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Doing Real Research
A Practical Guide to Social Research

ERIC JENSEN
CHARLES LAURIE
6 HOW TO GAIN RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

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This chapter covers the following topics

- Why gaining participation in research is essential.
- Why people can be reluctant to engage in research.
- How to gain participation from research subjects who are useful for your study.
- What kinds of ethical considerations you should keep in mind during the process of gaining participation.

## Introduction

Most social research requires individuals to participate. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, participant observation and other research methods depend on participation. You need people to complete your surveys, agree to be interviewed or join a focus group. Therefore, strategies and procedures for gaining participation form the foundation of successful projects involving primary research. Participation also directly affects the quality of your sample and therefore the type of knowledge you can develop (see Chapter 5).

You may believe your research project is important, but how can you persuade other people of this? How can you convince your respondents that it is worthwhile for them to contribute their time and perhaps disclose confidential information to you?

## Strategies to Improve Research Participation

Some researchers may be lucky enough to encounter scores of willing participants. However, there are a number of good reasons why people may be reluctant to participate in your research. Potential respondents might not be interested in your research project, they might not immediately trust you or they might be wary of participating due to cultural sensitivities.

You are often approaching people with whom you have no prior relationship. A normal relationship might only progress to the stage of asking personal questions after a long period of time (if ever). Yet, you may be asking participants about their income, health or drug use after only knowing them for a few minutes. The fact that any personal information can be gathered in such a situation is remarkable – but it is possible to achieve with effective communication.

## Gaining Access, Attention and Interest

Finding Participants

The most common difficulties in persuading people to participate in your research are the simplest. Before you even move on to the more complex aspects of gaining participation, you must first locate your potential participants, make contact with them and garner their interest in your project. People lead busy lives. Between family, work and social activities, it can be difficult to find an appropriate time and place to get in touch with potential respondents and get your participation request in front of them. Given the background noise of daily life, your first challenge is to find where and how to reach your targeted participants.
Locate potential participants where they live, work and play. To find people in your target population to include in your sample, you should start by considering:

- Where your participants may be found
- Where they might be most receptive to participation requests.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLE

Go where potential participants are likely to be receptive to an invitation

Stella was looking to understand patterns of illicit drug use in Stockholm. She decided that seeking participants in community centres or rehabilitation clinics would be a sensible starting point. She found that potential participants were more open to an approach from a stranger in these contexts than on streets known for drug use or at a local police station.

KEY TIPS

Gaining participation through social media

Social media sites can be a great way to find key people to invite to participate in your research. In addition, for a qualitative study, social media sites can help you develop a snowball sample, as one useful participant is likely to be connected to others via social media. For example, if you are interested in researching migration policy and successfully establish contact with a relevant participant on LinkedIn, you can probably identify others involved in migration policy through that person’s contacts. The following are useful social media sites to consider:

- LinkedIn – widely used for ‘professional’ contacts
- Facebook – has a major focus on social networks, but many companies and key figures have public profiles on the website
- Twitter – not everyone has a Twitter account, but it can be a useful means of approaching people who do

In other cases persistent and creative internet searches can get you contact details for key people. For example, you may not have Katarina Pavlovka’s email address, but if you are able to find her colleague’s email address (e.g., joseph.smith@eurobank.com), then you could guess at Katarina’s email address (e.g., katarina.pavlovka@eurobank.com). Keep in mind that different research populations may have different levels of visibility online, so this technique is likely to be most appropriate for professional populations where a publicly visible digital presence is common. See the suggestions for further reading at the end of this chapter for more information on online sampling techniques.

PERSUADING PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE

Gaining attention for your request for research participation requires an understanding of what is likely to matter to people in your target population. The presence of requests for participation in market research in cafés, supermarkets, restaurants and websites means that prospective
participants are often faced with a deluge of requests. Against this background, how can you make your request stand out? And how can you convince respondents that they should take time to participate?

**Connect the research to a higher goal.** In many cases, your participants are unlikely to directly benefit from your research. In order to convince them to take part, you will need to think of reasons why their participation will help to achieve a broader pro-social goal. Think about how your relatively narrowly focused project contributes to larger, more universally recognized objectives. Most people are far more likely to participate in an activity if they feel that their time and effort will help achieve a greater good (see Table 6.1).

**Real World Example**

**Connect your research to a higher goal**

Ryan was researching the use of social networking websites among Yorkshire pig farmers, but struggled to convince participants of his work’s importance. Farmers were initially sceptical of Ryan’s motives and suspected that his research may be critical of the commercial meat industry by highlighting apparent cruelty to animals.

Ryan eventually had more success in finding participants when he explained that his study was intended to improve the quality and safety of the nation’s meat supply by assessing social networks’ capacity for spreading information about innovative farming practices. By thoroughly explaining his research and showing examples of some of the evidence he had already collected, Ryan connected his research to higher goals that his participants viewed as valuable. When farmers recognized that his research could contribute to improving the quality and productivity of their businesses while promoting health standards in the national food supply, they were much more willing to participate.

To help you brainstorm ways to appeal to altruistic motivations, here are some questions you can ask yourself about your research:

- Is it likely to **improve quality of life or health**? If so, in what ways? (For example, will it improve health services or customer service practices?)
- Will it **contribute to improvements in socially desirable institutions** such as governments or charities?
- Will it contribute to efforts to **reduce something socially undesirable** such as abuse, conflict or drug use?
- Does it **shed light on an important, contentious social issue** such as food poverty?
- Will it **address some kind of injustice**? Perhaps it will help to ‘expose what happened’ in an incident, or offer some kind of recognition of suffering.
- Could it **contribute to greater understanding** between groups or improve relationships between those who have a history of conflict?

**Consider using appropriate compensation to increase participation.** It is legitimate to use incentives to improve your research participation rate. Your participants are
offering you their time and thoughts, and it is reasonable to expect that they should receive something in return.

There are two main modes of offering compensation for participation:

- Offering incentives to **everyone who participates** means that from the participant’s point of view there is a guaranteed gain.
- On the other hand, offering incentives to only a few people – such as with a **prize draw** – will allow you to offer a more substantial potential benefit, but also lowers the likelihood of gain to the respondent.

People are generally divided on whether they prefer the chance of a larger prize or the certainty of a smaller one. If you have extensive resources, it will usually be preferable to offer the same incentive to all participants. However, there are often practical reasons for using a prize draw as your method of compensation. Most notably, if you can only afford, for example, a £50 incentive budget for a study that is likely to have 300 respondents, you have no choice but to use a prize draw approach (as a 16 pence incentive for each person is not going to persuade anyone).

If you think creatively and strategically about what kind of prize to use, you can stretch such a small incentive into something that many of your potential participants will find appealing.

### Table 6.1 Strategies and tactics for gaining participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Tactics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where can I find participants?</td>
<td>• Target places where you know participants live, work or play.</td>
<td>• Think about locations where participants will be most receptive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider approaching participants online.</td>
<td>• Build relationships with gatekeepers you can use to gain entry into communities or groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider if all of your target population has an active online presence to avoid sampling bias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I persuade people to participate?</td>
<td>• Connect research to a higher goal.</td>
<td>• Give prospective participants a reason to believe in your research, such as benefits to a wider community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Offer reasonable compensation.</td>
<td>• Consider different types of incentives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I make sure they stay committed to participating?</td>
<td>• Establish <em>credibility</em>.</td>
<td>• Be knowledgeable about your research topic, but avoid jargon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gain trust.</td>
<td>• Connect research to a trusted and respected institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Be organized.</td>
<td>• Provide clear details of how <em>anonymity</em> and <em>confidentiality</em> will be achieved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Be sensitive to cultural differences and minority perspectives.</td>
<td>• Respect your participants: treat them with courtesy and <em>professionalism</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Build rapport.</td>
<td>• Seek guidance from gatekeepers or others who understand the community to ensure you are well prepared to deal with cultural or socio-economic differences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider the way you interact with participants, including your external appearance (e.g., clothing, hygiene).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Keep your incentives proportionate. For most participants, incentives are seen as an ‘acknowledging of the respondent’s contribution, rather than payment for her time’, so offering appropriate incentives is important (Ornstein, 2013, p. 139). The general rule of thumb is that the level of compensation should depend on:

- **How much your participants will directly benefit from the research.** For example, if you want to convene a focus group on public attitudes about a particular brand, your aim of improving the brand’s public relations strategy is not going to benefit the participants. As a result, substantial compensation would be expected.

- **How much they will indirectly benefit from the research.** Perhaps your research will improve services for people they care about?

- **How much of your participants’ time you are taking up.** A three-hour focus group meeting will usually require compensation. On the other hand, asking someone in an informal setting if they could answer three or four questions may not require any incentive beyond your friendly demeanour and gratitude. This proportional approach to compensation makes sense on both a cost and credibility basis. If you offer everyone who participates in a brief interview a free MP3 player you will soon run out of research funds.

- **How costly your participants’ time is.** There is a point at which participants’ time is too valuable to attempt compensation at all. If you are trying to interview a chief executive or a politician you are better off appealing to their sense of generosity or interest in your topic than trying to provide compensation.

Think about different types of incentives. You should evaluate the pros and cons of incentives based on the characteristics and preferences of your particular target sample. Gaining input from a high-powered business executive will require a different incentive than you would need for an unemployed person.

Here are some ideas:

- **Give respondents access to your research findings.** This incentive should be an ethical requirement, when the results would benefit participants. It prevents your research from becoming a one-way, exploitative relationship in which data are harvested from participants and never returned in any form. It is inexpensive and easy to give this access, and reasonable for the respondent to request. It will also help the respondent to feel part of the research, and encourage them to participate more fully and consistently. The downside of this incentive is that it only works if the respondent is interested in your findings. (For further discussion of ethical principles and techniques, see Chapter 3.)

- **Offer a meal, tea and coffee when you meet with participants.** If you are looking for incentives for participation in a focus group meeting, providing refreshments could encourage people to take part. You could provide pastries for a morning session, a sandwich-based lunch for a midday session or biscuits and fruit for an afternoon session. This can be a bargain option as you could self-cater. You can add a personal touch by stressing that you are making pastries or cookies for the session yourself (rather than buying them). This kind of incentive is rather small, and some people may not find the offer very appealing. However, it may be just enough to make some people feel like they are getting something back for their time.
• **Offer vouchers, tickets or gift certificates.** Respondents will see immediate value and appeal in this incentive. The benefit for participation is clear and it is also easy for you to prepare these incentives well in advance. It is sensible to select something with broad appeal. Vouchers to a local comedy club may not appeal to everyone, whereas an Amazon gift certificate has much broader applicability.

• **Think twice before offering small amounts of money.** Cash incentives have clear, nearly universal value. However, some people are not likely to be attracted by small amounts of money. Another major downside of this incentive is that it overtly monetizes the experience, potentially undermining any altruistic motivations for participation.

• **Offer charitable donations.** This incentive has an appealing altruistic side to it, but it only works if the respondents like the charity or generally value charitable donation. In order to maximize the likely success of this strategy, select a charity that has a personal connection to the people from whom you are seeking assistance. For example, if you are looking to interview members of the Bangladeshi community then offering a donation to a Bangladeshi charity may be appealing. This incentive is useful for wealthier participants, who may not be interested in a free meal or a small amount of money. Given that this approach could be viewed as imposing your charitable values, this incentive may work best when you provide participants with a choice about whether to keep the money or donate it to a charity.

• **Reimburse travel costs.** Participants typically expect to be reimbursed for travel costs. However, always communicate an exact maximum amount that you are willing to reimburse, because some respondents may interpret phrases such as ‘reasonable costs’ too generously. Even people who seem perfectly reasonable may send you a massive travel bill. You will also need to specify that receipts are required. This is necessary so you can track your research costs and will also likely be required if you are claiming reimbursement from a funder. Be sure to send all the necessary details and claim forms to the participant in advance of their travel.

When preparing your incentives, always ensure you have enough to meet your commitments to participants. See Table 6.2 for an incentives chart.

**Table 6.2 Incentives chart**

| Incentive categories | Individual incentives | Direct compensation | • Vouchers  
| | | • Tickets  
| | | • Gift certificates  
| | | • Prize draw  
| | | • Cash (fair market value)  
| | Reimbursing expenses | • Travel costs  
| | | • Stipend for meals (e.g., lunch) or alternatively provide refreshments  
| Social incentives | Charitable | • Donation to charity of researcher’s choice  
| | Community/Society | • Donation to charity of participant’s choice  
| | | • Details of how findings will benefit the participant’s community or society  
| Ethical incentives | Access | • Give respondents access to the research findings  

It is also worth noting that incentives should not be withheld if someone ultimately decides not to participate.

When thinking about these incentives, you also want to think about how you frame them in your initial approach to the participant. For example, if you are approaching strangers in the street then explicitly identifying your incentives will likely be necessary. By contrast, if you are seeking to interview a high-level professional, it may be more appropriate to suggest meeting ‘over lunch or a coffee’ at a time that suits them.

**Remember that incentives are not always appropriate.** Incentives can be unhelpful for some research topics and target populations. For example, if you are researching depression in new mothers, it would be inappropriate to tout free theatre tickets or a raffle draw as an incentive. Indeed, when researching topics that hold deep emotional meaning for your participants, such as wartime experiences or family conflict, you will often find incentives are not helpful. Participants may even be repulsed at the prospect of exchanging their emotionally charged stories for a ‘prize’. For such participants, you should use the other strategies discussed above, such as demonstrating that your research will offer general benefits to society, help others in a similar position to themselves or allow them to document their experiences. Finally, be sure to always allow people to opt out of incentives as they may, for example, face a tax liability that they might not want to deal with.

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**KEY TIPS**

The wrong incentive can bias your research

Make sure that the particular incentive you choose does not make it more likely that you will get one kind of participant and not others. For example, if you were conducting research on public views about the ethics of zoos, then offering free zoo tickets would be a very problematic incentive to offer. Only those who enjoy visiting zoos would be attracted to such an incentive. As such, the incentive could introduce systematic sampling bias against those who dislike zoos. You can avoid this kind of bias by choosing widely desirable and inoffensive incentives that do not hold any direct relevance to your research topic.

Finally, if you use incentives, they will be part of your self-presentation as a researcher. Moreover, you should think about whether the particular incentives you are using could affect the kind of people who participate or what people say. For example, when Eric studied people attending the UK’s Cambridge Science Festival, the festival organizers wanted to use ‘science kits’ as an incentive. Eric advised against using this because people interested in a science kit for their children could be expected to be systematically different from the larger population of event attendees. This meant that the incentive could introduce systematic bias, with consistently lower participation from those less interested in science. Avoid this type of scenario by thinking critically about the appropriateness of your incentives, given your research population and goals.
Safeguarding your research from incentive bias

Offering incentives that are disproportionate or favour one social group over another can bias your sample and research findings. The following safeguards, adapted from Alderson and Morrow (2011, p. 68), aim to reduce the possibility that people will participate in your study purely because of the incentives:

1. Distinguish between the types of payment: reimbursement (e.g., of travel costs incurred), compensation (e.g., payment for time), appreciation (this is free!) and incentives (e.g., prize draw for gift certificate).
2. Be prepared to justify your selection of research incentives.
3. Ensure you still make payments to people who pull out of participating in your project.
4. Develop a clear, open way of describing your incentives in consent forms, in conjunction with your supervisor or ethics committee.
5. Make direct payments to the person who has participated in the research, not via an employer or other gatekeeper.
6. Normally avoid lump-sum payments to participants, except when reimbursing expenses.
7. Think about using deferred or non-cash payments.

Build bridges with gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are ‘sponsors or individuals who smooth access to the group. They are the key people who let us in, give us permission, or grant access’ (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 132). Having individuals who are known and trusted by your potential participants vouch for you can be very helpful when you are seeking to gain participation. Gatekeepers can save you time and headaches by helping to convince a large pool of people that your research is valid and participation is worthwhile. Gatekeepers can also give you insights into the knowledge and habits of your target population to guide your strategy for gaining participation. Gatekeepers might include:

- Local leaders such as members of the clergy.
- Members of a city or town council.
- Leaders within clubs and social organizations.
- Politicians.
- Schoolteachers or administrators.
- Executives or managers in a company.
- Activists from NGOs.

Gatekeepers may be able to bridge language and cultural barriers between you and your participants.

Just as gatekeepers have the power to grant you access, they can also restrict your access to a particular group (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 134). O’Reilly uses the example of a gang leader seeking ‘commitment from the ethnographer’ in order for them to continue enjoying access to the community. For a real life example of such an instance, see Venkatesh (2009).
In the case of research with children or vulnerable adults, gatekeepers are mandatory in almost all cases. You will need to approach the professionals or parents who are responsible for protecting these individuals. Approaching these guardians minimizes the risk of upsetting either your prospective participants or their gatekeepers. You will still need to ensure that you get some kind of informed consent for research participation directly from the children or vulnerable people you are conducting your research with. This may need to be given verbally, and the gatekeeper could then sign a paper consent form. In UK law, for instance, the only people who can give legally valid consent for research are those with parental responsibility or the (competent) children themselves. Teachers, social workers or other gatekeepers do not have parental responsibility and therefore ‘can grant researchers access to children, but cannot consent to the research’ (Alderson & Morrow, 2011, p. 105). See Chapter 3 for more information on the ethical issues of doing research with children.

Real world Example

Access participants through a gatekeeper

Olivia was hoping to conduct a verbal survey of children at a local primary school about their dietary habits. She knew that it would be unethical to contact the children directly, so she contacted the head teacher of the school and explained the objectives of the research. Olivia was able to convince the head teacher that her research would be contributing to the valuable social objective of combating childhood obesity.

The head teacher then agreed to contact the parents of children in one class to ask for their written consent for participation in the study. After this was granted, Olivia was careful to fully explain her study to the schoolchildren and to obtain their consent before conducting the survey.

Create an effective contact letter. This letter is your key means of persuading people to participate in your research (see Figure 6.1). It should contain the following details:

- **Describe yourself and your role.**
- **Describe the purpose(s) of the research.**
- **Identify how personal information will be used.** For example, you might say ‘Your data will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes. Any quotations will be anonymized and your name will not be used in the report.’
- **Provide appropriate justification for the importance of the research** (e.g., connect the research to a higher goal).
- **Indicate any incentives being offered.**
- **Explain how the participant was selected** (e.g., through gatekeeper).

Gaining participant trust

An essential first step as you seek to build a new research relationship is to show your participants that you are friendly, likeable, credible and trustworthy. Consider the situation from the
HOW TO GAIN RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Assure participants of privacy. One important factor that needs to be managed in the process of building participant trust is concern over privacy. Why should people give information to strangers about anything from their food preferences to their sexual behaviour or illegal drug use?

People may be dissuaded from participating in your research owing to concern over the security of any data they provide. There are regular news stories about breaches of privacy by companies and organizations. These breaches can be inadvertent, such as when laptops and memory sticks containing private data are lost. However, they also include deliberate efforts by hackers to breach data systems in order to gather personal information.

While not all research contains highly confidential personal information, many people are concerned about being targeted by marketing companies if they disclose even basic information. For example, filling in your address on a survey form for market research can often result in a barrage of junk mail from the company concerned, as well as third parties who are sold this information.

Figure 6.1 Contact letter

Dear Mr. Hernandez,

I was given your name by Julio Velasquez, the pastor from Holy Trinity church. He suggested that you might be interested in participating in a research study. I am a postgraduate student carrying out research at the University of Berkeley on homelessness in the San Francisco area. More specifically, I am investigating which groups of people are most at risk of long-term homelessness.

I am looking to interview key professionals like you for this research project. In particular, I would like to better understand your experience as a community outreach officer working for the State of California in order to gain insights into reasons why individuals are vulnerable to homelessness.

I can confirm the following for your participation in this study:

• Your anonymity will be maintained and no comments will be directly attributed to you or will be provided to any third party.
• You are free to withdraw from the study at any point.
• I will send you a copy of the interview transcript within one month of the interview.
• I will notify you once the study is complete and the final research report will be made available to you.

I would be happy to arrange a convenient meeting time and location for you should you be willing to participate in this research. I would also be pleased to meet you over lunch or coffee if that was more convenient for you.

Thank you very much for considering this request to participate in the study. Please do not hesitate to contact me by email (duane.alvarez@stateuniversity.edu) or by phone (123-456-7891) if you are willing to participate or if you require any additional information.

Yours sincerely,
Duane Alvarez
Even more critically, many participants may be reluctant to provide more sensitive information in case there are negative consequences later on. For example, a participant may fear at least embarrassment or even loss of employment or prosecution if they answer questions on psychological conditions or criminal behaviour. Indeed, studies examining any kind of socially undesirable activity carry risks for the participant and will make it difficult for you to carry out your research. Chapter 3 demonstrates the importance of maintaining participant privacy throughout your research.

**KEY TIPS**

**Manage concerns over privacy**

Given concerns over privacy, many potential participants may either refuse to participate or withhold details that could be vital to your research (for instance, on socially undesirable activities). Although you should never force anyone to participate in your research, you can help to assuage concerns about privacy in a number of ways. The following list is adapted from James and Busher (2009, p. 5):

- Indicate to your participant that:
  - Their information will not be passed to third parties under any circumstances.
  - There is no reason to believe that anyone would be specifically hacking your computer system.
  - Every reasonable precaution (such as using password-protected computers and never talking about personal information over email or on the phone) would be used to maintain privacy.
  - Collected data will be assigned a unique identifying number and the correlating respondent names will be stored on a medium not connected to the internet.
  - Data will only be used for the original purpose and unnecessary data will not be collected.
- Establish your credibility as a researcher.
- Take time to build up trust between you and the participant, especially if the topic is particularly personal.

**Establish your credibility as a researcher.** In order to overcome these potential concerns, you will need to convince participants that your research is credible. This will help to reassure participants that their private information is in safe hands and will not be misused.

**KEY TIPS**

**Reassure online respondents of your credibility**

When you make a research participation request online, establishing your credibility is even more important. Specifically, your prospective respondents need to feel assured that they are not opening themselves up to an onslaught of spam when they click on a link to answer your online survey or register their interest in participating in a focus group.
There are a number of steps that you can take to assuage any concerns that your potential participants might have:

1. Thoroughly check for typos or other errors in your message, as these can indicate a lack of credibility.
2. Post some kind of information about yourself and the research you are conducting on your institution’s website if possible. If you send a web link, keep the address as simple as possible so prospective respondents can type it into their web browser themselves, rather than having to click on the link.
3. Do not be surprised to receive queries from prospective respondents emailing you to confirm the research is legitimate. This means you need to keep a particularly close eye on your email inbox in the first 48 hours after you send out an online request for participation in your research.
4. Use an institutional email address. This will offer the reassurance that you are part of a respectable institution.

**Connect the research to a trusted or respected institution.** A good strategy for establishing your credibility is to link yourself to an established brand that the respondent will

**Figure 6.2** Soliciting participants: a decision matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Face-to-face</th>
<th>Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources to access a big enough sample</td>
<td>Small budget but large sample required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential participant locations are clear</td>
<td>Large geographic area needs to be covered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility more likely to be gained through face-to-face interaction (depending on topic area)</td>
<td>Uncertainty around where participants may be located</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants will feel comfortable discussing the topic in public (even if just an introduction)</td>
<td>Topic area is sensitive – participants will seek anonymity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
already be familiar with. This may make your research seem more important and credible. For example, if you approach an individual and indicate that your research is being conducted through the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, your association with this major research institution helps to implicitly validate the quality and value of your research. It is as if the institution is vouching for you. This is particularly important at the early stages of building a research relationship, when prospective participants have very little else they can use as a basis for judging your credibility as a researcher. Your institutional affiliation does not need to be famous or nationally known to benefit your credibility. It just needs to have an established place in the minds of your participants. Tying your research to a local community college or business also suggests that you are credible. This strategy is particularly important when you are approaching potential participants online, as other non-verbal cues are not available to indicate your credibility. So, if you have an institutional email account (e.g., johnsmith@institution.edu), be sure to use it. If you don’t have an institutional email account, then make sure your email address lends credibility (so not ‘donutsforever24@hotmail.com’ or ‘bieberfever4ever360@gmail.com’).

Of course, some institutions have reputational baggage. If you are conducting research for BP or McDonald’s, you may find a positive reception from some and immediate rejection from others. Think carefully about how an institution is perceived before you make a final decision about whether to emphasize your association with it. This also means that researchers using an institutional email address have to be particularly careful to uphold high standards of professionalism throughout their research process so as not to harm the reputation of the institution they are representing. See Figure 6.2 for a decision matrix when soliciting participation.

**REAL WORLD EXAMPLE**

**Tie your research to a well-known institution**

Tying your research to a well-known institution can be the determining factor in gaining participation. When Fiona was seeking interviews with respondents on the topic of hepatitis C and intravenous drug use, she knew people might be hesitant to participate due to the personal nature of the topic and possible legal consequences for using illegal drugs.

Fiona found that emphasizing that the research was connected to the International Committee of the Red Cross preempted many concerns such as Fiona’s identity and trustworthiness and the purpose and value of her research. Indeed, numerous respondents stated that they would take part in the research if it was for the Red Cross, but they may not have been so willing if it was only for Fiona.

Even after you establish that your research is credible and participants’ data will not be misused, there is still more you can do to show that you are someone who can be trusted and taken seriously.

**Be knowledgeable about your research.** In some cases, you may not know very much about your research topic at the time that you are collecting data. For example, you may be researching how social media sites such as Facebook influence the music buying behaviour of 18–25-year-olds. As the growth of social media has occurred relatively recently, you may not
know very much about the topic. However, you do need to be able to demonstrate mastery of the details of your own research and what you are seeking to achieve with it. Prepare answers for questions about what your research topic is, why you are doing the research and how you will ensure that your participants’ data will be kept secure. You may also be asked about whether, how and when the participant can view the results.

You should be able to answer the following common questions from participants:

- What is your research about?
- Why do you need my participation?
- How will my information be used?
- How long will it take?
- What’s in it for me?
- Can I see the final research product?
- When will the research be completed?
- What if I don’t know the answer to a question you ask me?
- Can a friend help me complete the survey?
- I feel uncomfortable knowing I will be recorded. Does the interview have to be recorded?
- What if I change my mind and decide I don’t want my data to be used at a later date?
- Will my contribution be kept confidential? How can I trust that my personal details will be kept private?

At the same time, you should also be able to speak easily and knowledgeably about more in-depth aspects of the research project. The following points are some possible detailed questions you might encounter:

- Your research objective sounds ambitious, but is your small study really going to have any effect at all on this issue? One response to this question is that there have been many major advances built upon ideas and findings from smaller studies, and that you intend to widely publicize your findings to achieve the greatest impact.
- Who is funding your research? How do I know they will not influence your research findings? In responding to this type of question, you would need to provide a full and honest account of who is supporting your research financially. To reassure participants, you could, for example, indicate that your funder does not require you to hand over any confidential information and will only see the final version of your report.
- All I am doing is talking about myself. How are you going to be able to do anything with this discussion? One response is to indicate that you will be carefully analysing each interview/questionnaire to look for patterns that shed light on your topic.

Even well-prepared and experienced researchers can be surprised by participants’ questions. When you encounter questions like those listed above, you should make a note of them so you can prepare good answers in case they come up again. Even if you don’t end up getting asked questions you prepared for, having sharp, concise and knowledgeable answers about your research will be useful to you, no matter where you end up presenting your research.

**Avoid using jargon or appearing unapproachable.** Use clear and concise language that is appropriate for someone who is not an expert in your field when you explain your
research. One way of quickly spoiling an interaction with a participant is to sound like you are talking down to someone. You may feel that using fancy or theoretical language and jargon may help to establish your reputation in your research community, but it will make you appear out of touch and unapproachable to a respondent. Indeed, your research topic may sound dull, overly complex and generally unappealing if framed in academic or obscure terms.

**KEY TIPS**

**Translate your topic for prospective participants**

Be sure that you are expressing your research interests in terms that will make sense to your prospective participants. Consider the following example for this kind of translation.

*Pre-translation:* ‘I am investigating the provision of holistic palliative care programmes for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome patients with a CD4 count below 100 who are beyond treatment.’

*Post-translation.* ‘I am researching ways to reduce the suffering of AIDS patients who are in the last stages of life.’

**Build rapport.** A strong rapport will almost certainly improve both the rate of participation and the quality of your interactions. This will be especially important if you are engaging in research that will require longer-term participation, such as interviews, focus groups or longitudinal studies. The key to building rapport is to create understanding and establish common ground.

Meeting over a cup of coffee or a meal will help to establish a more meaningful relationship with prospective participants because it personalizes the meetings and gives depth to the interaction. Another strong means of building rapport is to meet people in locations that are comfortable for them, like religious or community centres. This will help respondents to relax, which will in turn encourage them to participate more fully in your research.

Here is a brief checklist to go over as you prepare to meet prospective participants:

- **Clothing.** Dress appropriately. In covert observational or ethnographic research, blending into your surroundings is the priority. Therefore, you should wear clothing that is similar to other people in your research setting. When conducting a survey in a public space such as a museum or hospital lobby, you need to use the non-verbal cue of being reasonably well dressed (though not excessively so) to help establish your credibility. In most cases, it is essential that you have clean, unstained clothing that would match or slightly exceed the level of formality of most of your respondents’ clothing. For example, if you were interviewing bankers, you would need to wear formal business attire. On the other hand, partygoers at a chaotic and muddy music festival are unlikely to want to be interviewed by somebody wearing a suit.

- **State of mind.** You have done your preparations. You have your materials in hand. You should turn off your mobile phone and be 100% focused on your research.

- **Demeanour.** Introduce yourself with a smile and exude calm and confidence. If you seem nervous and uncertain, it may shake your participants’ confidence in you.
Keep appointments and provide promised incentives. Convey professionalism by getting the basics right. Remember that your participants are helping you, so you need to ensure that you accommodate their needs as much as possible.

- Always hold to your end of any agreements or commitments to your participants.
- Arrive early at appointments so you are organized and prepared when the respondent arrives. Even being a few minutes late can really annoy people and hurt your standing with them. Perfectly reasonable explanations (e.g. you encountered traffic or genuinely got lost) are of little use in this situation, so be sure you are in position well in advance of the agreed meeting time.

These may seem like obvious points, but they can greatly affect participants’ impressions of you, and by extension, their willingness to fully participate in your research.

Be organized when scheduling meetings. Arranging interviews or focus groups requires you to be well prepared, organized and diligent in following up with your participants:

- Know your own availability and be flexible. Avoid giving the impression that your time is more important than the participant’s. You are more likely to secure an interview if you say that you can meet any time the following week except on Tuesday from 2pm to 4pm, than if you say that you can only meet on Wednesday at 9am. From a practical point of view, if you genuinely do have limited weekday availability then you can try offering early evening and weekend times as well when you might have more flexibility.
- Be sure the participant commits to a particular day, time and location. If you receive a vague or uncertain response, gently press for a specific date, time and location. A meeting is much less likely to materialize if your potential participant only makes a vague promise to call you at some unspecified point in the future. Often people will ask you to email them details as a way of avoiding committing to something. Never force people if they don’t want to participate, but also remember that friendly, courteous persistence can be persuasive!
- Always confirm the date and time of meetings. You should always confirm the details of an interview or focus group by email or telephone the day before. If there are more than a couple of weeks between the point when you first seek research participation and the day of the data collection, you should also confirm several days in advance (unless you are concerned about bothering the participant with too many messages). These confirmations will enhance your credibility and serve as a polite reminder of the meeting, thereby reducing ‘no-shows’.
- Provide a realistic estimate of the time commitment required from the participant. Test this out in advance. Participants can become irritated if you underestimate the time required from them. For example, if you tell a respondent that your interview will only take 15 minutes when in fact you know it will take an hour, the respondent would be entitled to feel deceived. If during the interview, new topics arise and the interview looks like it will last longer than you expected, you should make this clear to the participant and check that they are willing to continue.
- Research appropriate places where you can meet. Be flexible and be prepared to offer your participant a range of meeting places. Given you will most likely be recording the interview, the quieter the setting the better in most cases. Make sure that you know
how to get to the place where you have agreed to meet. If you have problems finding the participant, you are both likely to feel stressed and distracted.

- **Choose convenient meeting locations.** You need to prioritize the needs of your participant and choose a meeting place that is close to their home or place of work. In general, you should travel to your participant, not the other way around. Your own home could be a particularly poor choice if you share housing where roommates might interrupt or behave inappropriately. Moreover, inviting people to your home could set off alarm bells for the participant from a safety point of view, and lower their trust in you as a researcher.

- **Select locations your participants are likely to feel comfortable in.** For example, if you are seeking input from skateboarders, asking them to do an interview at a skate park would probably be a more sensible than suggesting that you meet in a library. Similarly, if you are studying investment bankers, choosing a setting in an office block may provide a comfortable and familiar location for the research.

- **Ensure that you have everything you need to conduct the interview.** Don’t forget to bring pens, clipboards, and fully charged recording devices. Also be sure you know how to access the room or area where you will meet the participants. Imagine the embarrassment of being stuck outside the locked room in which you were supposed to hold your focus group or interview, or the awkwardness of having to interrupt an interview when the battery dies on your audio recorder. Such practical failings can undermine your credibility.

### 6.2.3 Account for Social and Cultural Differences

**Consider potential cultural sensitivities regarding your research.** It is important to be culturally inclusive. The results of your research will be skewed if you fail to ensure that your sample reflects the population that you are studying. For example, it could be unwise to assume that prospective participants from ethnic minorities (e.g., recent immigrants) speak English, have internet access, or are aware of certain local historical events. If you don’t recognize these sensitivities, you are likely to struggle to communicate the ideas behind your research and your efforts to gain participation will prove fruitless. Moreover, unrealistic assumptions can make your research appear irrelevant or disconnected from the social reality of the group you are trying to sample.

Note that subcultures within your culture can require just as much sensitivity as immigrant populations with which you are unfamiliar or research participants you encounter outside of your home country. Before you approach a target population, make sure that you consider a range of variables including local languages, educational backgrounds and levels of social marginalization.

### Real World Example

**Be sensitive to your research context**

Jens was conducting research on how residents of a low-income housing estate in London access information about their local area. He began his verbally administered survey by asking which digital device residents used to access information about local public services: iPad/tablet, desktop computer, laptop computer, smartphone or ‘other’. He was taken aback when the first respondent rejected the question, saying ‘We don’t have iPads: we have pencils!’.
Jens had made an inappropriate assumption that participants in low-income areas accessed information by some kind of digital technology when in fact a number of residents gained such information using other, non-digital means. Appearing out of touch like this reduces the likelihood of gaining and maintaining participation. With a self-administered survey, a respondent might stop participating if they came across an unrealistic assumption suggesting the researcher did not understand the situation.

Minority groups may also be reluctant to participate in research for reasons stemming from historical discrimination. Immigrant communities may feel vulnerable and could be reluctant to participate in research for fear of negative repercussions from the state, such as from immigration officials. Other communities may have a history of being exploited that has led them to mistrust research and research institutions. Being aware of these histories can help you understand that you may need a more careful approach to build rapport with some communities, including ethnic minorities.

**REAL WORLD EXAMPLE**

**Tuskegee syphilis experiment**

Between 1932 and 1972 a clinical study was conducted in which African-American men were unwittingly part of a major research project studying syphilis. Individuals who had previously, but unknowingly, contracted the disease were told that they were receiving free medical care. However, their syphilis was deliberately left untreated so that researchers could track how the debilitating effects of the disease progressed differently amongst African-Americans.

The project has rightly become notorious as an extreme example of unethical research. The fact that it continued for nearly 40 years highlights the pervasive racism against African-Americans at the time. Ethnic minorities are often treated poorly worldwide by authorities, which can make them reluctant to engage in research.

**Be sensitive to minority perspectives.** Where applicable, you should try to get input from people representing the different minorities within your target population when you are planning how to carry out your research. Furthermore, you may need to take ethnicity and other minority categories into account when you are seeking out gatekeepers. For example, if you are carrying out a survey among a population of recent immigrants, it would make sense to be accompanied by someone who is respected within the particular minority ethnic community you are working with and is able to act as an interpreter if necessary. This will help to ease community members’ concerns about participating in your research.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have highlighted strategies you can use to secure participation in your research. You should be prepared to demonstrate basic mastery of information about your
research topic to assure your participants of your credibility as a researcher. You should also avoid terms and phrases that may make you sound condescending, pompous or unapproachable. For example, you should normally avoid using theory or jargon when describing your research.

We also discussed the role of incentives in research. The greater the time commitment, inconvenience and risk faced by your respondent, the more you will need to offer incentives for participation. A five-minute survey will require less of an incentive than a two-hour-long focus group. Regardless of incentives, you may need to work through gatekeepers in order to reach your participants effectively. For instance, you will need to approach a parent or guardian if you want children to participate in your research.

In this chapter we have also discussed the importance of getting the fundamentals right: dress appropriately, keep your appointments, arrive early and ensure that both you and the participants are absolutely clear about where and when you will meet. Finally, regardless of your particular strategy for gaining participation, you should always follow the core ethical principles discussed in Chapter 3. These principles include your duty to produce quality research, to get informed consent, to respect your participants’ right to refuse and to keep your promises of confidentiality or anonymity. Finally, despite all your efforts, there will be no guarantee that potential participants will trust you enough to take part in your research. Be prepared for rejection and take it gracefully, expressing thanks for considering your participation request. But if you follow the steps outlined in this chapter, you will be well on your way to gaining (and maintaining!) participants for your research project.

**Suggestions for Further Reading**

- **Alderson, P., & Morrow, V.** (2011). Money matters: Contracts, funding, projects and paying participants. In P. Alderson & V. Morrow, *The ethics of research with children and young people: A practical handbook* (2nd ed., pp. 63-73). London: Sage. This entire text is a useful guide for doing research with young children, but this chapter in particular provides guidance on the financial side of research. While the chapter comes from the perspective of research with children or young people, the messages are applicable to research with any demographic.

- **Fricker, R. D.** (2008). Sampling methods for web and e-mail surveys. In N. Fielding, R. M. Lee & G. Blank (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of online research methods* (pp. 195-217). London: Sage. This is a useful text that discusses the advantages and shortfalls of various sampling methods for online research, either through email or web-based platforms such as Survey Monkey. The chapter also includes a broader discussion of sampling methods outside of internet-specific research.

- **McNamara, P.** (2009). Feminist ethnography: Storytelling that makes a difference. In P. Atkinson & S. Delamont (Eds.), *SAGE qualitative research methods* (pp. 162-197). London: Sage. This chapter provides a useful real world example on the importance of establishing researcher credibility and gaining participant trust.


• Venkatesh, S. (2009). *Gang leader for a day: A rogue sociologist crosses the line*. London: Penguin. This book provides a very readable, entertaining, popularized account of an ethnographic study of a gang in Chicago. If you are thinking about doing an ethnographic study with a challenging population, this extended real world example can help you prepare as it reveals some challenging issues involved in gaining participation. However, this book describes some very problematic research practices, so don’t look to it for solutions to these issues!

**GLOSSARY**

**Anonymity** - Not identifying an individual by name in your research to ensure their privacy. Anonymity typically means the researcher doesn’t know the participant’s identity.

**Confidentiality** - If you offer participants confidentiality, that means you know who they are but you promise to keep their information private and not to publish their names or associate them with what they have said when you write up your research report.

**Credibility** - This refers to the combination of qualities such as being trustworthy, reliable and honest.

**Focus groups** - This is a method of research in which three or more participants take part in an extended group discussion about a given issue.

**Gatekeepers** - Individuals who know and have influence over a pool of potential respondents.

**Informed consent** - The process of ensuring that respondents know all the necessary information about your research before agreeing to take part.

**Interviews** - A method of research whereby you have an extended, somewhat structured face-to-face conversation with an individual, during which you ask them questions.

**Participant observation** - A method of research in which you observe individuals in a setting from the position of someone participating in whatever activities are taking place in that setting.

**Professionalism** - Establishing yourself as competent and knowledgeable when approaching individuals.

**Rapport** - A trusting relationship you can develop with an individual.

**Snowball sampling** - A non-probability method of sampling in which you recruit new participants from the acquaintances of individuals who have already taken part in your research.

**Surveys** - A method of research in which participants answer a series of questions, either through filling out a paper survey or being asked by an interviewer.

**REFERENCES**


