Specialised Interviewing

Interviewing Specialists on Sensitive Topics

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Specialised interviewing

Who are they (*elites* v *specialists*)?

Persons who have a specialized information about, or who have involvement with, any social or political processes (Dexter, 2008)

- *Elites* are people in close proximity to power, deeply influential for the policy-making process (politicians, ministers, head of state, presidents, lobbyists, CEOs etc.)

- *Specialists* are experts in particular areas (lawyers, top civil servants, compliance officers, etc.)

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Specialised interviewing: pros and cons

1. Advantages

- Individual insights on the research context
  - Exploratory research and hypothesis testing
- In-depth information (useful to interpret documents)
- First-hand accounts (off-the-records)
- Network (access to other respondents)

2. Disadvantages (problems)

- Access
- (Unrepresentative) sampling *
- Bias
- Tape recording
- Coding and analysis

* Not necessarily a problem, insofar as the researcher acknowledges it (Richards, 1996)

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Before the interview: Access (1)

1. *Call* them

- Introduce yourself
  - Affiliation with university or research institute, drop names if you can (gate-keepers) etc.
- *Mention* the research project and the content of the interview

2. Follow up with an email

- Make it official
  - Logo of the university and/or research institute
- Spell out the *basic* research content
- Explain why *them*
  - Research question(s)
  - Preferably, mention some (flattery) evidence (reports, statistics etc.)
- Place emphasis on *their* interest in the research
  - E.g., they can use the data you will collect
- (Cover the ground-rules)
  - E.g., use of tape recorder, how the information will be utilised etc.
- Anonymity and confidentiality
  - They might be requested by the respondent as a condition to accept the interview (e.g., confidentiality agreements)

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Before the interview: Access (2)

3. Call them again (schedule the interview)

- Ask for an intermediate length (e.g., 45 min-1 hour)

4. Follow up with an email (*check-list*)

- (General) list of main topics

5. Get well prepared (practice)

- E.g., to avoid asking questions on information you can easily find elsewhere (websites, official documents etc.)

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During the interview – best practices (1)

1. Introduction

- Be ready to (once again) introduce yourself and the research project
- Be confident, professional and knowledgeable

2. *Rapport*

- Pay attention to the dress code
- Avoid academic (and technical) jargon
- Be an (emphatic) listener
- Encourage the respondent non verbally
- Give silence a chance

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During the interview – best practices (2)

3. Semi-structured interviews (conversation guide or *checklist*)

- List of main topics

- Ask open questions
  - Start with general questions and proceed with more specific ones
  - Ask probe and follow-up questions
  - Leave the most sensitive questions to the middle of the interview (trust)
  - Ensure that the respondent does not go too far off the subject
  - Pay attention to how questions are formulated (and not to steer answers)

- Take down some notes using *keywords*

- Pay attention to non verbal behaviour

- Keep it open
  - At the end of the interview, always ask if there are other areas you have not touched upon, that the interviewee may be willing to comment

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After the interview

1. Extend the notes *asap* (memory does not last that long!)

2. Thank them via email

- Send the transcripts of the interview (or a summary of it), if requested
- Ask further questions or clarifications
- Establish networks

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