

## Interviewing for Research - Making Contact

- How to contact people
- What questions should you be prepared to answer?
- Preliminary contacts

### How do I contact people?

You will probably have an idea of the main people - sometimes called key informants - you want to talk to, and how to contact them. These will be people with first hand knowledge about the topics you are interested in, or who have opinions you want to know about. If you have trouble contacting them, or if you need to spread your net wider you should consider the following:

*Word of mouth* is usually a very effective way of contacting people, but beware of getting people with similar backgrounds and stories. For example, retired managers will probably put you in touch with other retired managers from similar backgrounds.

*Local interest groups* are useful if your project is looking at particular topics e.g. veterans associations for ex-servicemen or women.

*The Media* - local newspapers and radio or TV may help you to contact people outside of your immediate geographical area. 'Memory Lane' features are often very useful.

If you want access to a community of which you are not a part, you may need to use a 'gatekeeper'. For example, with young people this will be a teacher or guardian, in nursing homes it may be the manager. More broadly, it may be a religious leader, community elder, local activist, or someone who is a part of a community and has good contacts. Those who are genuine 'gatekeepers' are very useful, those who claim to be but are not are to be avoided.

*'...although I was positioned as an 'outsider', throughout the interviews I was able to establish a degree of trust with the respondents. This was partly due to the 'gatekeeper', who worked at a local community centre for over twenty years and had migrated from Kashmir in the 1960s. During the early stages of the research when I attempted to contact potential participants on my own, I encountered considerable suspicion and despite my reassurances the respondents were reluctant to talk due to fears that their interviews would be publicised in the media. However, my contact with the local community worker proved extremely fruitful and he not only helped to arrange the interviews but explained to the respondents the aims and rationale of the research and was vital in gaining their confidence. Consequently, the participants did not seem resent the interview process, or view it as an intrusion, rather they welcomed me into their homes and many stated the importance and value of telling 'their story'.'*

'Ethics in the Cross-Cultural Oral History Interview' Dr J Herbert, University of Leicester

If your appeals are successful you may make more contacts than you are able to interview. Be careful not to make any promises you can't keep. A simple explanation that you may not be able to interview everybody will avoid anyone feeling as if you have ignored them. This feeling can also be avoided by keeping people informed of your project's progress.

### What questions should you be prepared to answer?

When you contact a potential interviewee you should be able to answer the following questions (you may want to create an information sheet which answers these questions):

- *Who do you work for and what are your qualifications?* Be prepared with contact details, perhaps an information leaflet about the project, your own biography.
- *Where did you get my name from?* If it was from another member of the public you may want to let them know that you have followed up their suggestion. Goodwill is all.
- *Why are you doing the research?* Have background details, progress of project so far.
- *Why do you need to talk to me particularly?* Be prepared with a good explanation. Make it clear that you are interested in what they have to say.
- *How long will it take and where will it take place?* Even if you have an office, be prepared to visit people in their homes if need be; if someone doesn't want to be interviewed in their home, be ready with a fall back location.
- *Will it be recorded?* This isn't an obvious question to ask, but you must make your intentions clear if you are going to record the interview using audio or video equipment. Is the interviewee happy for this to happen? Are you happy to only take notes if they object?
- *Will it be anonymous and confidential?* Explain about the extent to which you can make the information anonymous and confidential. You will also need to explain about needing written consent etc. (does one need written consent if you only make notes and then use them?) See the section on **Consent and Ethics**.
- *Will I get a copy of the interview?* Researchers usually provide interviewees with a transcript of the interview and ask for comments. At the least, it is polite to offer a copy of the recording.
- *What will the end product be?* If it is impractical to provide a copy of your article/report/dissertation etc. to all your interviewees, you might want to consider creating a summary of your work for them.
- *Will I be paid?* Probably not, but can you pay expenses if you're asking someone to travel away from their home?

**A thorough explanation at the outset means that none of the points above should come as a surprise to the interviewee at, or after, the interview.**

## Preliminary contacts

How many preliminary contacts you make with your interviewee will depend on the logistics involved. There should always be a preliminary contact made by telephone, letter, or in person. Research primers often recommend making contact in person before the interview so the process can be explained, and the interviewing environment checked out. However, this isn't always possible. If appropriate, write a letter confirming whatever arrangements have been made, and remember that all written correspondence should be to a high standard.

Be careful when using intermediaries, as it is possible that an intermediary will not correctly understand and explain your purposes to someone else. When interviewing the elderly particularly, a relative or carer may agree to an interview on their behalf. If at all practicable try to contact the person you are actually going to interview to confirm that they are willing to be interviewed. This is your first chance to establish a working relationship with your interviewee.

For the first telephone contact you may want to write a brief script to help you speak more fluently.

Keep thorough notes of names, addresses, telephone numbers and details of contacts made. Pay attention to details such as the best time of day to contact people. It is easy to forget who you have contacted and when, and it leaves a bad impression if you communicate this to interviewees.

At all times you should be presentably dressed, and your manner should indicate that you are professional, competent, and particularly enthusiastic to talk to the individual concerned. Try to be punctual and polite throughout.

From your final contact before the interview you will have explained what you are doing and should have arranged:

- Time – to start, and duration of interview
- Place – a quiet environment
- Directions/map - for you or interviewee.