

Staying safe when you are interviewing; Common Sense Reminders

Some of these may seem obvious but even the most experienced researcher can use a reminder:

Preparations and basic personal safety:

- ✓ Wear clothing that is comfortable, appropriate for the area you are visiting, and has pockets.
- ✓ Avoid wearing jewellery or carrying valuables.
- ✓ Carry only essential keys, money or cards, and a mobile phone (use a cheap handset if possible). Put aside money for your return fare if needed – have an emergency “stash” hidden somewhere on your person in case your bag gets stolen.
- ✓ Before you set out make sure your phone is fully charged, has a signal where you are going and has credit.
- ✓ Ensure someone knows where you are working, who you are likely to be meeting and what time you expect to get back, inform them if your plans change.
- ✓ Where possible, conduct visits during daylight.
- ✓ If you need to carry a laptop or other equipment bear in mind that computer bags are an invitation to thieves. Laptops can be carried just as easily in anonymous looking small back packs. Make copies of data just in case. Consider data security and encrypting sensitive data.
- ✓ Carefully plan your journey. Write down directions and draw a map on a separate piece of paper that you can consult inconspicuously. Getting a map out can identify you as a stranger, uncertain of the area and in some situations vulnerable.
- ✓ Always carry a form of ID e.g. a laminated copy of your passport or driving license (leave originals somewhere safe) and a copy of your research permit where applicable.

Personal safety when interviewing:

- ✓ Find out as much background information about interviewees as possible. To be forewarned is forearmed. Local knowledge and contacts are crucial. Find out the local sensitivities, tensions, political landscape, topics to avoid etc.
- ✓ Always be friendly and polite and do not appear aggressive or annoyed if an interviewee is late or says they have to leave early. Respect their wishes. You are taking up their time.
- ✓ Consider whether your interviewees might have expectations that you will give them something in return for their cooperation. Think about how you might handle that without compromising yourself or your research – manage their expectations and find out what local customs are and what is culturally appropriate.

- ✓ If possible, conduct meetings during daylight hours in a public or neutral space, for example a café; if you are interviewing a controversial figure or someone likely to attract negative attention consider a hired room or an office environment.
- ✓ Have pre-prepared exit excuses should you need one, and neutral responses to sensitive controversial issues, in case your opinion is asked.
- ✓ Where questions might be sensitive trial your questions where possible with someone you trust who is aware of the context. Familiarise yourself with the local culture sensitivities and tensions.
- ✓ Be aware of how you might come across, particularly in a cultural environment you might not be familiar with.
- ✓ **In accordance with the level of risk*, implement one or more of the following:**
 - ✓ Visit with a colleague.
 - ✓ Have someone you check in and out with for each interview (agree action if check-ins are missed).
 - ✓ Have a colleague make a 'safety call' after a certain length of time. You can agree a code word which indicates you need assistance.
 - ✓ Set your phone timer to make a 'fake call' to give you an excuse to go.
 - ✓ Make sure someone knows your itinerary, your expected time of return and how to get hold of you.
 - ✓ Activate GPS phone tracker setting on your phone if available
- Consider skype for high risk interviews (create a separate skype account for your research)
- If specific significant risks are associated with a particular interview carry out and record a separate risk assessment. Consider whether the visit should go ahead.
- ✗ Do not give out your home telephone number or address. Where applicable, you may wish to consider a separate mobile phone number for the research. Email addresses can be also anonymous.
- ✗ Do not invite interviewees to your home base to be interviewed or undertake interviews in your car.
- ✗ Never start an interview with someone who appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or where the interviewee or any other person present is in a disturbed, charged or emotional state. If the interviewee becomes upset during the course of the interview, offer them the opportunity to take some time to compose themselves before continuing.

*[*consider the risk associated with the person you are interviewing, the location of the interview and topic area. For example if you are visiting the offices of a large utilities company to talk about something uncontroversial in a low crime setting city it may be sufficient to leave your itinerary and contact details with a colleague and inform them of your expected time of return]*

Where interviewing in the subject's home is necessary:

Interviewing in someone's home increases the risk to your personal safety and wherever possible arrange to visit with an additional person. If this is not possible it is particularly important to inform someone of your itinerary and check in and out with them (see section above for more information on check-ins). In addition to the measures in the above section on 'Personal safety when interviewing' consider the following:

- ✓ Research the local area and the nature of the accommodation (if it is a high crime area you need to factor this in to your personal safety measures and decision to go)
- ✓ Watch out for dogs, and don't enter premises if you feel at risk from a dog or other animal.
- ✓ Keep your belongings together and try to sit nearest the door.
- ✓ Watch for changes in the person's mood, expression and body language.
- ✓ If you feel at risk leave as soon as possible without arousing suspicion (have a pre-prepared exit excuse).
- ✗ Never enter a house if you are in anyway unsure or uneasy about the occupant(s) or situation.
- ✗ **Do not carry out the visit if the risks cannot be managed.**

In a hostile situation or where you feel yourself threatened:

- ✓ Remove yourself from the situation as quickly as possible (have a pre-prepared exit excuse/ exit plan). Back away slowly.
- ✓ Try to remain calm and contain the situation; speak gently, slowly and clearly.
- ✓ If appropriate acknowledge their feelings (... I can see you are angry..)
- ✓ Make your body language neutral and relaxed – don't mirror defensive or aggressive body language, such as crossed arms or hands on hips.
- ✓ Maintain eye contact ... but do not stare.
- ✓ Keep your distance – allow plenty of personal space.
- ✗ Do not reach out to touch or make physical contact if someone is angry or emotionally upset.
- ✗ Never raise your voice or let yourself be led into an argument.
- ✗ Do not tell them to 'calm down'

➤ **Your personal safety is your priority.**