In general, a flexible and pragmatic approach works best. If, for example, you are interested in how younger speakers use language, you will find your target ↳ participants in the institutional context of a school. Indeed, a lot of sociolinguistic research has examined teenagers by first making contacts in schools (e.g. Heath 1983; Eckert 2000; Kerswill and Williams 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008; though Cheshire 1982 actively sought out teenagers who were *not* going to school) or through after-school clubs/activity classes. However, if the research question is more concerned with how age and gender interact, and how they affect use of language across the lifespan, a broader spectrum of the speech community (e.g. families) where there is a mixed range of age and gender will need to be recorded (Sankoff 2004; Blondeau 2001).

A common first step is to contact people that you know, such as your family and friends, or people you work with who have ties to the community you want to study (cf. Tagliamonte 2006: 20–35). If your initial contacts introduce you to other people, you have the start of a snowball sample (sometimes called 'friend of a friend' networking). Milroy (1980) and Milroy and Gordon (2003) discuss this method in more detail. Labov's work (1972b) with members of street gangs represents the earliest systematic study of language variation through social networks. In this approach it is best to prepare brief questionnaires (whether administered verbally or in writing) for personal information. This is a useful way of categorizing and finding out more about participants whom you have little or no acquaintance with.

Familiarity between the researcher and the participants also has an impact on the patterns of language use that the study will record. Cukor-Avila and Bailey (2001) explore the effect of a familiar interviewer on how people talk, noting that speakers use more vernacular features in conversations recorded with someone they are familiar with, and that general familiarity of the interlocutors seems to have more of an effect on the likelihood that non-standard or vernacular features will be elicited than shared ethnicity alone does (cf. Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994).

5.3.3 Beyond 'friend of a friend'

Aside from being introduced to someone via a friend (or a friend of a friend), it is possible to gain entry to a community through organized groups such as societies, clubs, and churches. You can distribute an email to the club's email list (e.g. 'Participation in research required') or ask for volunteers through community bulletin boards but, in our experience, this produces a very low response rate unless you are already an active member of the club or community group. It helps to think creatively and brainstorm with friends, drawing on their ideas and networks, if your target community seems hard to crack into.

5.3.4 Some comments about sociolinguistic fieldwork in institutional settings

If your aim is to collect data from institutional contexts such as schools and service encounters, you may need to undergo thorough checks of your probity and trustworthiness. These can take a long time (maybe months), so your fieldwork plans need to reflect this. Regulations governing access to institutions like schools or other groups that may be deemed 'at risk' (as the phrase goes in the UK) will vary depending on where you are, so you must seek advice locally. Because gaining access to institutional settings can be slow or problematic, it is advisable to have backup plans in case permission is not granted.

If you need the approval of a ministry or governmental organization prior to conducting your research, it is wise to inquire how other researchers have dealt with such issues. Contact with local universities and/or research institutes before fieldwork starts and good relations with these groups once fieldwork is under way can be helpful too. In addition to familiarizing you with ongoing research and establishing valuable communication channels which can secure ongoing progress in the field, it can help shape a social position for the sociolinguist within the local norms of research culture.