Best practice guidance for elite interviewing

Background
Research studies conducted in the Social Sciences and Humanities may involve interviewing senior/well known people, often known as elite interviewing. Elite interviewing raises particular questions about how to manage “informed consent” and issues of confidentiality and anonymity.

Methods include any one or more of the following:
- Unstructured interviews which may or may not be recorded
- Semi structured interviews which may or may not be recorded
- Structured interviews which may or may not be recorded
- Questionnaire

Research staff or students undertaking elite interviews need to be particularly alive to the issue of managing confidentiality and anonymity through all stages of a research project, including anonymity in publications, and will need to have received appropriate training in elite interviewing.

Recruiting participants
The first type of elite interview is where senior and prominent people are interviewed. These prominent public figures could range from senior government officials, Ministers or Members of Parliament and Chief Executives of large companies, to individuals famous for specific activities in Academia, the Arts or Sport. Recruitment is therefore by a specific request to named individuals to take part.

The second type is where individuals are chosen not because of their particular role but because of their general position e.g. editors of national newspapers, high court judges, tax lawyers. These are sometimes termed ‘expert’ interviews.

Negotiating access and information provided to participants
As prescribed in the CUREC guidelines, although initial contact may have been made through professional or social networks, request for access should normally be through a formal letter requesting the interview which has the following information:
1. the name of the study
2. the name and status of the researcher carrying out the study and how to contact them
3. a brief rationale of the study, including its purpose and value
4. why the individual is being invited to take part in the research
5. an explanation of what the participant would be asked to do, and where the interview/survey will be conducted and how long it would take

BPG_03/elite interviewing/version 1/27 Feb 2014
6. assurances about the option of confidentiality and use of data including who would have access to the data, how it will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the study
7. a statement that if desired by the participant data would be anonymised and an explanation of how this anonymisation will be effected
8. a statement of what the degree of control of the interviewee over the final report will be if anonymity is not desired.

It is a matter of researcher judgment in elite interviews as to whether or not the letter includes the information that people may withdraw at any time as this is deemed axiomatic given their powerful status.

**Consent of participants**

In elite interviews it is often argued that requiring written consent is not appropriate. This is because it is held that this type of person understands the situation s/he is in and in granting an interview is implicitly giving informed consent. It is not appropriate to assume this without doing the following:

1. Sending a letter as outlined above
2. Reiterating the content of the letter verbally before the start of any interview and recording the acceptance of this, either as an audio recording or as a written note in the interview notes.
3. If the above steps are carried out and the interview is tape recorded written consent is clearly not necessary.
4. However, if the interview is not tape recorded some evidence of agreement between interviewer and interviewee on levels of confidentiality and attribution of quotations is desirable, and it is desirable to have a simple statement of agreement with anonymity/confidentiality conditions offered by the researcher.
5. The degree of control over what is reported by the researcher should also be clarified and recorded. Elite interviewees, more than most, have an expectation of a role in the clearance of results. So it is important to clarify with interviewees whether or not they will be asked to/be able to check and approve what is reported.

**More on data protection and acknowledgement/anonymity issues**

As mentioned above, as well as the normal careful data protection routines, if elite interviewees request anonymity extra care must be taken. Qualitative elite interviews of the first type may not be easily anonymisable. Clearly false names/ or code numbers should be used in any records but in using quotations etc in any written material it is important to ensure that contextual information does not immediately reveal who said what.

Elite interviewees may choose not to seek anonymity. Regardless of whether they do or not, participants should be made aware of how the data will be used. If appropriate, elite interviewees may need to be made aware that text could inadvertently reveal who they are,
and aware of the possibility of being misquoted. Elite interviewers may consider offering interviewees the opportunity to check the use of direct quotes, and view contextual information which will be available in the research report but they should consider the appropriateness and practical feasibility of following through with this. All negotiations need to be done with care ensuring that academic freedom is maintained while keeping within the laws of libel and as far as possible meeting interviewees’ legitimate concerns.

However, if ‘expert’ interviewees do not wish to be individually identified, views may be used in a more aggregated way and the maintenance of confidentiality should be possible to achieve using the standard procedures of qualitative studies.

It will be important to ensure that both anonymised and non anonymised data are properly handled after the completion of the study. Some funders require the deposit of data in data archives and their conditions should be met if at all possible without compromising the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents.

There is no time limit on retention of completely anonymised data. All non-anonymised data generated as part of the project should be destroyed once the research studies have been successfully completed. Participants should be informed at the beginning of the study as to what will be done with the data.

**Monitoring and reporting of adverse or unforeseen events**

It is important to report any unforeseen or adverse events of a serious nature to a supervisor or senior colleague and get their advice and support as any difficulties which arise with “elite” interviewees need to be treated with considerable care.

**Duty of care issues / confidentiality / potential risks to participants / researchers / others; and what will be done to minimise these.**

The types of risks associated with elite interviewing chiefly involve the researcher as there is a potential power imbalance between researchers and their elite interviewees, and researchers should be prepared to handle these imbalances when planning their research. This means junior researchers need to be well supported and trained in preparation for elite interviews.