

Field work

If you are doing field work, these tips will strengthen your research design

Specify the universe of possible interviewees

- When interviewing from a small population (e.g., senior U.S. government officials working on counter-narcotics policy in Latin America), list the names, positions, or both of your ideal set interviewees, and then list substitutes for each. When interviewing from a large population (e.g., Mexican journalists), select a random sample.

Find contact information for potential interviewees

Prepare introductory letters, thesis summary, interview guide (see next)

Complete Human Subjects review process

(<http://web.mit.edu/committees/couhes/>.)

Pilot interview guide on subjects who will not be part of your study

Where possible, attempt to obtain some measure of inter-coder reliability in the use of the interview guide

Suggestions for writing interview guides...

Craft an interview guide

Write out your intro (so that you can rattle it off and it is similar for different interviewees)

Motivate your respondents (why study is important, what is in it for them, etc.)

Ground rules (on or off record, do they get to see the notes, do they get to edit their comments after the fact, etc.)

Questions should form a logical sequence

Use branched questions, numerical scales, and balanced alternatives

Third-party vignettes (“What would someone in a town like this one say about X?”)

Avoid interviewer-induced bias (leading questions, the effect your appearance has, etc.)

Beware of recall and projection biases (people forget in predictable ways, people ascribe things to others unconsciously)

Ask for additional contacts

Ask if you can re-contact them with follow-ups

...and doing interviews

Something in it for them (flattery, possibility of professional advancement, data on where they fit into the “industry”, top-down fiat, genteel bribery, etc.)

Build rapport

- Clear but generous ground rules
- Easy questions up front
- Wear appropriate clothing, observe all cultural conventions
- Get them out of their office
- Turn recorder off for hard questions

Beware interviewer-induced bias

- affirmative response bias
- cultural congruence
- confirmatory bias

Challenge them (nicely)

- Bring relevant data

...and doing interviews (2)

Don't ignore contradictory information; make sure there are opportunities for them to provide information that would falsify your hypothesis and verify others

Balance fidelity to original agenda against promising new directions

Anything I missed?

Anyone else to talk with?

Can we talk again?

“Record” everything you can about the interview afterwards (context, respondent's unease with certain answers or questions, etc.)

Follow up

Before, during, and after: take basic steps to ensure your personal safety and privacy

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