

Interviews in research

Research interviews are a useful means of collecting in-depth information from human participants. Depending on the research topic and methodology, interviews can range in form from being tightly structured with standardised questions through to the free flowing, unguided conversations typically engaged in by ethnographers.

From a research ethics perspective, the foremost thing to consider when incorporating interviews into your research design is how to minimise risk to participants. This guidance note will help you identify and mitigate ethical risks involved in planning and conducting interviews for research. It has been informed by the guidelines set out in the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#) (NS). It is essential that you familiarise yourself with the National Statement as early as possible in the research design process and incorporate its principles into your project planning.

Understanding interview risk level

Research projects involving interviews are always either low or more than low risk; they are never negligible risk. This is because interview data is identifiable. Interviews are not anonymous; even if participants are not named in publications and a code is used in transcripts, the researcher will always know who the participants are and, in most instances, will have their signed consent forms. The storage of such personally identifying information is never completely without risk – improperly stored data is at risk of being lost, stolen or destroyed. (See the last section of this document for guidance on minimising risks associated with data storage.)

The way participants experience interviews also informs the risk level. Many people are naturally shy in unfamiliar social situations and will feel some level of discomfort when talking to someone they don't know very well, particularly if the conversation is being recorded. When discomfort may be experienced, however minor it may be, the risk level of a research project will

be at least low. You should refer to the relevant research methods literature for advice on minimising participant discomfort during interviews.

Interviews on a topic that could be considered sensitive are considered more than low risk and must therefore be considered by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), as opposed to a College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN). Sensitive interview topics are those that can cause participants to experience more than discomfort, such as pain, anger, embarrassment, distress, feelings of despair or worthlessness, etc. While there is no exhaustive list, 'sensitive' topics in human research can include issues such as sexuality, race and racism, anxiety, depression, body image, mental health, relationships, self-harm, experience of violence or abuse, homelessness, substance use, etc.

Interviews that discuss sensitive information – that is, information that could be used to discriminate against participants – are also considered to be more than low risk. The Privacy Act defines 'sensitive information' to mean information or an opinion about an individual's:

- racial or ethnic origin;
- political opinions;
- membership of a political association;
- religious beliefs or affiliations;
- philosophical beliefs;
- membership of a professional or trade association;
- membership of a trade union;
- sexual preferences or practices; criminal record;
- health (not otherwise defined as 'health information'); and/or
- genetic information (not otherwise defined as 'health information').

Sensitive information and/or research topics can be contextual and therefore not necessarily

apparent to people outside a community. For instance, interviewing people from a specific community about a social practice that is widely accepted in broader society, but frowned upon within that particular community, may be considered collecting sensitive data because it can be used within that community to discriminate against individuals.

How to minimise risks when planning interviews

You can minimise risk when interviewing people for research by only collecting information that is necessary to answer your research question. Most importantly, you should avoid collecting sensitive information unless it is directly relevant to the research. Where your research topic allows, construct interview questions to elicit opinions or observations, rather than personal disclosures. Also be mindful of the following:

Illegal activities

Where possible, avoid asking questions that could elicit responses about illegal activities. This includes activities prohibited by both criminal and civil law, however minor the behaviour might seem. Underage drinking, public transport fare evasion and jay-walking, for instance, are examples of illegal activities that are easily not recognised as such. More detailed information about conducting research with people involved in illegal activities can be found in Chapter 4.6 of the National Statement.

If such information is necessary to your research, you will need take a number of precautions which are outlined in the guidance note on research involving illegal activities. It is important that you read and follow its advice if there is any chance that your research may uncover illegal activities, or you find yourself party to a disclosure of illegal activity.

Interviews involving intellectual property or data protected by copyright

If your interview questions are likely to elicit information about intellectual property or information protected by copyright, then you need to think carefully about the legal risks this could raise for you as the researcher and/or your participants. Such risks commonly arise when discussing professional practice in disciplines such as architecture or design, but

can present themselves in other areas where innovative approaches to problems in commercial settings are discussed. If it is likely that your research may touch on such issues then you must make sure that participants are clearly informed about these risks both in the Participant Information and Consent Form and any preliminary discussions that take place before the interview.

Interviews involving Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander participants and/or topics that are of specific significance to their communities

In addition to the principles set out at the beginning of the National Statement, research involving Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities and/or issues that are of specific significance to them must demonstrate the six core values identified as being important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

- Reciprocity
- Respect
- Equality
- Responsibility
- Survival and protection
- Spirit and integrity

All research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and/or issues that are likely to specifically impact their communities needs to be considered by the Human Research Ethics Committee regardless of the risks involved. See the National Statement for further advice on research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.

Informed consent

Chapter 2.2 of the National Statement sets out the requirements for informed consent. It stipulates that “a person’s decision to participate in research is to be voluntary, and based on sufficient information and adequate understanding of both the proposed research and the implications of participation in it”. Consent to participate in interviews is almost always obtained via a signed Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF).

To draft a PICF for your specific project you will need to download the RMIT PICF template from the Research Ethics Platform (REP). Make sure

that you use clear and concise language, which in most cases means writing for a reading level of approximately 14 years. Remember that participants are not looking for an academic justification of the research, but rather an explanation of what they will be asked to do, so avoid academic jargon and references to literature and use the second person tense throughout (i.e. “you”, not “the participant”). Make sure that any risks and their implications are clearly described.

When recruiting participants, you need to ensure that your recruitment method meets privacy requirements and does not place any undue pressure on people to participate.

Respecting participant privacy: your legal obligation

In Victoria, it is illegal to collect the personal information of people without their consent, unless you have reasonable cause. This means you must never obtain the personal information – names, phone numbers, email addresses, etc. – of potential interview participants from other people for the purposes of research recruitment.

This can seemingly present problems if you wish to use a ‘snow balling’ recruitment technique – whereby people are recruited via existing research participants – but it does not need to. Ethical snow balling involves having your participants pass on information about the research (e.g. a brief description of your research and a copy of the PICF) to their contacts. Those contacted can then get in touch with you for further information if they are interested in participating.

You can use professional third party recruitment companies to provide you with a pool of recruitment contacts, however you must know for certain that those contacts have consented to having their personal data shared for exactly this purpose. If in doubt you should ask to see the terms of the agreement made between the recruitment company and participants.

Respecting participant privacy: your ethical obligation

In addition to legal considerations, interview recruitment involves respecting participants’ privacy for ethical reasons. For recruitment to be considered ethical, participants must not have pressure placed on them to participate. This

means that except in certain limited circumstances – for instance where a professional recruitment organisation is used or the participant has limited capacity to consent to participate - third parties should not have knowledge of who has and has not participated in the research.

By keeping participation confidential you are mitigating against the risk of people feeling pressured to participate due to an existing relationship or power dynamic. Often people feel compelled to participate in research not because they really want to, but because they believe it will please someone who holds power or influence in a relationship with them. Such relationships exist between employers and employees, teachers and students, and union leaders and union members, for example. It may be that a person in such a position has no real interest in whether anyone participates in your research. This does not matter – it is how recruitment to participate is experienced by participants that is important, regardless of whether the basis of those feelings is real.

In practice, you can use a third party such as an employer, teacher or union leader to distribute information about the research on your behalf, but they must not be privy to information about who has and has not participated or be able to access any raw data collected. Instead, they can pass details such as a brief description of your research and a copy of the PICF and to their contacts; those contacted can then decide for themselves whether they wish to participate and can do so without the knowledge of their employer, teacher, etc.

Interview location

The location of the interviews is an important yet easily overlooked practical factor to consider when planning research interviews. Will you conduct interviews in person, by phone or via online video chat? Think first and foremost about convenience for your participants: will your interviewees be able to easily get to the interview location at the proposed time, or does the time and place of the interviews effectively lock out certain participants (e.g. working mums, older people, people who are reliant on public transport)?

If you are conducting interviews via online video chat, do your participants have a sufficiently stable internet connection? Are they likely to

have a secure, private place to participate comfortably? If not, how will you accommodate them?

If you are conducting face-to-face interviews, think about the suitability of the space. Busy cafes are generally not suitable as the background noise interferes with recordings. If you require an easily accessible public space, consider booking a room in a public library or community centre.

An office or study room at RMIT is often a good choice provided participants can travel to campus. Rooms in the offices of a supporting organisation are also often suitable. Always try to check the room before using it, however. Never assume that a room is necessarily private just because you have been assured exclusive access to it: conducting an interview in a glass enclosed office, for instance, may compromise the confidentiality of the interview and could make participants feel exposed and therefore uncomfortable.

In general, avoid conducting interviews in participants' homes. Risks in private residences include aggressive pets, allergens, hazardous DIY projects, intrusive visitors, intoxicated householders, etc. It can be an uncomfortable or even dangerous experience trying to extricate yourself from a situation in which someone in the home behaves inappropriately.

Interviewing people at home is a necessary part of some kinds of research, particularly those involving material culture. Discussions with collectors about their collections or elderly people about their gardens, for instance, would be far less rich without the garden or collection acting as a material prompt. Similarly, life history interviews, whereby people narrate their lives over several sessions with a historian, are normally best conducted in participant's homes. Where there is a strong rationale for conducting

a reputable locally-based service. Beware of overseas companies offering cut-price transcription services— not only can the quality of transcription vary significantly, you may not know how or where your data is being stored. Insecure data storage can put participant confidentiality at risk and potentially breach Victorian privacy laws.

interviews in participants' homes, make sure you have a safety plan in place. This should involve letting a supervisor or colleague know your expected interview times and checking in with them before and after the interview so that they can confirm you are safe.

There are further issues to consider if you are conducting interviews overseas. There may be specific local customs around reimbursing participants to consider, or travel advice that needs to be followed. Please see the guidance note on conducting research overseas for further advice.

Payments to interviewees

Sections 2.2.10 and 2.2.11 of the National Statement pertain to the payments to participants. It is always ethically responsible to reimburse participants for any costs they may incur by taking part in research, such as parking fees, transport, etc. In some cases participants may be paid for their time. Such payments should be a reasonable reimbursement, and not act as an incentive to participate. A good guide for establishing payment for time is the minimum wage in the research location.

Any payments should be made electronically or in vouchers that are easily redeemable by participants. RMIT has a policy limiting cash payments, however this can sometimes be waived where electronic payments or vouchers are inappropriate (for instance where participants are living in rural areas of developing countries).

Transcribing interviews

It takes between three and six hours to transcribe each hour of a recorded interview. If you have adequate funds to pay for someone else to do your transcribing, make sure you use

Storing interview data

You must minimise the risk of your data being lost, deleted, stolen or accidentally viewed by others by following the guidelines set out in the [RMIT research data management policy](#). The policy provides detailed information about collecting, storing and disposing of research data.

For all interviews, no matter the risk level, always upload your data to the RMIT server; data must never be stored on a laptop, office or home computer or on an external device such as a USB stick or external hard-drive.

Interview recordings conducted in the field must be uploaded to the university server and deleted from the recording device as soon as it is practical to do so.

Extra precautions need to be taken with data collected from interviews involving sensitive topics or information:

- Data must be encrypted between browser and receiving server;
- Alterations and deletions of data must be logged;
- Access to data must be restricted to authorised users only, with authentication required.

Further information

For further advice on this topic or other human research ethics matters, please email humanethics@rmit.edu.au. A Research Governance and Ethics Coordinator will assist you and may connect you to one of the CHEAN or HREC members in your discipline who can offer expert ethics advice.