Interview-Based Fieldwork: Questions and Answers for First-Timers
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These notes are geared towards PhD students doing extended interview-based field research for the first time. The focus is on the types of interviews that are most useful for political science research questions. These notes cover practical issues, not administrative ones such as how to fulfill IRB requirements. Advanced researchers, or those who have a large and established network of contacts in the field site, will find most of what follows to be unnecessary. It should also go without saying that this is largely irrelevant for students doing the type of field research that involves hiring translators and local students to administer surveys or randomize interventions; or alternatively, for participant-observers doing the type of ethnographic research which is very uncommon in political science today.

I. …tools and best practices for organizing potential interview contacts beforehand, specifically managing the different stages of contacting and follow-up that one might be in with multiple individuals at the same time.

The best tools for organizing interview contacts beforehand depend completely on the types of people you intend to interview. If you wish to interview "elites," email is the best tool, followed by text (in some parts of the world, texting may be the best). You should be prepared, especially in the beginning, for 90% of your emails and text messages to disappear into the ether. I usually email first from the U.S., then if I have a mobile number, then follow up with an text as soon as I arrive in-country. I almost never call people on the phone anymore as an initial contact (see IV below). After I get a reply via email or text, *then* I call.

I don't think that there's anything special to discuss about what you do after the initial stages of contacting people. Before the days of Google Calendar, I had an Excel spreadsheet in which I kept my list of people whom I'd contacted and whom I intended to contact, proposed interview times for those who had agreed (I highlighted these yellow), and confirmed times for those who had confirmed my proposed interview times (highlighted green). I then sorted them by date and time and went to the interviews. Now I use Google Calendar.

It is definitely helpful, once you have a mobile number, to send a reminder text two hours or so before the interview takes place.

The story for "non-elite" interviews is very different. If you are getting out of the national or provincial capital to talk to "regular people" you cannot rely on setting up specific interviews beforehand, but you can still do a lot of work from home to anticipate how you will proceed in identifying the people who will serve as your primary sources of information. This means thinking about *situations* that will allow you to identify people and make personal contacts with them. How to do this varies tremendously, but for political science-type questions, you want to explore situations that give you access to a broad sample of people who are feeling social. These may include festivals or public holiday celebrations, local political party events, public meetings, public or quasi-public institutions (the local cooperative's headquarters), etc.

CONSIDERATIONS: THE ANSWER DEPENDS ON YOU, YOUR PROJECT, AND THE PLACE

1. What type of people you intend to interview?
    a. What are their time constraints?
    b. Where do they spend their time? (Are parliamentarians actually in the parliament? Do businesspeople hang out at their businesses? Is the capital city the place to go to find them? Can you disturb villagers at their work do you have to wait until the evening?)
    c. How can they be contacted? (email, text, networking, intermediaries, walking down the village path to find them, etc.)
2. Language: will you need an interpreter?
    a. How fluent are you in the country's official or working language?
    b. How fluent are you in the local vernacular? Are you sure? The difference between the spoken forms of the language at your field site and the formal or standard version that you learn in language classes can be immense. I, for example, do not speak Jakarta Malay or Kelantan Malay.
    c. Which does the interviewee speak? Are you sure? Depending on the type of interviews you do, people may be unable to use the official/formal language in conversation.

II. …general info on establishing relationships to facilitate the work would be great

Establishing relationships requires you to follow the **3 Ps**: be *pro-active*, *persistent*, and *polite*. The first two should be self-explanatory. The third is actually very hard to master and some people are better at it than others. Being polite means more than just saying please and thank you, it also means obeying local customs and conventions about interpersonal interactions (quite literally, what "polite" means). Depending on where you are, it can mean things like understanding that "perhaps" actually means "no," sharing a meal or a cigarette with a potential interview subject even when you aren't hungry or a smoker, being properly deferential (or not), looking older people in the eye, and so on. It also means in every situation remembering that people are giving you their time, and respecting that.

In my experience, good first contacts if you truly don't know anyone include local and international NGOs, universities, think tanks, and in some places the local World Bank office or even your university's alumni network. It is also useful to identify people in the U.S. who have done research in the country which you plan to study, and arrange to email or speak over the phone about the organizations which would serve as good first contacts. Even local organizations usually now have some sort of web site, even if it's just a small one with a contact form. Use these. Go meet the people there. At the beginning you'll find yourself talking to low-level people, but if you are nice and humble *and* you can convince them (or fool them into believing) that you're not just a naïve foreigner who needs everything explained, you will often find yourself sent higher up the food chain.

Happily, outside of the U.S., Canada, Japan, and Western Europe, academics (especially political scientists, economists, and sometimes sociologists) are much more plugged in to the local political scene than you might expect. This is probably because academic salaries usually aren't enough to make a living. So, local faculty may be important research contacts too.

You should not expect that your first meeting is with the Deputy PM or with the CEO of the country's largest firm. You get to these only *after* you've put in your time doing low-level interviews and building your network.

III. …how to get started--what to do in that first week after getting off the plane

There is actually a simple answer to this question. Before you arrive, you should have a list of meetings that you have arranged beforehand. Go to these meetings. Plan on one per day. With the rest of your time, do these other things.

1. Fulfill any legal requirements to ensure that you can remain where you are as a foreign researcher. (For the first extended research trip this is essential. You will learn only later whether or not you actually need to do this every time that you visit.) Depending on where you are, this might take weeks.
2. Get a local mobile phone. Texting is essential. If you can afford one with email too, get it. It is almost never a good idea, or even very affordable, to get your U.S. phone to work where you will be.
3. Figure out where you will live.
4. Figure out where you will work. This should not be the same place as where you live.
5. Figure out how to get around *safely*. As a general rule, I do not recommend using all of the local forms of transportation in developing country contexts.
6. Practice your language. Eat street food (might as well get sick at the beginning rather than later on, but of course you should try to avoid hepatitis or cholera). Go to where local people go and hang out there.

At this point, I should make clear that the first time that you set foot in the country should not be the actual field research trip. You should try to start with an initial exploratory visit (7-14 days is good, enter on a tourist visa if you can) in which you figure out how the place works and try to identify your base networks (described in II above). These are the people that you meet the first week that you're in-country for the real extended research trip. You will alert them that you're there, ask for more advice and contacts, and figure out what events you can attend to begin to plug into local networks.

IV. …networking in-country. How to cold call people, get them to give you their time and resources, and how to figure out who are the best people and organizations to contact (especially given low-information environments in the developing world)

These points are partially addressed in II above. It should also go without saying that you should be extra nice to office staff, secretaries, etc. They often have a Rolodex (real or virtual) of important people and their business cards. (On that note, bring business cards with you or have them made when you arrive. I'd go with 500 to start.)

I never literally cold call people anymore because in the parts of the world that I study people do not answer their mobile if they don't know the incoming number. So "cold call" just means "cold text." That said, the way to cold call people is…to cold call them. There's generally no way around it that I know. Sometimes you can get an introduction, and sometimes you can find a "fixer"—a well-placed friend or colleague who knows important people and can get you onto some VIP's schedule. Sometimes you can arrange to be at a public event where you know a potential interviewee will be, and then you can "cold handshake" him or her. But those are the exceptions and you should not wait for them. When you're more established such alternatives to the text/email-out-of-the-blue are more common.

Getting people to give you their time is difficult. Normally, if people respond to your initial inquiry then you can be confident that they are willing to spend at least 20 minutes with you. To get them to be helpful—or to give you more than 20 minutes—you need to show them that those first 20 minutes were interesting and useful. You do that by being engaging and well-prepared, and you do *that* by doing your homework before the interview. (This also goes for setting up a meeting with someone who might be useful for networking purposes but who is not actually an interview subject.) Some people get very frustrated with ignorant or unreflective foreigners.

Relatedly, you should arrive with enough specific questions to cover an hour prepared and ready to go before you enter the room. Never show up without a lot of specific things to talk about. I write these questions down on a notepad, which ensures that I don't forget them or get lost, and also that I have a well-articulated and grammatical version of what I want to say on hand if I get nervous.

V. …etiquette for recording interviews and tips on making that less awkward for the interviewee

Etiquette is really context-specific, and there are no guidelines that I know that apply across countries, but there are several schools of thought on recording. As a rule I do not record interviews, but I take detailed notes, and I spend about an hour after each interview typing them up for my records. Many people insist on recording interviews.

It turns out that if you want to record interviews, and your subjects consent, then in the course of a conversation they will almost certainly forget that they are being interviewed. It takes about five minutes. Strictly speaking, if an interview subject initially declines or even expresses discomfort at being recorded, that should be the end of the discussion. I don't know, but I suspect, that it would be a violation of human subjects guidelines to do anything that could be interpreted as an effort to "convince" a subject to be recorded if s/he does not want to be.

CONSIDERATIONS: THE ANSWER DEPENDS ON YOU, YOUR PROJECT, AND THE PLACE

1. How sensitive are the *questions*? If questions are very sensitive, interviewees may not want to be recorded.
2. How sensitive is the *context*? In many authoritarian or post-authoritarian contexts, interviewees may be wary of being recorded regardless of what you're discussing.
3. What do you intend to *do* with the interview data? Once the respondent gives you informed consent, are you looking for quotations (in which case recordings can be indispensable), background (in which case less so), or just general context that is not for attribution in any form (in which case even less so).

VI. …information that can apply to Americanists as well including interview techniques, what equipment to use when interviewing, how to set up interviews, how to organize your interview data and notes, and any do's and don'ts of field research

Most of these are covered above in I, IV, and V. I'm not sure if anything is different for Americanists except for the language/safety/research permits bits.

Because I do not record interviews, I don't have any equipment with me but a notepad and a pen. Most people I know who do record interviews like to use a smart phone these days. I bought a Dictaphone when I went to Southeast Asia in 2004, but I never used it. I can't think of any other equipment that you'd need.

However, I believe that you should *not* plan on taking interview notes on a laptop or a tablet (like an iPad). In 1-on-1 interactions, the person being interviewed views the computer as a competing source of attention, no matter how much attention you actually are paying to him or her. If you want to take notes (and I can't imagine why you would not), use pen and paper. Just trust me.

There are qualitative analysis software programs out there that many people find useful for organizing interview data, but I have never used any of them.

VII. …conducting elite interviews, along with any advice for those of us planning to pursue those in our fieldwork

Beyond the points identified in I and V above, I'd just add a couple of notes.

On timing: I recommend that you plan on a maximum of two interviews per day. Interviews are tiring, and this is especially true if they are not in your native language. The interview takes somewhere between 20 minutes and 2 hours, and you have to get there (not trivial in many cities), and it probably won't start on time. Also, I need at least 30 minutes to prepare, and 60 minutes to write up notes. Add that together and an interview work day is easily a 9-5, and often 8-7 or even later. Advanced researchers will tell you that they can do more than two interviews per day, and they are right, but they are normally (a) more fluent in the language, (b) often talking to people whom they already know, and (c) much less careful to transcribe the interview data in the way that a PhD student should.

On bad interviews: I have had several nasty interview experiences. For example, one interviewee yelled at me about Jews for half an hour and told me that I was a bad interviewer. I don't know how common this is but I suspect that I'm not the only one who has had an experience like this. It can get you down but it is important not to take such things personally.

It is not uncommon for women doing interview-based research to find themselves the victims of sexual harassment, the targets of sexual advances, or, more insidiously, the victims of either mild or overt gender-based discrimination. For obvious reasons I am not the person to give tips on how to manage this, but I do know that women should be aware that such things happen. Race matters in many parts of the world too: interviewees will expect Americans or people from American universities to be white.

Finally, on field work in general: Some people love doing interview-based research. Some people find it tiring and exasperating. Some people truly hate it. Unless you're the first type of person, it is important to ensure that you have something else productive to do when you're not doing interviews, because you can burn out. Useful alternatives to interviewing may include looking for data in the local statistical office, reading primary source material (in the archives, perhaps), attending local research presentations, "participant-observation" types of activities if you are doing something more ethnographic in nature, writing up progress reports for your committee back home, or any number of other things. If none of this sounds pleasant to you, then field work is not for you.

Further Reading

Christopher B. Barrett and Jeffrey W. Cason (eds.) *Overseas Research: A Practical Guide.* Second edition. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

Jaber F. Gubrium, James A. Holstein, Amir B. Marvasti, and Karyn D. McKinney (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*. Second edition. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2012.

Chris Blattman's field work notes: http://chrisblattman.com/tag/field-work/.