, Vol. 11, Issue 4, pp. 431 - 441,
- CUREC application process:  
<http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/apply>
- Information Commissioner's Office: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/> and <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/exemptions/>
- Oxford Information Security website: [www.infosec.ox.ac.uk](http://www.infosec.ox.ac.uk)
  - How to encrypt laptops and other devices:  
<https://www.infosec.ox.ac.uk/secure-my-mobile-devices>
- Oxford IT Services: how to register for Oxford's HFS backup service:  
<http://help.it.ox.ac.uk/hfs/help/registration>
- Oxford University research data website: <http://researchdata.ox.ac.uk/>
- Social Research Association Guidelines: <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>
- University of Exeter guidance on encrypted cameras and audio recording devices:  
<https://as.exeter.ac.uk/it/infosec/tips/recordingdevices/>