Methodological Approaches for Junior Researchers Interviewing Elites: A Multidisciplinary Perspective

William S. Harvey

Department of Geography,
University of British Columbia,
1984 West Mall,
Vancouver,
BC V6T 1Z2,
Canada.

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William S. Harvey

Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1984 West Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada.

will.harvey@ubc.ca

Abstract

This paper explores some of the methodological strategies for interviewing elites with a particular emphasis on the challenges for junior researchers. The paper focuses on researching elite members and preparing for interviews, gaining access as well as conducting interviews. Examples are drawn from across the social sciences and from the author's doctoral and post-doctoral work with over one hundred members of business elites. It is argued that researchers should be particularly attentive towards the following five areas. First, being organized when contacting respondents and attending interviews. Second, providing flexibility when designing the research and conducting interviews. Third, ensuring transparency when communicating with elite members and during the analysis. Fourth, maintaining good etiquette with all participants to ensure the highest professional standards. Fifth, persevering with difficult stages of the research such as interview rejections and uncomfortable meetings. The overall aim of the paper is to provide an introduction for those who are new to the field of interviewing elite subjects.

Key words

Elites, interviewing, methods; junior researchers

Introduction

In the last few decades social scientists have increasingly turned their attention towards the role of elite members within society which has led to a growth in work on some of the methodological challenges of interviewing this group. However, although there have been some groundbreaking texts on these methodological challenges (Dexter, 1970; Ostrander, 1993; McDowell, 1998), there have been few attempts to bridge these different experiences across the social sciences. Furthermore, there is little formal guidance for junior researchers about whether they should be interviewing elite subjects. If they are encouraged to research this group then it is not clear what types of challenges they might expect.

This paper provides practical guidance for researchers interviewing elite members and draws upon the experiences of scholars across the social sciences as well as my own experiences of interviewing over one hundred CEOs, Vice-Presidents and Directors during my doctoral and post-doctoral work. I begin by introducing and addressing the problem of defining elite members and I highlight the importance of researchers clearly outlining who they are referring to when they use the term 'elite'. The remainder of the paper focuses on three aspects of researching this group. First, I raise the challenges of researching subjects including preparing for interviews. Second, I suggest some strategies for gaining access to elite groups. Third, I address overcoming particular problems during the interviews. I argue in my conclusions that interviewers should be attentive to five areas in particular: organization, flexibility,

transparency, etiquette and perseverance. Although this paper focuses on the challenges for junior researchers interviewing elite subjects, much of the analysis is applicable to all researchers and subjects.

Introducing and Defining Elites

Historically, many social science disciplines have skewed strongly towards quantitative research, thereby overlooking the experiences of those groups such as elites who were not large enough in size to be included in sample surveys (Savage and Williams, 2008). However, in the last few decades, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of both quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell, 2003; Bryman, 2004). This in turn has led to a resurgence of ethnographic research including case studies, interviews, participant observation and longitudinal studies. Within this body of research, there has also been growing attention towards the role of elite members. Yet, much of this literature has overlooked some of the methodological challenges and implications of researching this group.

One of the pioneers of elite interviewing methods was Anthony Lewis Dexter (1970, 2006). Although he argued that interviewing this group was an important research tool within the social sciences, he was clear that it was not always the most appropriate method to understand this group. In his earlier work, he seemed to suggest that junior researchers should avoid interviewing elite members because they are "ill-prepared" and "needlessly take up the time of important persons" (Dexter, 1964, p. 557). Since this controversial assertion, there has been little if any commentary from other scholars concerning whether junior researchers should interview elite groups or leave this research to more experienced interviewers. At the same time, interviewing elite members has

become more common among junior researchers and yet is rarely taught in graduate schools (Berry, 2002). It is particularly important to consider some of the distinct power relations that might exist between less experienced researchers and elite subjects as this can significantly help the former to prepare for and conduct these types of interviews.

There is much confusion and debate surrounding the definition of elites. Indeed, a major criticism of Dexter's (1970) work is that he said little about what constitutes elite subjects (Richards, 1996). They are often regarded as numerical minorities because they frequently occupy positions at the top of the employment and income pyramid (Woods, 1998). However, an individual's position within a company, for example, is not exclusively an indicator of elite status because certain actors are deemed elite members because they hold strategic positions within a social network and therefore act as important connectors and bridges between social structures (Burt, 1992). Furthermore, elite status may be embedded within place and time. A person, for example, might be considered to qualify as an elite member in one particular region but not in another. In addition, this group are by no means spread evenly across geographical space and elite status is not static since individuals can gain or lose their status over time.

The boundaries of defining elites are also changing. As Savage and Williams (2008, p. 13) rightly point out, 70% of FTSE 100 companies in the early 1980s are no longer in the index today. Although some senior managers have subsequently become part of elite groups through working for other companies, many more have retired or been made redundant and are therefore no longer the occupants of corporate power today. Table 1 shows twenty different job titles of senior managers from my doctoral work in 2006 on highly skilled British and

Indian scientists working in Boston's pharmaceutical and biotechnology sector. The variety of senior management titles within one regional economy demonstrates the difficulty of defining elite groups. To make matters even more problematic, these job titles are not synonymous from one company to another. A Senior Vice-President of Company A, for example, may well have a very different job role to a Senior Vice-President of Company B. In short, defining elites is a difficult process which has led to some scholars critiquing the usefulness of the term (Woods, 1998; Smith, 2006). At the very least we need to be as transparent as possible with our definitions of this group within our research frameworks. In this paper, when referring to my work I use the term elites to describe those who occupy senior management positions, but I apply the term more broadly when drawing on examples from the theoretical literature to reflect the diversity of interpretations.

Table 1: Senior Management Positions

Chief Executive Officer	President	Founder	Principal
Chief Financial Officer	Chief Business Officer	Chief Scientific Officer	Chief Operating Officer
Senior Director	Director	Executive Director	Executive Project Director
Associate Director	Senior Vice-President	Vice-President	Executive Vice-President
Divisional Vice-President	General Manager	Head of Marketing	Head of Research

Researching subjects and interview preparation

Similar to other types of interviews, one of the most important considerations when designing elite interviews is that they are tailored to the purpose of the study (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002). In particular, scholars need to be attentive to validity (how appropriate and accurate their measuring techniques are) and reliability (what the probability is that if they repeat the measuring technique they will produce the same results) (Berry, 2002;

Schoenberger, 1991). Yeung (1995) argues that triangulation can improve the validity and reliability of data collected through, for example, using different methods (e.g. interviews, participant observation, archival research) or through posing verification questions within a single method such as an interview.

Before commencing interviews, researchers should have a detailed knowledge of their field. In addition, thorough preparation of elite interviews is critical and scholars should ensure, *if possible*, that their respondents have not been interviewed in their line of work before. Elite members often suffer from 'research fatigue' and will be less likely to contribute if they have participated in what they perceive to be a similar study. If they have then the researcher should know their work well enough that they can provide a justification for why their particular study is unique compared to other studies. In October 2008 one potential respondent said to me that someone had already conducted a study on British expatriates. I quickly responded by saying that my study was looking at British expatriates working across a range of economic sectors in Vancouver, whereas the study that the potential respondent was referring to (Richardson, 2008) looked at British expatriate academics working in New Zealand, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. This was a clear enough distinction for the potential respondent to agree to participate in my research.

Junior researchers in particular often fall into the trap of asking questions during interviews that they should know the answer to. One of the advantages of interviewing elite members compared to other subjects is it is often more straightforward to acquire information on them before an interview. As a result, it is important to acquire as much information on this population as possible beforehand (Peabody *et al.*, 1990). Another pitfall that junior researchers, including myself, have fallen into is focusing too heavily on 'how many'

interviews to conduct and less on how to maximise the quality of interviews. In part, this is because in "[…] elite interviewing the error term is largely hidden to those outside the project while the number of cases, the "n," is there for all to see and judge" (Berry, 2002, p. 680).

Scholars should try and be as flexible as possible when designing elite interviews. In this regard, junior researchers have an advantage over senior researchers because they often have more time for pursuing different avenues for gaining access, setting-up interviews as well as conducting interviews.[1] Nonetheless, all scholars should be prepared to be flexible when they are designing their research on elite subjects. A frequent question that they will ask is how long the interview will take (Dexter, 2006) and it is important to be honest about the expected interview time as well as showing flexibility in case they are limited with the time they are prepared to set aside. Conti and O'Neil's (2007, p. 71) experience of a government official beginning an interview by saying "What can I tell you in 45 minutes?" can be a typical question that an elite member might ask. One of my respondents in 2006 asked me over the telephone what my doctoral research was about and I replied by saying that I was comparing why British- and Indian-born scientists moved to Boston, Massachusetts, what their experiences have been of finding work in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology sector, and whether they had any intentions of returning to and/or investing in their home countries in the future. This interviewee responded to my summary by speaking uninterrupted for five minutes addressing these issues before immediately hanging up the telephone. This serves to highlight firstly that elite

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[1] I am grateful to David Edgington for pointing this out to me.

groups often try to dictate the conditions of an interview and secondly, as I mentioned above, that the number of interviews is not necessarily an indicator of high quality research. Finally, on occasions an interviewee might provide more time than expected and researchers should be flexible and use this as an opportunity to go into more detail on particular topics (Peabody *et al.*, 1990).

Like other types of interviews, before conducting elite fieldwork scholars should know their interview questions and the order of their questions thoroughly. This is critical for the interview itself because often respondents will cover an answer to a later question. In this case, interviewers should try and revise the ordering of their questions during the interview to avoid repetition, provided that the questions still flow logically (Peabody *et al.*, 1990). When communicating with elite members concerning a research project, in the vast majority of cases researchers should also be as open as possible with their research goals and attempt to instil trust and a common understanding about what they hope to achieve (Oinas, 1999; McDowell, 1998). Feminist scholars have been particularly attentive to these issues through recognising that the power dynamics between an interviewer and an interviewee will have direct implications on the type of knowledge that is created (Conti and O'Neil, 2007). In certain circumstances, both the interviewer and interviewee will be silent on certain issues because they are either unable or unwilling to disclose certain information. These potentially awkward scenarios can be overcome in some measure through the interviewer discussing any shared interests he or she has with the interviewee or through using something that an interviewer has read or seen that might help to break the ice and gain rapport. (Richards, 1996; Peabody *et al.*, 1990). At the very least, before an interview researchers should make clear to the respondent: who they are, where they are working, what the nature of

their research is, who is sponsoring them, approximately how long the interview will take, how the data will be used, how the results will be disseminated and whether the information will be attributed or anonymous.

Researchers should be aware that the location of an interview can influence the type of information respondents are prepared to disclose. Within the workplace, for example, respondents may be less willing to disclose confidential information or provide additional time, for fear of being overheard or because their colleagues expect them to be performing other duties (McDowell, 1998). Dexter (2006, p. 48) argues that scholars should prioritise the workplace over the home "[…] because some interviewees will let their families come in and out freely, and generally will tolerate interruptions which they would not in their offices." I disagree on this point because elite members are equally if not more likely to be interrupted during business hours by colleagues than they are by family members outside of standard work hours. Furthermore, interviews outside the workplace are easier to expand as well as to broach more confidential information. If researchers are interviewing in a 'neutral' venue such as a café or bar then they should avoid areas that are either too quiet, which may make respondents tentative about disclosing certain types of information, or that are too noisy, making it difficult to speak to and hear respondents. If I am meeting someone in a café or bar then I plan to arrive ten or fifteen minutes early so that I can find a suitable place to ask my questions.

Dexter (2006, p. 49) argues that interviewing elite subjects over lunch is a mistake because it is difficult to take notes and avoid people making more general conversation. Having recently interviewed over lunch, I have to agree that combining eating noodles with asking questions, engaging with the interviewee, writing down responses and being conscious of other diners nearby

made the task particularly difficult! Again, flexibility is important and researchers should be prepared to interview this group over lunch since many people are more comfortable and prefer talking about business in this environment. If recording the interview (which I address shortly) then it is critical to ensure that the venue is suitable for a recording device. If an interview is conducted in the workplace then researchers should try and accept an invitation for lunch or a drink afterwards since elite members might provide interesting information not given during the interview. This also provides an opportunity to verify points made by interviewees as well as proving useful for gaining candid feedback (Dexter, 2006).

Although piloting research is strongly encouraged within the social science literature (Yin, 1989), there is very little guidance concerning whether interviewers should be encouraged to conduct pilot work on elite members. Peabody *et al*. (1990) suggest that researchers should ask their questions to colleagues and friends before posing them to elite groups which can help to clarify and refine questions. However, as a junior researcher I am unclear whether it is encouraged to do pilot work on this group. Indeed, are *any* researchers encouraged to conduct pilot work on elite members? If the answer to this question is 'no' because of elite time pressure, then does this not lead to potentially poorer quality questions since they have not been pre-tested? In short, there is a lack of guidance concerning pilot work on elite members. I would suggest that inexperienced researchers who decide to interview this group as part of their research speak to them towards the end of their fieldwork when they are more familiar with their research and interview questions, not least because elite members do not 'suffer fools gladly' (Richards, 1996).

It is generally agreed that elite subjects prefer not to be asked closed-ended questions (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002, p. 674). As a result, in most cases interviewers should avoid asking too many formulaic questions and instead focus more on achieving a conversational flow. Rivera *et al.* (2002) argue that open-ended questions can be successfully followed-up by closed-ended questions. During my doctoral and post-doctoral research I wanted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on highly skilled professionals and therefore asked open-ended questions followed by closed-ended questions. When seeking to understand why British expatriates might want to return to the UK, for example, I started with an open-ended question: 'Why would you return to the UK?' This gave respondents an opportunity to say in their own words what the key driving forces were in influencing them to return. I followed this question up with a closed-ended question: 'Please rank from 0 to 10 the importance of each of the following factors that might influence you to return to work in the UK: a) Professional opportunities in the UK; b) Family considerations; c) Culture and lifestyle in the UK; d) Government or company incentives to return to the UK; e) Desire to contribute to the economic development of the UK'. This closed-ended question enabled me to generate some quantitative data on factors that I considered of theoretical importance when I was designing my questions. I also found that elite members preferred to be asked open-ended rather than closed-ended questions, but if researchers only ask this group open-ended questions because that is what they favour then there is a danger that there will be a shortage of certain types of quantitative data and analysis.

Gaining access

Before addressing some of the potential strategies for gaining access to elite networks, it is important to recognise that academic institutions may have different regulations with regard to contacting potential respondents. The Office of Research Services at the University of British Columbia, for example, require that researchers do not make initial contact with respondents by telephone, that researchers receive a complete written consent form from respondents before they participate in the research, and finally that if respondents recommend other people for researchers to contact then they must receive permission from them first before providing their names and contact information. These types of conditions make it difficult for all scholars, but especially junior researchers to gain access to elite groups because they hold less experience, professional contacts and social capital than more senior researchers. In addition, a researcher's opportunity to snowball further contacts is significantly reduced when elite subjects need to gain permission from their contacts first before they can pass on their personal details to researchers. These kinds of ethical requirements significantly hamper the ability of researchers to gain access to elite groups. Anecdotally, I have found that a number of scholars have either cancelled their research projects or have ignored some of these ethical guidelines because of their restrictiveness.

The success of gaining access to elite subjects depends a great deal on serendipity, social networks as well as the particular circumstances at the time (McDowell, 1998, p. 2135). Researchers should attempt to pursue as many different avenues as possible in a polite, yet persistent and opportunistic manner (Yeung, 1995). During my Ph.D fieldwork one gatekeeper arranged for me to interview seven scientists consecutively in one morning at a large

pharmaceutical company. Needless to say, the experience was both challenging and extremely tiring, but nonetheless rewarding and an illustrative example of grasping an opportunity. Diagram 1 shows some of the different routes I used to maximise the opportunity of gaining access to British elite workers around Vancouver. These avenues were not of equal importance in helping me to gain access to respondents. Sports clubs, for example, were very helpful because I was able to forge new social networks and gain rapport with elite respondents outside of a business environment. In contrast, the British Consulate was of limited assistance because of the confidential and bureaucratic barriers of disclosing personal details.[2] An important methodological advantage of pursuing multiple avenues for gaining access to elite populations is that it reduces the potential bias of only speaking to people within a particular social network.

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[2] I was told that personal information could only be disclosed to third parties in the case of 'emergency situations'.

Diagram 1: Gaining access to British elite workers around Vancouver

When scholars are looking to confirm interviews with elite members they should not interpret a 'no because I am too busy right now' as a definitive no (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002), but instead make a note to themselves to contact the person again at a later date. On a number of occasions I have asked these subjects to participate in my research and they have either said they are too busy or they have not replied to my request. However, if another interviewee has referred me to them then I will use this as an opportunity to make contact with

them again and mention that 'Respondent A recommended that I contact you.'[3] A similar strategy is when an interviewee asks a potential respondent on the interviewer's behalf to participate in the research: "I had the chancellor of his state university, for which I had done some special work, get in touch with him, explaining that I was a very discreet and responsible person and saying that the university felt the project was entirely worthwhile" (Dexter, 2006, p. 39). In short, through persevering researchers can gain access to elite groups that were originally not willing to participate in the research project.

In most cases it is productive to use institutional and funding affiliations because this provides legitimation when requesting as well as conducting elite interviews (Zuckerman, 1972). In my research on highly skilled British expatriates around Vancouver, for example, I have identified myself as a Commonwealth and Canadian Government Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of British Columbia. Contacting a respondent through e-mail is an effective method of summarising a research project because it shows one's academic and funding affiliations and is also less intrusive than personal or telephone requests. If a research project has been approved through a university ethics board then this can instil trust in the project and increase the opportunity for gaining access.

James (2006, p. 298) found that mimicking the email address format of certain contacts (e.g. john.smith@company.com) within a firm and applying that format to a person whom he wanted to contact at the same company (e.g. david.thompson@company.com) or e-mailing the webmaster of the company

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[3] I could only adopt this approach when it satisfied my institution's ethics requirements.

and generating a response from the webmaster's e-mail address (e.g. webmaster@company.com) enabled a very high proportion of his e-mails (around 90%) to reach the right person.[4] He argues that there is never a wrong time to contact people because they will open an e-mail when they are ready. However, researchers should be aware that at certain points of the day, week, month and year, and depending on the sector and the individual, elite members will have a greater volume of work and e-mails than at other times. Although this is not always straightforward to predict, some commonsense should prevail (e.g. if possible, avoid contacting accountants near the end of the tax year or politicians around the time of an election).

Researchers should not be surprised to confront gatekeepers[5], particularly if they are unable to contact elite groups directly. They should also be well-prepared to summarise their research briefly in non-academic jargon to subjects and appointment secretaries. It is critical not to be put off by gatekeepers as one of their roles is to protect the interests of their company and managers (Peabody *et al.*, 1990). Rather than perceiving gatekeepers as barriers, I try to see them as potential opportunities. One gatekeeper wanted to meet with me to establish the nature of my research and he spent approximately 45 minutes asking me questions about all aspects of my work. Having satisfied his questions, he subsequently contacted around 60 people, the majority of whom agreed to participate in my research because of his reputation and positive referral. In

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[4] Again, many other scholars are unable to adopt this approach because it contravenes their institution's ethics requirements.

[5] Examples of gatekeepers include, but are not limited to, corporate secretaries, HR personnel and other individuals who have access to the personal details of elite members.

other words, gatekeepers are capable of opening as much as closing doors to elite respondents.

In the process of arranging interviews, it is critical to show flexibility with dates and timings. I frequently provide respondents with the option of answering my questions in the daytime, evening or weekend. In addition, although I prefer to conduct interviews in person, I also provide respondents with the alternative of a telephone interview or even of answering a questionnaire if they are too busy to meet with me in person. Although the quality and depth of data provided in a telephone interview or questionnaire is likely to be lower than in a face-to-face interview,[6] gaining less detailed data on respondents is significantly better than gaining no data at all. Again, researchers should provide as much flexibility as possible. On occasions, for example, I have been called and asked if the interview can be conducted immediately. In many other circumstances, I have been asked whether the interview can be postponed. In both cases, a researcher's flexibility will be appreciated by the respondent and therefore will help to achieve a high quality interview.

When corresponding with elite members, researchers should in most cases ask when it would be most convenient to speak with them (Zuckerman, 1972). However, if a respondent agrees to participate in the research but does not suggest a time and date after an earlier request, then it is important to take the initiative about suggesting some possible dates and times while still showing flexibility to fit in with his or her schedule. At this point it is also appropriate to state how long the interview will take as this is a frequent question. As I

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[6] I am grateful to David Ley for highlighting that different levels of research intimacy (e.g. face-to-face versus telephone interviews) may generate various qualities of responses.

mentioned above, it is important to be honest with respondents although there is some leeway to "[…] specify a time a little, but not much, less than the normal time which interviews on the particular project take" (Dexter, 2006, p. 49). Junior scholars in particular should be realistic about how much time they can expect to speak with elite members. I generally ask for about thirty minutes and my interviews typically last for approximately forty-five minutes. Ostrander (1993, p. 21) asks for "[…] about an hour and a half in terms of time", but this is most likely because even at the time of writing her paper she was a well-renowned scholar and held a good deal of experience in interviewing members of elites. These two attributes most junior scholars do not share and therefore asking for anything over an hour is arguably unrealistic.

As Diagram 1 illustrates, using different avenues is productive in gaining access to elite subjects. It is also important to try and use one's own existing contacts and social networks to get in touch with respondents as this helps to increase response rates (Ostrander, 1993). There has been much debate within the social sciences concerning the advantages and disadvantages of being an insider or outsider. Traditionally, scholars have argued that being an 'insider' can provide an advantage because a person holds a shared sense of belonging to respondents (Hill-Collins, 1990). However, 'outsiders' arguably hold the advantage of not belonging to a group and therefore are more objective and better able to observe behaviour (Fonow and Cook, 1991). Some scholars find that being an outsider can be an advantage when seeking to gain access to respondents. Herod (1999), for example, argued that he received a warmer reception as an outsider conducting research on trade union officials in Eastern Europe than as an insider in the US.

It is possible that a researcher can be both an insider and an outsider, according to Mullings (1999). Junior researchers, for example, can be seen as at the 'cutting edge' or 'inexperienced' and senior researchers can be seen as 'world experts' or 'out-of touch'. When I was studying British expatriates in Boston and Vancouver I found myself simultaneously as an insider because I was a British expatriate and as an outsider because I was a young researcher in my mid-twenties compared to my respondents who were mainly in their forties. In short, judging an interviewer's positionality is a slippery process and "Rather than thinking in terms of a dualism, then, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider the relationship between the researcher and the elite s/he is researching as one involving a sliding scale of intimacy" (Herod, 1999, p. 326). Finally, it is important to be aware that positionality is not static. Parry (1998, p. 2155), for instance, found herself during the course of her fieldwork promoted to fulfil the strict criteria of membership of an elite network. Equally, other scholars may quite as easily lose their insider status while conducting elite research.

Interviewers should appreciate that their university affiliation may have both positive and negative implications in terms of gaining access to elite networks. Surprisingly, there has been a relative lack of discussion about this within the elite literature. Herod (1999) is one of the few exceptions and he provides an example of how researchers from northern universities in the US may be perceived as 'pesky Yankees', whereas researchers from southern universities in the US may be perceived as 'backwards' and out in the 'sticks'. When conducting my doctoral research around Boston I found that being a researcher from Cambridge University and a visiting scholar at Harvard University enabled me to gain access to elite members, not only because many of them were former students of both universities but also because I was able to

attend events organized by members of the Oxford and Cambridge Club and the Harvard Faculty Club. Similarly to McDowell (1998), I am not arguing that if I was affiliated to other universities then I would not have been able to gain access to this group. Indeed, my links to these universities may have meant that some potential respondents did not want to speak with me because I was affiliated with what they perceived to be elitist and less down-to-earth universities (see Herod, 1999, p. 321). Furthermore, it is important to recognise that it is easier to demonstrate how an affiliation to a university was helpful in gaining access, but much harder to show that an affiliation to a university was restrictive in gaining access to elite subjects. Researchers should be aware that their institutional affiliations will be received differently which in turn will affect their experiences of gaining access to this group.

The academic discipline of researchers will also affect their experiences of gaining access to and interviewing elite members. Depending upon the research goals and the professional interests of respondents, researchers from different social science disciplines might have varying experiences in gaining access to this group. When conducting my doctoral research on Boston's pharmaceutical and biotechnology sector, a number of my respondents assumed that I came from a Business and Management background and when I said that my training was largely in Economic Geography, they would typically ask 'How is this work related to Geography?' McDowell's (1998, p. 2138) respondents also found it bewildering that "[…] geographers should have any interest at all in workplace organization." Importantly, the issue of respondents not identifying with a particular discipline is prevalent across the social sciences. Certain disciplines, for example, will have greater exposure to firms in particular regions than others. In addition, within a given regional economy, individuals will differ markedly in

their perceptions of the value of various social science disciplines. It is important that researchers are conscious of the significance of their disciplinary positionalities as they might need to clarify their academic background in order that respondents are better able to identify with their work.

Conducting interviews

Gaining access to elite subjects is often an achievement in itself, but researchers should remember that conducting the interview is even more important. Interviewers need to gain the trust of their respondents in order to collect high quality data. Ostrander (1993) argues that this trust is built up over time and researchers should attempt to build a rapport with elite subjects from the moment they first contact them to the interview itself and beyond the interview. As I mentioned earlier, it is critical that researchers know as much about their field and their respondents as possible before the interview. During the interview researchers must show that they have done their homework (Zuckerman, 1972). In addition, they should attempt to read and feel the tone of the interviewee as soon as possible (Oinas, 1999). This is critical because like *all* types of interviews the best way to conduct research on elite members will vary from one interview to another and researchers need to gauge early the atmosphere of the interview and adjust their behaviour, speaking voice and mannerisms accordingly. In short, "What may be suicidal or impractical for one interviewer or in one situation may be feasible or even the best way to proceed for another interviewer or in another situation" (Dexter, 2006, p. 32).

Additionally, researchers need to consider how they will present themselves. When conducting research on industrial and commercial elites, McDowell (1998, p. 2138), for example, found herself shifting her position

including 'playing dumb' with older patriarchal figures, 'brusquely efficient' with fierce older women, 'sisterly' with women of the same age holding similar positions and 'superfast and well-informed' with younger men. Importantly, she decided how to present herself after initially observing and assessing the visual and verbal clues of respondents. Successful interviewers are those that are able to easily adjust their style and make the interviewer feel as comfortable as possible. This is important not only in generating high quality responses, but also in increasing the likelihood of elite members providing other interview opportunities such as additional contacts. Researchers should try and assess the interview continually and pick up on any inconsistencies in responses as this is a crucial form of evaluating the validity of information (Schoenberger, 1991).

Scholars disagree on whether elite interviews should be recorded. Byron (1993) argues that this group are often more relaxed and Peabody *el al*. (1990) find that people are more likely to talk 'off the record' without a recorder. Aberbach and Rockman (2002), on the other hand, found that few elite members refused to be recorded and most quickly lost any inhibitions through the presence of a recorder. A recording device also provides a verbatim script of the interview and the interviewer can focus more on engaging with the respondent (Richards, 1996). I decided not to use a recorder for my doctoral research because many of my respondents felt uncomfortable with me recording interviews because pharmaceutical and biotechnology firms around Boston have strict rules for employees about disclosing certain company information. In addition, my interview questions were quite structured and included open- and closed-ended questions which made it considerably easier for fully writing down responses. Furthermore, I interviewed over two hundred respondents for an average of forty minutes which would have been too time-consuming in terms of

transcribing (see also Ostrander, 1993). The problem with not using a recording device is that some qualitative data is lost regardless of how fast researchers can write. It is also more difficult to make observational notes while writing down interviewee responses. In short, there is a balance between recording which provides a more detailed record of the interview, but is weaker because of the interviewee's discretion, and writing which provides a weaker description of the interview, but potentially more detailed off-the-record information (Byron, 1993).

Junior researchers in particular should be conscious of how to cope with difficult interviews with elite respondents. During my doctoral research I was interviewing a CEO of a pharmaceutical company whom I had previously spoken to as part of a pilot study. During the interview he became extremely agitated saying that my questions were 'so vague' and 'not relevant' and his responses to my open-ended questions were extremely short. During the course of this very uncomfortable period I suggested that we continue the interview at another time that was more convenient, but he insisted on finishing the interview. Needless to say, this experience hampered my confidence in my research project and it unfortunately affected my conduct in a few other subsequent interviews. What I learnt from this experience was to take away the positive aspects of the interview. Firstly, the respondent agreed to be contacted again. Secondly, he provided the details of other elite members whom I could contact which he presumably would not have done if he thought that I would be wasting their time. It also transpired that the company had very recently made a large number of redundancies which was out of my control. However, in this instance I should have done my research more thoroughly on the company beforehand so that I could have either re-arranged the interview or at the very least had a better idea of the interviewee's context. I also needed to respond

better to criticism and have a good reason for why all of my interview questions were significant and relevant. In short, it is important not to let an uncomfortable interview hamper one's confidence in a research project as well as one's performance in subsequent interviews.

Interviewers should be well-prepared about how to ask elite subjects questions that they might not be at ease answering. Richards (1996) suggests that these types of questions should be posed in the middle of an interview once there has been an opportunity to build some rapport with the interviewee. As a junior researcher, one of the questions which I have found awkward is asking elite members their annual salary. Three of my respondents in my post-doctoral research, for example, received a net annual income (excluding their company stock and share options) in excess of ten times my net annual income. It is critical to ask such questions politely and not to make a big deal of the question or the answer to avoid making the interviewee feel awkward. Ostrander (1993, p. 24) suggests that interviewers acknowledge when they have asked an awkward question: "That's not a question I would ask you if we met socially, but my purposes here are quite different." In summary, when asking potentially difficult questions, it is critical to be aware of the language to use as well as being sensitive with the tone of the questions.

Elite members will often advertently or inadvertently not answer the questions asked of them. In such situations, I would recommend politely asking the question again without sounding patronising. If they still do not answer the question then it is best to ask another question and circle back to the original question (Berry, 2002). If they continue not to answer the question then take this as a sign that they do not want to answer it and move on with as little fuss as possible. Other scenarios to consider during an interview include how to

address subjects who become distracted. Frequently I have found that a respondent's telephone will ring during an interview. I agree with Dexter (2006) that it is often a good idea to encourage him or her to answer the telephone as it provides an opportunity to catch up on one's notes and gather a clearer picture of the respondent.

Towards the end of interviews, respondents can start to become tired and less detailed and focused with their responses. To help avoid this, one strategy is to clearly signal to the respondent throughout the interview if the questions are going to address different topics as well as stating approximately how much longer the questions will take. Elite groups often find it difficult receiving a steady flow of questions because it can be strenuous answering question after question (Dexter, 2006). Therefore, researchers should consider mixing questions which require longer and shorter responses. In addition, if researchers occasionally respond to and comment on the responses of subjects then this provides the latter with a break from speaking. Interviewers can also adopt other strategies to stimulate greater responses including using encouraging phrases such as 'Really?' or 'Interesting!' (Marshall, 1984). Writing notes rapidly with occasional glances at the interviewee can also encourage more detailed responses (Dexter, 2006). Berry (2002) suggests that maintaining silences can be useful for creating a tension which can lead to more detailed answers. There is a fine balance here because creating overly long silences can potentially produce such an awkward atmosphere that respondents feel uncomfortable disclosing certain types of information.

At the end of an interview researchers should attempt to receive some feedback from interviewees. I typically ask if they have any comments, observations or criticisms regarding my research. This is significant for gauging

how the interview went as well as for determining whether there are certain questions or areas of research that have been overlooked which are potentially germane for the study or a follow-up research project. Exchanging business cards is useful, particularly for junior researchers, in raising their status and reducing the power gap (Yeung, 1995). It can also increase the likelihood of respondents referring other elite members to interview because they have better access to the researcher's contact details. Researchers should remember to thank the interviewee when they leave as well as the appointment secretary for any assistance that they have provided (Peabody *et al.*, 1990).

Within a day or two after the interview, it is important to write to the respondent to thank him or her for their time and input into the project. I would strongly suggest including a personal detail about something interesting that they said to avoid the letter or e-mail reading like a standardised thank you note. It is also critical to follow-up any requests that respondents have made during the interview as well as reiterating that an executive summary of the findings will be sent at a later date. Finally, if they have not provided details already but agreed to do so then it is important to prompt them about referring other potential respondents to interview.

Conclusions

This paper has provided a number of guidelines for researchers interviewing elite members and I have drawn upon the experiences of more senior scholars in various social science disciplines as well as my own experiences. The focus of my argument has revolved around three areas. First, in researching subjects and interview preparation. I showed that it is critical to have a detailed knowledge of the field including the subject. Researchers should

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also be flexible in the design of their questions and as transparent as possible with subjects concerning the nature of their project. It is important to consider how the location of the interview as well as pilot work can improve the type of data gathered. Second, in gaining access, I began by arguing that institutions may have different regulations concerning making contact with research subjects. Researchers should try and pursue as many avenues as possible, including using their own social networks. It is also critical to persevere during setbacks, show flexibility and use institutional and funding affiliations when possible. Researchers should think about how their positionality, such as their institutional affiliation, may affect their ability to gain access to elite members. Third, in conducting interviews, I argued that researchers need to try and gain the trust of respondents and show that they have prepared thoroughly. In addition, it is important to think about how to present oneself to promote a positive initial impression of the interview. Other aspects to consider when interviewing include whether to record, coping with bad interviews, asking awkward questions and keeping elite subjects focused on the questions asked. Finally, gaining feedback from respondents and remembering to thank them after the interview is essential for achieving and maintaining high research standards.

I would suggest that researchers should be attentive to five areas in particular when interviewing elite members. First, it is critical to be *organized* in terms of contacting respondents, replying to e-mails, attending interviews on time and providing a summary of the project. Second, researchers need to be *flexible* in the design of their questions, arranging meetings as well as when conducting interviews. Third, *transparency* is important in terms of ethics, gaining the interviewee's trust as well as during the writing stage so that

scholars are able to more clearly analyze the research. Fourth, maintaining good *etiquette* with different subjects throughout the research process is vital in order to achieve high professional standards. Fifth, researchers should be prepared to *persevere* through difficult times such as interview rejections and uncomfortable remarks made by respondents.

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to interviewing elite subjects and the nature of the research and the personality of the interviewer and the interviewee should to a large degree shape individual approaches. Junior researchers in particular should strongly consider sharing their strategies and experiences with supervisors and colleagues to help highlight how best to prepare for and conduct interviews with elite members.

Acknowledgements

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