**Key informant interviews:**

**a practical guide for refugee and displacement researchers**

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Interviews with key informants are an important component of any research project dealing with refugee, displacement and humanitarian issues. Whether you are talking to a politician, a government official, a UN or NGO employee or a civil society leader, they provide an invaluable means of gaining access to factual and topical information; an understanding of the historical context of your project; as well as ideas, insights and opinions that can shed a new and different light on the evidence you have collected by other means. In my experience, they can also be one of the most stimulating parts of the research process, more enjoyable in many ways than administering a survey, trawling through archival records or reading reams of secondary literature.

Unfortunately, however, too many refugee and displacement researchers adopt a rather sloppy attitude towards key informant interviews, essentially making up their methodology as they go along, rather than thinking through the purpose, format and use of each interview in advance. On the one hand, this means that they do not get the full benefit of the interviews that they manage to arrange and undertake. On the other hand, when interviews are conducted in a deficient manner, and particularly when the informant feels that they have had a negative experience, they will be much less likely to agree to set aside any time for any future researchers that they meet in the course of their work.

In that respect, the golden rule to remember is that your key informants are usually busy people with many other items on their agenda. A bad interview will reflect badly on you and the organization that you represent, will represent a lost opportunity in terms of the research that you are undertaking, and will be a waste of time for a person who almost invariably has more important and urgent things to do.

To avoid such negative outcomes, I would like to provide a set of 8 key guidelines, based on my own experience as an interviewer and interviewee over the past 40 years. While your approach will evidently have to be revised and adapted according to the person you are meeting and the context in which you are meeting them, I believe that these guidelines provide a solid basis for any key informant interviews that you undertake in the course of your research. Please note that these guidelines do not apply to interviews with refugees, displaced people and host population members.

**1. Preparation**

In my experience, too many researchers conduct interviews in an ad hoc manner, without too much advance consideration of the purpose of the meeting, the issues that it should cover or the potential difficulties that might arise in the course of the conversation. To avoid such mistakes, preparation is essential.

Before you undertake an interview, therefore, make sure you know as much as possible about the situation or issue that you want to discuss. As an interviewee, there is nothing more frustrating than to be asked a question such as ‘what does UNHCR actually do?’, ‘how many displaced people are there in Kenya?’, or ‘has your country signed the Kampala Convention?’ These are questions to which you should already know the answer.

Similarly, before meeting any informant, try to find out as much as possible about the organization that he or she is working for, the way that organization is structured, the policies that it pursues and that person’s position within the institutional hierarchy. At the same time, before undertaking any interview, try to develop a well-rounded understanding of the operational context in which you are working.

Have there been any recent events or developments of which you should be aware? Is the operational environment characterized by any particular issues, complexities or controversies? What comments have been made about those controversies by other stakeholders, including the national and international media, human rights organizations and the United Nations?

**2. Professionalism**

If you want to be taken seriously as a researcher, then there are some minimum standards of professionalism that you should always try to meet. Try to arrange meetings in advance, rather than showing up at someone’s office in the hope that they will agree to meet you. If at all possible, send them an email in advance, briefly explaining who you are, what you are doing your research on and which issues you would like to discuss.

In very practical terms, professionalism means being on time for your meeting - even if your interlocutor is known to be a poor timekeeper. While you do not need to dress smartly, unless, perhaps, you are meeting a senior politician, government official or businessperson, try to look as clean and tidy as possible. Always present your interlocutor with a business card when you first arrive for your meeting.

As a general rule, I always accept refreshments when they are offered to me, as to turn them down might cause offense. More generally, make sure that you are aware of any local customs with respect to what you wear, the way you sit and the title you use to address the person you are interviewing. In order to maintain a high degree of professionalism, I always try to avoid interviews that take place over drinks, dinner, at a reception or in a moving vehicle.

**3. Personal engagement**

Effective interviewing is as much a social skill as it is an academic or technical one. And in that respect, I always try to engage with my interlocutors at a personal level, before moving on to the substance of each interview. There is no hard and fast advice that I can provide on this matter, other than to underline the importance of finding a point of connection with your interview, thereby breaking down the barrier that almost inevitably exists between two people who are meeting each other for the first time and whose backgrounds might well be very different.

To give some very simple examples, if you start a conversation with a sentence such as “Well, it is a great pleasure for me to be in Amman again,” your interlocutor is likely to be interested or pleased to know that you have visited their city before, and may well go on to ask how it has changed since your last visit. If you mention that you are studying sociology, law or international politics, you may find that your interlocutor has similar academic interests. And a reference to mutual acquaintances often acts as a useful ice-breaker. Needless to say, your efforts to find a point of connection in this way should be done in as natural a manner as possible. If it doesn’t happen in a fairly spontaneous way, then don’t try to push it!

**4.. Language**

If you can undertake an interview in the first language of the person that you are speaking to, that is fantastic! It will almost certainly prove to be more fruitful than one undertaken in a person’s second language, and even more so than one undertaken by means of an interpreter. Unfortunately, if you and your interlocutor do not have a common language, and the interpreter you are using is ineffective, there is not a great deal that can be done to improve the situation!

Remember that your job as a researcher is to communicate, and in that respect the language that you use is paramount. Try to speak in a clear, coherent and measured manner, especially when your interlocutor is speaking in a second language. Unless you are talking to an academic, a bureaucrat or UN official respectively, rigorously avoid the use of all academic, bureaucratic or UN jargon. You cannot expect a local government official to discuss the finer points of Agamben or Foucault, just as you cannot expect an academic to have a full knowledge of the UN’s Cluster System!

**5. Timing**

With respect to timing, my advice is to avoid meetings as much as possible at the very beginning or very end of the working day, when your interlocutor is most likely to have other things on her or his mind. Preventing someone from having a lunch-break is also generally not a good idea.

I usually try to keep my interviews down to around 45 minutes, although I also usually ask at the beginning of each meeting how much time the other person can spare. When I discover that the person I am interviewing does not have anything very important or interesting to say, I try to keep the interview going for at least 20 minutes, so as to avoid the impression of wanting to leave in a hurry.

This approach can have some amusing consequences. I once interviewed a government official in northern Iraq who could not answer any of my questions. I managed to keep some kind of conversation going for 20 minutes, and concluded by thanking him for his very informative comments. He looked at me with a quizzical look on his face and said, “Well, I’m very surprised to hear you say that I have been so informative, as I only started this job today and haven’t really learned what I am supposed to be doing.”

Finally, don’t try to cram in too many interviews in a day: two in the morning and two in the afternoon is usually quite enough if you want to allow time for preparation, to read through your notes and to get from one place to another.

**6. Questions**

Questions are at the heart of any key informant interview, and your effectiveness as a researcher will depend to a great extent on your ability to pose them in the right manner. Some key points:

1. Arrive at each interview with a pre-prepared list of the issues that you would like to cover with your interlocutor. Do not, however, write those issues down as specific questions, and certainly DO NOT run through a list of scripted questions as if you were completing a survey or questionnaire. The whole point of an interview is to have a free-flowing conversation in which you can adapt and add to your questions as you go along and respond to the remarks your interlocutor has made.

1. Keep your questions short and to the point. Be careful about expressing strong opinions or, even worse, getting into an argument with your interviewee. I often find it useful to distance myself from opinions by using the following format: “As you might have seen from their recent press release, Oxfam has suggested that it is too soon to encourage the refugees here to repatriate. How do you respond to their comment on this matter?”
2. I like to use questions with a numerical basis. For example, “What are the three biggest challenges confronting you in this operation?” “If you were given additional resources for IDP education, what would your top four priorities be in terms of increased expenditure?” “Can you identify three main reasons why coordination between humanitarian and development actors has proved to be so difficult in this operation?”
3. If I suspect that an interlocutor might not want to provide me with honest answers, I sometimes ask them a question to which I already know the answer, so as to check on how truthful they are prepared to be. It’s a cheap trick but it can work!

**7. Answers**

You evidently need to keep a record of your interviews, and there are two main ways of doing this: electronic recording or taking manual notes. I much prefer the latter, mainly because some people are intimidated by the sight of recording devices. There is also more to go wrong technically. I once did an hour-long interview with a researcher that I had to repeat for a second time because the person had pushed the wrong button on their device!

If you are taking notes by hand, then keep taking notes by hand! There is nothing more dispiriting than to give an interview to a person who seems to think that nothing you say is worth writing down!

I find it useful to go through my interview notes the day that I have written them, to highlight key points made in the course of the interview and to identify any issues that need to be exploited further with future interlocutors. I personally do not produce typed transcripts of my interviews and have never used any kind of coding method to analyze their contents.

**8. Ending the interview**

I always conclude my interviews by thanking the interlocutor for their cooperation and by asking them if they have any questions from me. I usually ask if there are any other particular people that I should talk to, and whether they have an email address for them. If the interview has gone well, I may ask the interlocutor if they have any appropriate documents that they can share with me, especially if they have mentioned any specific reports in the course of the interview.