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## Setting Up Targeted Research Interviews: A Primer for Students and New Interviewers

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## Setting Up Targeted Research Interviews: A Primer for Students and New Interviewers

### Abstract

This article analyzes key strategic considerations for setting up targeted research interviews, including human subjects and Institutional Review Board requirements, approaching respondents, the medium of contact, using technology, cultural conceptions of time and commitment, using networks, wading through bureaucracies, and watching for warning signs. By making these considerations explicit and conscious, we can better specify how to gain interviews for our research and how to ethically approach this task. This analysis will be most useful as a pedagogical explanation for students and for scholars newly approaching interviewing.

### Keywords

Interview Methods and Human Subjects

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## **Setting Up Targeted Research Interviews: A Primer for Students and New Interviewers**

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### **Introduction**

The interview method is one of the most widely used forms of data collection in sociology, so much so that as far back as 1956, the editors of the *American Journal of Sociology* declared sociology as “the science of the interview” (Benney & Hughes, 1956, p. 137). One of the crucial questions facing interviewers is how to convince respondents to speak with them. A substantial literature exists examining this question in relation to survey research and household interviews, especially because non-response bias can shape the quantitative validity of survey research (Groves, Cialdini, & Couper, 1992; Groves & McGonagle, 2001; Lynn & Clarke, 2002; Morton-Williams, 1993; Morton-Williams & Young, 1987). However, with some notable exceptions, a scarcity of analysis has been devoted to the question of how to set up more targeted interviews in research projects that involve semi-structured interviews with specifically identified key informants, organizational representatives, or political elites (Devereux & Hodinott, 1992; Dexter, 1970; Weiss, 1995). While there is much similarity between survey research and targeted interview research, setting up interviews differs substantially in these two approaches. Whereas survey research seeks to elicit broad responses from a representative sample of a population, targeted research interviews are often directed towards a handful, or even one or two people. The interview pitch is much more personalized and the choice of the interview respondent much more specific. More importantly, when there are only one or two people in the position or with the qualifications to answer the questions the researcher holds, the consequences of rejection are much greater.

Literature analyzing targeted, semi-structured interviews tends to focus on the development of interview questions, determining an interview sample, analysis of the interview delivery, building trust with an interview respondent, conducting an interview, and discussions on the hermeneutical status of interviews, with various perspectives identifying it alternatively as a constructed conversation, a dramaturgical event,

therapeutic process, or an objective attempt to extract information from a source (Briggs, 1986; Dick, 2006; Franz, 1942; Hermanowicz, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Mishler, 1986; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Snow, Zurcher, & Sjoberg, 1982; Warren et al., 2003; Weiss, 1995). Scholarly discussions of interviews also focus on methods for coding, analyzing, or interpreting the interview, the locale of interviews, and on the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, especially in relation to characteristics such as gender or age (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Herzog, 2005; Oakley, 1981; Reinhartz & Chase, 2003; Riessman, 1987; Weston et al., 2001). However, until you convince someone to spend the time to talk to you, you will not obtain any data to analyze at all.

The process of setting up interviews is a sociological puzzle when we consider the variations involved in pitching interviews and scheduling appointments across organizational, cultural, and class dimensions. In this article, I will draw upon the experience of conducting over 250 interviews in 10 countries throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and North America. These interviews were conducted for research projects which examined public policy, homelessness, and social development. In all of this research, interview respondents were targeted as representatives of specific formal or informal organizations. Interviews were conducted with individuals ranging from homeless people in urban settings, to armed revolutionaries in mountain strongholds, to top corporate executives in fancy offices, to civil servants in local government agencies, to high-ranking politicians and national ministers, to grandmothers with AIDS in an African slums, to Non Governmental Organization (NGO) workers and directors, to militant Muslim leaders, Hindu gurus, International Development Bank officers, and hundreds of other people involved in a myriad of organizations. Convincing each of these people to give me an hour or more of their life and to answer my questions required a different approach for every person.

Of course, human subjects protocols set the limiting guidelines, which I had to follow in arranging these interviews. Nonetheless, even within those limitations, plenty of room existed in order to strategically vary my approach to gaining interviews. As with many human endeavors, persistence plays an enormous role in securing interviews. While some interview appointments seem to drop from heaven right into your lap, with little or no work for yourself, little time spent contacting the respondent, and little follow-up communications, most interviews require multiple contacts and conversations before respondents commit to them and the date is fixed. Some interviews require a seemingly endless series of phone calls, e-mails, and personal visits before they are conducted. Especially with powerful people, you will have to spend a great deal of time getting through their gatekeepers and staff to speak with them. The more strategic you can be as a researcher in moving through this maze, the less time and resources you will expend in this process and the more you will have for the actual interview and its analysis. In this article, I discuss six main strategic dimensions of setting up interviews: human subjects' requirements, the interview approach, the medium of contact and technology, using networks, and avoiding problematic situations.

### **Human Subjects**

Within contemporary social science research, the rules of interviewing are set by Institutional Review Boards which formulate policies based on national guiding

documents or laws. Unfortunately in North America, Institutional Review Boards have often turned research ethics into rigid and sometimes absurd human subjects procedures. Haggerty writing from his experience as an Institutional Review Board member at the University of Alberta argues that “the fetishization of rules” within human subjects oversight can “reduce ethical systems to a form of conformist rule-following” (Haggerty, 2004, p. 410). By turning the ethical oversight of research into a system of rote rules which must be followed for their own sake, rather than out of ethical reflection, this can in turn encourage rule breaking. Haggerty (p. 410) writes, “a paradox of such a system is that it can itself become an instrument of unethical behavior.”

While human subjects protocols may play an important part in safeguarding subjects in medical research, they can often cause more headaches for the researcher than positive benefits for subjects in social science interview research. The exact procedures or protocol you are required to submit for human subjects approval will depend upon the Institutional Review Board at your home university or institution. The part of the protocol most relevant to the task of setting up interviews is the recruitment script or recruitment procedure. Human subjects protocols, especially if you are seeking exemption from having your proposal go before a full Institutional Board review, generally demand adherence to a set of static procedures which you are supposed to lay out before you have even obtained an in depth sense of the field within which you will be working.

Human subjects procedures in effect embody the old proverb, “when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” They tie you to a standardized process in making contact and setting up interviews that may or may not be culturally appropriate beyond the narrow bounds of North American, legal rationality. Nonetheless, human subjects procedures are unavoidable and should have an important intent of safeguarding the subjects of your research.

Outside of the obligations imposed by the human subjects procedures, it is still important to independently assess and ensure ethicality in your research process and in setting up interviews. While selling your research concept and your interview request to respondents is a necessary aspect of interview research, it is important to always be straightforward and honest with them, unless, of course, some element of deceit has already been factored into your research plan and human subjects protocol. It is also important to always approach respondents with a deep commitment not to harm them in any way and to guaranteeing their fundamental rights and respect. This is ultimately what human subjects rules aim to achieve.

### **The Approach**

An interviewer must have a variety of techniques for approaching respondents for an interview. You must learn to shape every approach to the respondent you are targeting, and to do so while remaining within the rules set by your human subjects protocol. As a sociological interviewer, you will generally have little or nothing to offer your respondents, unless you have specifically set up payments to respondents as part of your research protocol. For many types of research, however, such payments are inappropriate; they were for all interviews which I conducted. If you are not offering payments, as part of your human subjects protocol, you will most probably need to indicate to your potential respondent that your research provides no direct benefits to them. As such, the

only way to convince someone to interview with you is to persuade them of the merit of your research project or your legitimacy as a researcher. Essentially, this means that you will approach the potential respondents with an interview “sales pitch.”

Again, the specifics of your human subjects protocol will probably greatly determine how and what can be said in this sales pitch. Nonetheless, even with the specifics largely determined by the human subjects protocol, as with all sales, the delivery remains crucial. Effectively delivering an interview pitch involves a delicate balance of emphasizing your own cultural capital as an academic, making the potential respondents feel important, and immediately generating a feeling of personal connection with them.

The delivery of the pitch is a classic Goffman-esque game of self presentation (Goffman, 1959). The first step of this self-presentation is to use whatever verbal, visual, or written clues you can to convey your own legitimacy as a researcher and a professional. This is one place where the human subjects protocol can indeed become a tool for you. The very fact that you have a specific and obviously legally fashioned procedure for making contact with respondents, as well as formal documents which reference the Institutional Review Board (along with official letters of presentation which you should always have ready), can be used to demonstrate your legitimacy.

Obviously, other cues will also be important to respondents, such as the clothes you wear if you are meeting them or their office in person, the words you choose, even the way you walk. You want to tailor your words, your language choice, and your dress to the potential interview respondent. It is not always a matter of trying to be the best dressed you can and to use the biggest words you know. If, for example, your goal is to interview members of radical social movements or to meet with residents of slums, then you will need to wear less formal clothes to make your respondents feel like they can trust you and to avoid unwanted attention.

Thinking about the dress you wear points to the more fundamental principle that an important part of setting up interviews is utilizing, from a Bourdieuan perspective, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). Cultural capital involves the attitudes, skills, tastes, and credentials which position you within social hierarchies. Your choice of words, the conversation topics you reference during small talk, even the way you gesture can all be a part of how you convey and utilize cultural capital. The process is a nuanced one in which you have to assess the cultural location and preferences of your potential interview respondent and then adjust the presentation of your own cultural capital to your perception of their preferences.

Similarly, if the person you are seeking to interview has gatekeepers and staff you must go through, you may have to vary your self presentation as you move through the layers. For first line staff, you may want to play up your legitimacy, authority, and cultural capital, making yourself seem important enough to pass through their filter. Further down the line, however, you may want to downplay this, and instead take a more humble stance that can better elicit sympathy either from a senior staff person or from the potential interview respondent themselves to push you through the gauntlet and onto the appointment book. All this is in a sense classic salesmanship, and it must be tailored to each individual with whom you are interacting.

Another aspect of securing interviews that is also classic salesmanship is making your potential respondent feel important. Treat them with respect, refer to them with honorifics, especially in written materials, and overall make them feel like they have information and perspectives which are valuable. When you meet them be friendly, make small talk about family or other topics, and pay attention. A real sense of respect for other human beings regardless of what social position they occupy is actually a prerequisite for being a good interviewer. The reality is that the reason you want to interview this person is because they do indeed have valuable information you would like to hear. Making them feel that way is really only expressing the truth of the situation.

A final aspect of the interview sales pitch, and probably the most obvious and important one, is to be enthusiastic about your research and describe it in a way that will be interesting to potential respondents. Especially if you are not offering payment for interviews, the least you can offer respondents is an interesting conversation, the opportunity to express their thoughts about a topic important to them, and the opportunity to be a part of an interesting research project, of which they will later see the results. In order to make your project seem interesting to them, you have to be able to both get a read on what they might be interested in and to package your project description to fit into their interests. Choosing the right framing to describe the very same project can make a large difference. Even if you are locked by your human subjects protocol into particular wording in the initial presentation of the research, usually potential respondents will ask questions about the project and it is there that you explain it in light of their own interests.

### **Medium of Contact and Technology**

As a researcher, in addition to strategizing the content of your pitch to potential respondents, you also need to figure out what the best medium is for communicating the pitch. There are three primary options for making contacts when you already have determined who you would like to interview: in person, over the phone, and by e-mail. There are benefits and drawbacks to each of the three mediums of contact you use when you have already identified your potential respondent or the organization from which you want to recruit a respondent. E-mail is the easiest way to make a contact, and the least likely to actually receive a response. Depending on the nature of your project, as many as 95% of your e-mails will be ignored. E-mail is best used for follow-up communication after the initial contact has been made. However, it can still be useful for first contacts because it is a cheap and quick way to communicate. I have found e-mail to be a particularly useful form of contact when I have a large list of potential interviewees and only need to interview a small number of them. This of course moves the process closer to survey research, than to targeting one or two specific respondents.

When using e-mails, it is important to keep in mind that many busy people or high level executives possess multiple e-mail addresses. One or more are their official work e-mail address, which they often do not even check themselves, but have assistants who sort out only the most important letters from that address. The other is their select e-mail, from which they conduct important work related communications and personal communications. You are far more likely to receive a response from someone like this if you use their select e-mail address.

By far the most common medium I have used to make contact with potential respondents is the phone. Phone conversations cannot be as easily ignored as e-mails, and gives you the opportunity to make a pitch tailored to your potential respondent, as well as to develop a personal connection. At the same time, phone conversations are far less time consuming than meeting someone in person to schedule an interview. Tracking down phone numbers can sometimes be difficult, but is quite possible. With the proliferation of cell phones around the world, it is now quite easy to catch a large portion of the world's population at any time. However, some people might find calling them on their cell phone a bit of an invasion of privacy. Often, when I called people at their office, if they were not in, I would ask for their cell number from someone in their office. I would not use this number right away, but try calling them at the office a few more times. If I was never able to reach them there, or if they were not answering calls, I would then turn to the cell phone number. When I called a cell phone number, I would quickly tell them who provided me their number to try to minimize the feeling that I was invading their private space. I operated in the same way in regards to home phone numbers. If I received someone's home number, I would try to avoid using it unless there was no other choice. In that case, I would call it and immediately tell them where I received it.

Sometimes it is preferable to make first contact by a direct visit to the person or office you wish to interview, especially if the office is easy to arrive at. When people meet you in the flesh, they are far more likely to take you seriously and to give you some of their time. Sometimes there is no choice but to do this. Some interviews I have conducted were in remote villages in the developing world with people who had neither phones nor e-mail access. In these cases, there was no other possibility but to simply go to the village and see what happens. Sometimes, this will mean one trip to schedule the interview (hoping the person you want to encounter is even there) and one trip to conduct the interview. In many rural cultures, however, where time is not as over-scheduled and preciously guarded as in Western urban culture, it is possible to show up, meet someone, and then interview them all at once.

E-mail, phone, and personal visits may be seen as progressively intense forms of contact, which you can cycle through. One nice part about e-mail contact is that if your e-mail is ignored, you can call up with nothing lost. The same is true with phone contacts. As long as you do not receive a no, you can always stop by in person.

Making use of new communication technologies can also assist in the task of setting up interviews. Advances in communication technology such as smartphones or PDA phones can be incredibly useful when setting up interviews while traveling in the field, and micro-sd cards can provide an excellent means for backing up and safely storing digitally recorded research interviews. The level of documentation on the Internet has also made it easy to find countless contacts, even when someone's information is not posted formally online. If a person ever attended official meetings of any type, meeting rosters and sign-up sheets with contact information for many meetings and conferences are now often posted somewhere online, and can be found with Internet searches.

## Cultural Conceptions of Time and Commitment

Time is the limiting ingredient of the whole interview setting process, your time and your respondents' time, and the less free time either of you has, the more difficult conducting an interview becomes. Moreover, every field of research has its own social and cultural specificities around time. For example, in North America, respondents, especially those I interviewed as official organizational representatives, preferred to schedule interviews between one week and one month in advance. In Ghana, interview respondents preferred between five hours and one day in advance. In Thailand, it was somewhere in between.

When respondents prefer to schedule appointments with short notice, this can make things difficult for a researcher. For example, when I planned to conduct research in Ghana, I had found an ample list of potential respondents, and began contacting them two months in advance. With only one exception, every potential contact told me, "Contact me once you have arrived in the country." Even once I had arrived there, I would call and if I was not available immediately or the next day, they would tell me to contact them in a day or two to see if they were free then. This became quite difficult in terms of trying to have a set schedule and to insure I met my interview goals. However, it also had a positive side, in that whenever I had free time, I could more or less cycle through the list of people I wanted to interview and as soon as I hit someone who was available, I could go directly to them and conduct the interview.

The short time frame which Ghanaian's held for scheduling interviews, however, was more than just a reflection of cultural conceptions of time, but also of my own importance to them. If I was an important person who was coming to offer them something they valued or needed, I'm sure they would have made an appointment even two months in advance. Instead, what they were basically communicating to me was that if they could fit me into any gaps in their schedule they would, but everything else had first priority.

Conceptions of time can also vary in terms of when is appropriate to meet. Some cities stay up later than others. For example, in Cairo, where the desert heat makes night a much more preferable time to be up and about than the day, it was not unusual for respondents to suggest meeting at 9 or 10 at night. Other cultures, such as in Southern Mexico, have long lunches and even siestas, so the middle of the day is out, and respondents are a little more sleepy with their full belly in the afternoon.

Cultural conceptions can also shape how much of a maze you have to move through to get an interview. For example, in more informal cultures such as in indigenous areas of Guatemala, I was frequently able to directly call directors of organizations or walk into offices and make an interview appointment with the director on the spot. In the strongly hierarchical culture of Thailand, on the other hand, if I wanted to interview a director, it would involve a long vetting process in which I had to send documentation to and communicate with that person's subordinates.

Of course, in every culture you must be ready to have your appointment cancelled at any moment, even at the time you arrive for an interview. You must also be willing to wait for a respondent once you have arrived at an appointment and not expect punctuality. Again, punctuality and the tendency to cancel vary across cultures. Wherever you are, you should always give yourself plenty of time to arrive at an interview,

especially if you are traveling to an unfamiliar location. It is useful to reconfirm interviews the day before if they had been scheduled much earlier. It is always useful to go with the flow of your respondent. If they suddenly need to go somewhere and cannot reschedule, offer to walk or drive with them and talk on the move. And always be ready for the unplanned surprise interview. You never know when you might run into someone perfect for your research.

### **Using Networks**

An interviewer must learn to use social networks to gain access. The exploration of networks has been one of the key contributions of sociology to modern social sciences (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005; Smith-Doerr & Powell, 2005; White, Boorman, & Breiger, 1976). Networks underlie all aspects of society and social organization, and as such networks and networking are a key means of both discovering potential interview respondents and convincing them to meet with you. The first network you have as an academic is the group of other academics in an area you want to conduct research.

The legitimacy you gain by having a referral from someone within your target respondent's network amplifies manifold your possibility of arranging an interview appointment with them. Network references also are the easiest way to get contact information for potential respondents, especially direct contact information like home and cell numbers. I have at times even scheduled interviews with people, primarily in order to be able to ask them for references to contacts I knew they had with other people.

This example suggests another strategic point about gaining interviews in complex organizations or networks; where to enter into the organizational hierarchy. If you want to interview someone from a large organization, but do not have any direct contact or reference into the organization, figuring out who to make your first contact within the organization can make a big difference. Large organizations tend to have staff lists fairly well available online, but you need to decide who to approach. One possibility is to try to make multiple contacts at once, and hope that one will work. Another is to try to contact a receptionist or office manager, and ask them who they would recommend you speak to. In general, I have tried to contact people in middle level positions. Often, what they will do is bounce my request for an interview with someone in the organization up to a senior level manager, who would not have fielded the request if it came directly from me. This senior level manager will then often either accept the request personally, or direct one of his subordinates to do so. In a sense, this strategy ends up simulating the situation of being referred by someone within the organization or network.

### **Wading through Bureaucracies and Problematic Situations**

A final aspect of setting up interviews is being careful of potential hazards. The first hazard, bureaucratic swamps, are unfortunately, sometimes unavoidable. If you are interviewing government workers or politicians you may need specific releases or permissions from the government to conduct the interview. Even some corporate and NGO officials, will also need to have oversight permission to conduct an interview with you. Usually, the more authoritarian a country is and the more it has to hide, the more difficult it will be to jump through these hoops. There is no real shortcut in many of these

permission processes, and they will just require a combination of persistence and patience. A similar hazard is respondents who will send you in endless circles in order to exercise their power over you, and then never sit down with you for an interview or show up for appointments with you. If you sense this happening, it is worth making note of it and proceeding with caution, so that you do not waste too much time or energy pursuing something that will not work out at all.

The opposite of this situation is when you interview individuals or groups of extremely impoverished people and they expect some form of donation or support from you. This is another problematic situation of which to be careful. Even when your human subjects protocol has no allowance for any form of payment to subjects, this can occur. I conducted a few interviews with associations of impoverished people in slums and in rural settings. As a Westerner, these respondents immediately related to me as some form of philanthropist, NGO representative, or foundation funder, and expected that a meeting with me would translate either into technical support or financial benefit for them. Even when I stress that I will not provide any of those to them from the first time I approached them for an interview, these expectations persisted. This creates an ethical dilemma in scheduling interviews. On a few occasions in Africa, I set up interviews only to find after I arrived at the interview that people were expecting I would donate money to them upon the conclusion of the interview. I explained to them that I am not permitted to provide them any reward according to my human subjects protocol, but this meant absolutely nothing to respondents who could care less about their rights and protections as a human subject of research, when they are dying of hunger and AIDS and need money for food.

I have also met with and interviewed community groups in impoverished areas of the world who expected that as an academic expert, I should tell them how to organize their group, run their projects, or contact foundations. I chose not to provide this type of advice when I am meeting people for brief periods of time in foreign countries, in the context of them being respondents in my research. Since I actively work around issues of homelessness in the United States, when this situation has confronted me, I tell them that I am an outsider to their community and it is not my role to tell them how to resolve their problems. Instead, I work with poor people in my own community. I tell interviewees that I have come only to learn from them, that I can listen to them in a spirit of solidarity and can tell them about organizing projects in the United States in the interest of sharing perspectives, but I cannot take on their struggle or work for them or tell them how to run it, especially because I am meeting them in my capacity as a researcher. I have found that upon hearing this, people have backed down their expectations and understood my position.

### **Conclusion**

One of the most difficult and time consuming aspects of targeted interview research is setting up interviews. Ironically, this aspect of interviewing has been scarcely considered in the literature. It is not entirely absent, however, and many of the references listed below do touch upon this subject in one way or another. One of the best discussions of setting up interviews, however, comes in Chapter 2 of Weiss's (1995) book, *Learning from Strangers*.

In this paper, I have provided a systematic discussion of key strategic considerations for setting up interviews, including human subjects requirements, the pitch, the medium of contact, using technology, cultural conceptions of time and commitment, using networks, wading through bureaucracies, and watching for problematic situations. Some readers may find the suggestions here too cynical or strategic, but I would venture to guess that most interview researchers consciously or subconsciously undertake many of the considerations and tactics discussed. By making these considerations explicit and conscious, we can not only figure out how better to gain interviews for our research, but also what are the ethical boundaries of this process. While many of these considerations may be well known by most researchers, they will be most useful for students and for scholars newly approaching interviewing.

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### Author Note

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