

Conducting research involving elite individuals

Guidance document

Introduction

When conducting research involving primary data collection, and particularly interviews, you may end up wanting or needing to interview people who are famous in their fields, are public figures, or hold senior positions. These participants may be considered elite individuals if they are inherently identifiable from their position or their knowledge. What constitutes an elite individual can sometimes be a grey area, and heavily context-dependant.

The following guidance is here to help you better understand who may or may not be considered elite individuals, and to reflect on the ethical considerations to take into account when conducting research involving elite individuals.

This will also help lower the risk of your research, as in most cases, projects involving elite individuals are considered moderate risk and need to be reviewed by an Ethics Review Panel. This is because their privacy may be compromised, as they are often unavoidably identifiable in the research output. However, this can sometimes be mitigated, especially if your participants' identity can be successfully anonymised. If you have any questions, please contact the Research Ethics team at research-ethics@qmul.ac.uk.

Please note this guidance is designed for research involving elite individuals in an otherwise low risk context. Additional considerations may arise for research involving sensitive topics, dangerous locations, or vulnerable people.

Elite individuals in research

Generally, if your participant can be anonymised or pseudonymised and they are providing information that cannot be directly linked to their post or their identity, they will not be considered an elite individual. Please find below a non-exhaustive list of situations when a participant may be considered elite and the ethics application should therefore be reviewed as moderate risk by an Ethics Review Panel:

- They hold a position which cannot be generalised, that is to mean, you cannot describe their role by simply being vague. For example, senior staff members in a ministry may be described as 'policymakers' or 'Ministry employees', but a president or a prime minister cannot.
- They hold a position few do: for example, judges of a specific court would be inherently identifiable if the court or its focus is named in the research output.

- You are discussing specific events and case studies, or asking your participant for information only they would be privy to, making them identifiable. For example, asking an activist about their own notorious court case would make them an elite individual, even if they do not hold any particular role in their organisation.
- You are discussing your participant's specific involvement or opinion about events or case studies. For example, if you are asking a lawyer about their experience working on a specific case, the lawyer would fall under the 'Elite' category.
- You are discussing subjects which could be considered sensitive, and potentially cause trouble for your participant should it be revealed that they are the participant. For example, asking prominent activists about their political opinions in a country under dictatorship may increase their vulnerability if they are identified.

While these situations are the most common, there may be other reasons why your participant can be considered an elite individual. If you are unsure, please get in touch with the Research Ethics team.

Recruiting and setting up interviews

When conducting interviews, due diligence should always be exercised regardless of who the participant is. However, when interviews involve elite individuals, there are some additional aspects and practical considerations to consider.

While research designs often run on tight timelines, it may be useful to ensure you have given yourself enough time to recruit and conduct the interviews. Ethics approval through panel reviews typically take longer than approvals for low risk studies, and you cannot start recruiting, let alone collecting data, until you have obtained ethics approval.

Additionally, elite individuals are often busy, and their agenda can allow for very little availability. They may not be very flexible when it comes to dates and times for an interview to take place.

Finally, you will need to think about where the interview will take place. Elite individuals may not feel comfortable with the interview taking place in a public space, or the focus and topics covered in the interview may mean it is inappropriate to conduct it in a public place.

When recruiting your participants, while informal contact may have been made through professional or personal network, a formal request for participation should be made, and the participant needs to be given a detailed Participant Information Sheet including the following information:

- the name and purpose of the study

- why they are being invited to take part
- an explanation on what taking part would involve, how long it will take, and where it will take place
- how their data will be handled, as well as a process for data withdrawal should the participant change their mind
- how their data and information will be used, and what processes are in place in terms of privacy and confidentiality

Please note this list is not exhaustive. The QMUL PIS template lists all the information you are required to provide your participants with. However, the points above are points that an elite individual may be particularly sensitive to. It is therefore imperative that you ensure you have thought about this aspect of your research, and that you can provide detailed information to your participants.

Elite individuals may also expect to have a degree of control over what is reported by the researcher. While it is common practice to give participants a transcript for them to review, it is also important to ensure the scope of this review, and that participants may not amend the interpretation of the transcript.

Consent of participants

A written informed consent process is generally recommended, so that both participants and researcher have a record of what has been agreed upon, especially any limitations to confidentiality.

You will also need your participant's explicit consent to use any direct quotes or answers, and to use any information about them which may indirectly lead to them being identifiable.

It is important to provide a clear and detailed consent form, and you have a clear record of what they have consented the data to be used for.

QMUL is held to national and international standards for ethics protocols, and the ethical landscape has changed markedly in the last decade. In particular, UKRI consenting principles state that all research with human participants requires appropriate informed consent procedures unless there are very special circumstances. In cases where full informed consent is not being sought, QMERC would expect applications to make clear why waiving this would be essential and why it would lead to enhanced research. The Ethics Committee would then be in a position to advise whether or not they agree with, and support, the justification. This would be considered on a case-by case basis.

Data protection and confidentiality issues

While it is understood that elite individuals may be more difficult to anonymise, it is good practice to try and protect the identity of your participants, in line with the GDPR principle of privacy by design.

If elite individuals do not want to be identified, extra care must be taken that their request is respected. Along with obfuscating their names and roles, you must take care that no contextual information included in the output may accidentally reveal their identity, or be linked back to them in any case. It can be helpful to report views in an aggregated manner and refer to their role with as vague a description as possible. This will also lower the risk level of your study.

When interviewing high profile individuals, guaranteeing their anonymity may not be possible. In such circumstances, it is good practice to be upfront and offer for them to be named and interviewed 'on the record'.

You need to make sure it is clearly understood by you and your participants whether comments may be directly quoted, attributed to them, or not included at all. It also needs to be clarified to the participant what will happen to the data after the study has concluded. For more information on Queen Mary University of London's data policies, please see the [Data Storage Matrix and the Data Retention Schedule](#). For more information, please contact Queen Mary's Records & Information Compliance Manager: p.smallcombe@qmul.ac.uk.

Mitigating risks associated with elite individuals

When conducting interviews, there is often an unequal relationship between interviewer and interviewees, and any associated ethical issues need to be properly mitigated. This imbalance may be exacerbated if the interviewee is an elite individual. Participants may try to control the interview, and you should ensure you are flexible to topics they are unwilling to cover, while remaining aware of the topic you are interested in discussing.

Specific training may be available at your School level to help you hone your skills ahead of an elite individual interview.

Any other risk associated with primary data collection or research travel also needs to be addressed and properly mitigated in your ethics application form.

Frequently asked questions

I would like to meet with an elite individual for an informal conversation about my dissertation topic but might use their comments in my dissertation. Do I need ethics approval?

As long as the individual's input is simply advice and help around your dissertation topic, and you are not collecting their views, opinions, or any data to be analysed in your dissertation, you do not need ethics approval. Please note this can be a fine line, and we strongly recommend consulting your supervisor or the Research Ethics Team before initiating the meeting.

I would like to interview an elite individual, who is also a family friend, for my dissertation. Do I need ethics approval?

Yes. If you are interviewing someone, you will need ethics approval before you can start data collection, regardless of your relationship to them. Interviewing close relations or family members comes with additional ethical considerations.

My research is low risk, but I would like to interview experts in the field, policy-makers, and NGO employees. Do I need an Ethics Panel Review?

If your participants can be safely anonymised and pseudonymised, and you are not discussing any specifics which would identify them, this can be reviewed as a low risk study.

Further reading

Lillie, K., & Ayling, P. (2020). Revisiting the un/ethical: the complex ethics of elite studies research. *Qualitative Research*, 21(6), 890-905.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120965361>

Liu, X. (2018). Interviewing elites: Methodological issues confronting a novice. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918770323>

Phillips, R. (1998). The Politics of History: some methodological and ethical dilemmas in élite-based research. *British Educational Research Journal*, 24(1), 5–19.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192980240102>

Niu, H. (2024). Navigating power dynamics in elite interviews. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1–26.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2024.2394055>

Smith, K. E. (2006). Problematising power relations in 'elite' interviews. *Geoforum*, 37(4), 643-653.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2005.11.002>

UKRI ESRC, 'Research that may require full ethics review' in Ethics reviews:

<https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/ethics-reviews/research-that-may-require-full-ethics-review/>