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ELITE INTERVIEWING

IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT[1]

Interviewing elites presents distinctive methodological challenges, which are exacerbated when interviewing elite professionals. These individuals (i.e. senior professionals and professionals in elite professional organizations) are typically relatively powerful, highly educated, and self-assured, and work in organizations which guard their external image very carefully. Over the past 25 years I have interviewed many hundreds of senior professionals in elite professional organizations. For this article, I have reflected on my experiences and have asked senior professionals to reflect on their own experience of research interviews. Bringing together insights of both interviewees and interviewers, this article provides an opportunity for researchers to reflect upon and improve their professional practice when conducting elite interviews.

Key words: Elite interviewing, Professionals, Professional organizations, Qualitative methods

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‘You might be surprised by the amateurish and unprofessional nature of some of the approaches I have received from academics requesting interviews.’ (Senior Partner)

‘About 20 minutes into an interview I can tell if it’s going well – the kind of questions the interviewer is asking, the challenges they are offering. Are they making me reflect on decisions I have made and getting me to think out loud? Am I learning something from *them?*’ (Managing Partner)

INTRODUCTION

Essays on elite interviewing emphasise the considerable difficulties and distinctive challenges it presents. As Mikecz explains, ‘Interviewing elites represents unique methodological problems when compared to non-elite interviews …. Gaining access to elites is hard enough; gaining their trust and building rapport with them is even more difficult’ (2012: 482). Yet we need to overcome these challenges and get beneath the well-polished veneer of these influential individuals, organizations, and professions if we are to conduct high quality research into sensitive and significant organizational issues.

Unfortunately, there is relatively little about elite interviewing within the sociological and management methods literature (Conti & O’Neil, 2007). By contrast, there is an extensive body of methodological writing about elite interviewing in areas such as human geography (e.g. McDowell, 1992, 1998; Schoenberger, 1991, 1992) and political science (e.g. Dexter, 1970; Goldstein, 2002; Morris, 2009; Richards, 1996). This article, seeks to redress the balance, by drawing on insights from methodological writing in other fields, from my own extensive experience, and from the experience of elite professionals, to develop guidance of generalisable interest to scholars of management and organizations.

I have never deliberately set out to study elites in professional organizations, yet the research issues that have fascinated me over the years (from M&A and strategic change, to governance and leadership) have prompted me to spend many hundreds of hours interviewing the leaders of elite professional organizations. Starting with my PhD, which focused on pre-merger planning and post-merger integration, I have studied the leaders of elite professional organizations whilst they were engaged in politically sensitive change processes.

While detailing the challenges from an interviewers' perspective, methodological essays on elite interviewing typically ignore the perspective of elite professionals themselves. Researchers know very little about how we come across to our interview subjects, which of our practices they consider effective and ineffective, and why. For the purposes of this article I, therefore, sought to understand elite interviewing from the interviewees' point of view. I spoke to senior and managing partners of elite global law, accounting and consulting firms, with whom I had long-standing research-based relationships. All had extensive experience of being interviewed by a range of academics. I also asked early career researchers in the Centre for Professional Service Firms at Cass Business School to provide me with questions to answer on the topic of elite interviewing.

I address issues relating to: gaining access, preparing to interview, establishing authority, building rapport, going deeper, and dealing with difficult interviewees. I begin by establishing some definitional clarity and examining the issue of power asymmetry in elite interviews. I conclude by addressing the challenge of maintaining critical distance when interviewing elite professionals.

WHAT IS ELITE INTERVIEWING?

While the term ‘elite interview’ is rarely defined in the methodological literature, it broadly relates to power asymmetry and relative privilege between interviewer and interviewee. As Odendahl and Shaw state, ‘Elites generally have more knowledge, money, and status and assume a higher position than others … their world (is) difficult to penetrate … they ably protect themselves from outsiders’ (2002: 301). Elite interviewees are sufficiently powerful to manipulate information and to deny access to it. Perhaps because of their power to protect themselves from intrusion and criticism, elites are relatively unstudied (Mikecz, 2012).

Odendahl and Shaw’s definition implies that professionals as a whole are ‘elite’ since the professionalisation project is essentially an exercise in establishing and defending elite status (Suddaby & Muzio, 2015). The partners and leaders of elite professional organizations can be counted as part of the ‘ultra elite’ (Zuckerman, 1972). Ultimately, in the context of professional organizations, the concept of elite derives from a combination of the status of the profession as a whole, the ranking of the organization within that profession, and the reputation of the interviewee within that organization. Researchers therefore need to understand subtle distinctions of reputation, ranking, and status among leading professional organizations and leading professionals. These distinctions may seem trivial to the uninitiated but are highly meaningful to the professionals and professional organizations we are seeking to study. As one managing partner explained to me, ‘When you asked me to participate in your research study I wanted to find out who else you were doing research on. We had to be alongside firms of equivalent or higher status.'

CHALLENGE OF POWER ASYMMETRY

As McDowell argues, elite interviewees are 'always powerful and usually knowledgeable, often on their guard, sometimes keen to demonstrate their relative power and knowledge and your relative power and ignorance' (1998: 2137). Elite interviewees are accustomed to exerting authority in their everyday work; researchers used to the more informal and less explicitly hierarchical discourse of academia may find this intimidating. The early career researchers I spoke to referred to their anxiety about approaching senior professionals and raised issues such as: 'How should I present myself and deal with my nervousness?', 'How can I establish my credibility?', 'How do I deal with differences and disadvantages due to age, experience, expertise, gender, race, class etc.?'

So, superficially, it may appear that elite interviews pose a particular challenge of power asymmetry. But Conti and O'Neil put the challenges in perspective: 'Studying those in positions of power invokes similar types of methodological problems as studying those excluded from power networks: problems of access, problems of authority in the interview setting, problems related to language, style, and cultural capital.' (2007: 68). In other words, the same basic challenges arise whether we are 'studying up' or 'studying down' – but we need to respond to those challenges in different ways.

A structuralist classification of research subjects into elites and non-elites implies a crude conceptualisation of power. As Smith notes, it is unwise 'to assume that the power associated with people through their professional positions will transfer directly onto the interview space' (2006: 645). A post structuralist perspective on power allows for the possibility that the interviewee may not feel powerful in the interview situation, or that power can shift during the course of the interview between interviewee and interviewer. It is worth bearing this in mind if you feel your power ebbing away from you during a difficult elite interview – there may still be an opportunity to regain control. But first you must persuade the elite professional to be interviewed.

GAINING ACCESS

> 'The fact that you are trying to get to the key decision maker is the clue you have a problem – we are too busy taking decisions.' (Managing Partner)

> 'Requests from very junior people are more likely to be declined, not out of pomposity but simply because, from experience, they are often a waste of time.' (Senior Partner)

With senior professionals working 80+ hours a week, an hour with an academic represents the loss of an expensive billable hour or, perhaps more valuably, an hour lost with family or catching up on sleep. A researcher is asking elite interviewees to forego things they value (money and time) and to talk openly about issues which are potentially commercially sensitive or highly personal. Why should they bother?

While I have had considerable success in negotiating access to elite professionals and professional organizations, it has often taken a lot of time and I have experienced significant rejections along the way. Thomas (1993) talks about spending two years trying to negotiate access for a single interview. Recently I was strung along for many months by a leading investment bank as I tried to assemble a coalition of supporters within the firm to persuade the CEO to grant me access. My approach was never actually rejected – they just stopped answering my emails. The Chairman of a Big Four accounting firm rejected my initial approach as he deemed his firm to be at a particularly politically precarious point. So I spent the next two years cultivating a relationship with him and, on the announcement of his retirement, asked again for research access. He introduced me to the new Chairman with a strong recommendation that I be granted research access, and from that point forward things went smoothly. The new Chairman was curious about what I could tell him about his firm and had no legacy to defend from my scrutiny.

To gain access, you need to work carefully at making contact, creating opportunities, and managing your mindset.

Making contact – A researcher is likely to encounter many lines of defence. A carefully crafted email may simply be deleted by a secretary tasked with filtering the hundreds of emails their boss receives every day. As one senior partner explained to me: 'Senior people receive many more requests for interviews than they could possibly accommodate and their diaries are scheduled months in advance.' Researchers, therefore, need to be prepared for repeated rejection. As Conti recounts, during a course of a research study, 'sending letters soliciting potential informants became an incredible burden as I continually had to overcome feelings of inadequacy and misdirection' (Conti & O'Neil, 2007: 73). Seeking research access requires hard work, persistence, resilience, and luck. Researchers need to study their target market and develop a 'sales' strategy. What are your potential interviewees saying in the trade press and what are the press saying about them? Can you find a way of linking your research to their publicly-stated preoccupations? Do you know someone who can facilitate an introduction? Some of my best research contacts have come from fellow PhD students, my MBA students, or people I have worked with in the past.

Creating opportunities -- As Odendahl and Shaw explain, ‘Frequently, the original or most important contact who leads to a series of introductions may seem to appear almost by chance’ (2002: 308). But to get lucky you need to place yourself in the right place at the right time. Practitioner conferences provide a useful platform. Their organizers welcome those academics who are willing to provide high quality relevant content for free. Unfortunately, professionals who have time to attend conferences are often not themselves particularly influential within their organization; it is important to learn to identify who has access to the most senior people[2]. Another way of increasing visibility is by writing articles for trade journals. A lot of the content in trade journals is supplied by independent consultants touting for business so, by comparison, even quite unsophisticated and underdeveloped academic content can appear original and substantive. Even if none of your ‘target’ interviewees read your practitioner article, you can include a copy of it with your interview request. This provides a context, telling the elite professional more about your work and demonstrating that you can communicate complex and relevant content in an interesting manner.

Managing your mindset -- Repeated rejection can lead to feelings of worthlessness, particularly at an early stage in your career (Conti & O’Neil, 2007). As your belief in your research and yourself diminishes, so too will your likelihood of engaging effectively with

[2] For a detailed discussion of the challenges of engaging with practitioners see: “Learn to spot time wasters and users” in Empson L. (2017), My Liminal Life: Intellectual Journeys Across the Research-Practice Divide. In *Academic-Practitioner Research Partnerships: Developments, Complexities and Opportunities*, J. Bartunek, & J. McKenzie (Eds): Routledge, pp. 198-214.

elite professionals, for whom a confident demeanour is essential (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson, Karreman, & Sullivan, 2015). Given the importance of reputation and status for professionals, I benefitted early in my academic career from being based first at London Business School and then at Oxford University. If you are not at a high-status institution, think about what you can do to enhance and promote your own status, either directly or by association. For example, you may have been awarded high-status funding, such as a PhD scholarship from a government-funded research council.

While it is necessary to be relatively formal and respectful in your initial approach to an elite professional, it is important not be overly deferential or obsequious. You are, after all, a fellow professional. Even if you are much younger, less experienced, less powerful, and much less well paid than your elite interviewee, you are every bit as clever as they are. If you do not believe this, then you probably should not be attempting elite interviewing.

GRANTING ACCESS

> 'You are incredibly busy and you have to ration your time. Clients always have first priority. Then there are about 500 partners around the world who have the right to my individual attention. Then there are journalists and many, many other people always wanting to interview me. So, when I get an interview request from an academic, I have to ask: "what's in it for me?"' (Managing Partner)

> 'You agree to be interviewed because you hope you will get some useful insights back. You would not commit the organization's time to something that is "purely academic". There are too many other things that are more important to do.' (Managing Partner)

Academics cannot expect senior professionals to agree to be interviewed out of an altruistic commitment to supporting high quality research. What is of central importance to your life as a researcher may be entirely irrelevant to theirs. It is easy to lose sight of this fact when you are totally immersed in your research. Instead, it is important to think about what *is* important to your prospective interviewee. Senior professionals cite three main reasons why they agree to participate in research interviews: intellectual curiosity, access to competitor information, and time to reflect.

Intellectual curiosity -- If you are lucky you will encounter a professional who is intellectually curious about your topic. Senior professionals may once have been excellent scholars, but often have not progressed beyond an undergraduate level. They may have very little opportunity to read or to be exposed to new ideas. Some professionals retain somewhat nostalgic memories of their time at university and dream of returning there (Empson, 2017). Spending time with you may be the closest they get to that, enabling you to capitalise on their interest in academia. But this is not the norm.

Access to competitor information -- As a managing partner explained to me, 'one of the things you want to get back is knowledge about how your competitors are thinking about these issues.' Yet senior professionals will not want to reveal commercially sensitive information about their own organisations. Questions from interviewees such as 'Why do you find my comment interesting? Have you not heard this in your previous interviews?', may be attempts to discover what competitors are thinking and test your ability to ensure confidentiality[3]. If your interviewee is persistent in their attempts to get you to disclose information, you can emphasise that you are too much of a professional to compromise anonymity and confidentiality. I sometimes say, 'Just as you would never disclose information about a client to me, I am also committed to very strong professional ethics.' One way round the request for competitor insights is to offer a practitioner report, with all relevant identities disguised. It is also a basic courtesy to someone who has been a source of data for your research study and is a valuable opportunity for interviewees to interrogate your findings[4].

Time to reflect – As the managing partner quoted at the start of this paper indicates, the questions researchers ask, our follow-up prompts, and the responses we offer, can help elite interviewees think about their work and themselves in different ways. An interview requires senior professionals to set aside an hour or more to think about the things that are most important to them – their work and themselves. It is not often in life that we spend an hour with someone who is completely fascinated by us and does not expect us to demonstrate any interest in them -- normally we have to pay for that privilege. A simple or naive question such as, 'What makes you say that?', can prompt a sustained period of reflexivity unfamiliar to many senior professionals. As one managing partner explained to me: 'You often can't be upfront with your fellow partners. An interview is a great opportunity to talk honestly to an outsider.' Professionals often say that being interviewed by me is 'like being on the couch', revealing how little time they spend in introspection and self-analysis.

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[3] These questions may also reflect insecurity. When interviewing lawyers I have been surprised by how often they become unsettled if I give them the impression they are saying something novel. They are the only group of professionals I have encountered who regularly seek reassurance from me that they are 'normal'.

[4] I am surprised by how often I am sent papers to review which contain serious misinterpretations of data, reflecting a basic lack of understanding about the research context and which could have been fixed easily if the researcher had first asked a professional to read the paper.

PREPARING TO INTERVIEW

Preparation is the most effective means of reducing power asymmetry in an elite interview. Odenhahl and Shaw talk about how they as researchers have learned to 'gird ourselves psychologically for each situation by knowing as much as possible beforehand about the organizational culture, (including) details that might appear trivial, from conforming closely in our styles of dress to those we are interviewing, to the substance and degree of formality of our introductory conversation' (2002: 313). Preparation is a means of signalling your professionalism, flattering your interviewee, and learning their language. The latter is particularly important among professionals as sector-specific terminology and styles of discourse are important ways in which professionals signal expertise and experience to each other (Alvesson, 2001) and seek to exclude 'non-professionals.'

I recall one particularly bad interview with a senior lawyer. I was about two years post doctorate, and should have known better, but something about his arrogance and rudeness threw me off balance. In my nervous state, I mistakenly referred to his 'company' rather than his 'firm' (i.e. as a partnership his firm was not legally a corporation -- a very stupid mistake to make in front of a lawyer). I acknowledged my error immediately, yet his sneering expression made me even more nervous. In my panic I compounded my error by referring to his 'customers' rather than his 'clients'. The lawyer's look of mild contempt told me the interview was a complete failure.

More typically, interviewees assume that I have worked in their profession (whatever that may be) prior to becoming an academic. This reflects the effort I make to mirror their modes of discourse and utilise their jargon. I read the trade press to learn about style as well as substance. When starting a multi-sector programme of research, I try to begin field work in the sector with which I am most familiar. I move into less familiar sectors once I am completely comfortable with the fundamentals of my research design. This gives me an important safety blanket. If an interviewee begins patronising me, I can counter by referring back to insights gained through previous interviews, thus signalling my depth of expertise.

ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY

Certain factors are particularly important in establishing authority: the interviewee's presentation of self, use of time and space, and opening remarks.

Presentation of self -- Alvesson (2001), Andersen-Gough et al (1998) and others emphasise the importance of physical appearance in the context of professional work. Given the ambiguity of professional knowledge and the insecurity of professional work, it is one of the most powerful ways in which professionals signal their legitimacy to clients and colleagues. When I interviewed job candidates for a strategy consulting firm I was surprised by how quickly consultants would dismiss interviewees as 'hopeless' and mock them afterwards for wearing the 'wrong' shoes or shirts. A recent study about investment bankers by Ashley et al (2016) strongly reinforces this reality.

Professionals make the same kind of snap judgements in research interviews. As Conti explains, his elite interviews became far more successful once 'I upgraded my wardrobe to include suits and ties of a quality exceeding that required for academic conferences' (Conti & O'Neil 2007: 73). As a PhD student I bought designer suits from second hand shops and, when getting ready for an interview, learnt to enjoy the physical process of transitioning identities between the academic world and the practitioner world (Empson, 2013). Getting dressed and putting on makeup made me feel like an actor getting ready for a performance.

This raises the question: as an interviewee, should you be 'yourself' or play a role? Will being smartly dressed make you feel uncomfortable or give you a comforting disguise to hide behind? The point is not what makes *you* feel comfortable but what makes *your interviewee* feel comfortable, because it is only when they are comfortable that they will relax sufficiently to give you the data you seek. This is not the time to agonise about personal authenticity – at this moment your first duty is to your research and your identity as a researcher. By serving your research, about which you care passionately, you *are* being authentic.

Time and space – One senior professional emphasised to me that, 'researchers need to turn up on time and appear professional. It is surprising how often this is not the case.' Even though you should expect to be kept waiting by your interviewee, you should never keep them waiting. Arriving early is not simply courteous. It provides you with the opportunity to manage your physical space and your presentation of self. But it is important not arrive too early as this creates the impression that you have nothing better to do.

I aim to arrive 15 minutes early for an interview and ask to be shown to the meeting room. I use the time to 'take control' of the physical space, preparing my papers and equipment, thus avoiding awkward fumbling at the start of an interview when I should be focused on reading the signals the interviewee is unwittingly sending me. I choose where I sit and select where I want the interviewee to sit, moving a chair slightly so they are more likely to reach for it. I make myself tea so that I look well-established and relaxed by the time the interviewee enters the room. I then pour them a drink while they take a moment to settle, thus welcoming *them* into *my* space. This approach helps overcome any initial disadvantage for the interviewer with regard to power asymmetry. It also enables both interviewer and interviewee to relax and to get the most out of the time they are about to spend together.

Opening remarks – The senior professionals I interviewed for this article emphasise that a good start to an interview will overcome a wide range of potential problems. As one managing partner said to me: ‘It’s all about setting it up properly. Establish how much time you have for the interview, what areas you want to cover. Frame the discussion.’ Another explained: ‘By laying out the structure clearly, you show you are professional. A researcher should give a clear, concise upfront explanation of the context of the interview and what insights they hope to gain.’ This approach impresses the interviewee and is also a useful tool for the interviewer. If the interviewee is spending too long on certain issues and you are struggling to get them to move on, you can refer back to the interview guide; this guide can assume an authority the interviewer themselves may lack. For example, ‘I am very conscious of your time and I am keen to give you the opportunity to answer all the questions in the interview guide so I am afraid *we have to* move on.’

A senior professional may arrive at the interview with only a vague recollection of who you are and why they have agreed to be interviewed. After thanking them for agreeing to the interview I begin with, ‘Would you like me to explain a little bit more about why I am here?’ This gives me the opportunity to reaffirm my credentials and to define the agenda for the interview.

Having established control, I ask the interviewee an open and easy question. I may have no interest in their answer but it enables me to observe them carefully. At the start of an interview I am more interested in *how* the interviewee is talking rather than *what* they are saying because I need to calibrate my own responses. Do they seem relaxed and engaged, or slightly bored or uncomfortable? Are their answers short and factual, or long and rambling? Should I sharpen up my remarks or adopt a more conversational approach? How should I adapt my pattern of speech, my style of questioning, and my physical manner to reflect the signals they are unwittingly sending me? As McDowell explains, when elite interviewing she, 'developed a way of relating to the different respondents that depended on a quick initial assessment of a range of visual and verbal clues' (1998: 2138). I find that, unconsciously, my accent changes, moving up or down the social scale depending on who I am speaking to. If they swear, I swear too. If they treat me 'like a lady', I try to behave like one. If a woman professional raises issues of 'being a woman in a man's world', I respond to her signal of sisterly affiliation. As Harvey (2011) emphasises, researchers need to gauge early the atmosphere of the interview and adjust their behaviour, style of speaking, and mannerisms accordingly.

BUILDING RAPPORT

One early career researcher told me about how, finding themselves consumed by nervousness in an elite interview, they froze completely and became inarticulate. A senior professional complained to me of interviewers who 'lack confidence, are overly deferential, or slavishly following a script.'

If we allow ourselves to become intimidated by the subjects of our research, we fail in our responsibility to maintain academic detachment. Building a rapport with elite interviewees requires us to let go of our own insecurities and become aware of theirs.

Successful professionals work in an environment which puts a high premium on intelligence, eloquence, and confidence, so they learn quickly how to disguise their insecurities. They may be feeling uncomfortable about meeting you, because you have a couple more university degrees than they have, because they assume you have a deep understanding of the topic in question, and because your questioning may reveal their inadequacies. When I moved from London Business School to Oxford I noticed that senior professionals interacted with me differently; they seemed more eager to meet me but also more nervous in my presence. I realised that my questioning was evoking challenging memories of being grilled by their undergraduate tutors at Oxford or Cambridge. So I stopped trying to impress my elite interviewees with my intellect and focused instead on putting them at their ease. In the process, I became more at ease myself, and a better interviewer.

When it comes to building rapport, there is a longstanding methodological debate concerning the relative merits of what has been termed the neopositivist and ‘romantic’ views of interviewing (Alvesson, 2003; Silverman, 1993). The neopositivist approach advocates a consistent research protocol in each interview and seeks to minimise researcher influence and other sources of bias. The romantic approach focuses on building rapport, trust and commitment between interviewer and interviewee.

With elite interviews, the ‘romantic’ approach is a far more effective method for obtaining high quality data. As numerous writers on elite interviewing attest, each interview will be different. Rice suggests we look upon 'interviewing elites as more an intellectual discussion … to create a space for intellectual dialogue and reflection.' (2010: 74). The researcher may set the agenda but they cannot exercise the same degree of control they might in a standard interview. Senior professionals say they are looking for a conversation. They have complained to me of researchers who 'read out prepared questions mechanically, without linking questions to answers,' or 'ask long rambling questions or worse just giving monologues', who 'aren't interested in answers that do not fit their preconceived hypotheses', who 'engage in distracting behaviour by typing on their laptop or looking at their phone'[5], or who 'give the sense that they are more interested in what they can get for themselves than the value of the conversation.'

If, as Odendahl and Shaw argue, elite interviews should resemble an 'exchange between peers' (2002: 314), what options are available to a junior researcher who is clearly not a peer? As a young researcher seeking to establish a rapport, I fell back on strategies which had served me well in the past. Working as a graduate trainee in an investment bank in the 1980s, I had to make my way in a very aggressive, male-dominated, and sexually predatory environment. I realised that I needed the protection of a powerful senior male if I were to survive, and the safest way to get this was to present myself in the guise of 'intelligent daughter'. By creating the father-daughter dynamic, I rendered myself sexually taboo and received many hours of mentoring from very powerful male investment bankers. As a nervous PhD student facing the challenge of interviewing elite professionals, I automatically reverted to my 'intelligent daughter' persona, and was able easily and effectively to establish

[5] The researcher may be typing their interview notes or checking their recording device, but both actions are not characteristic of a good conversation. They serve to remind the professional that they are being interviewed on the record, which may cause them to be more inhibited in their answers. It is better to make brief handwritten notes and to use a recording device you can simply turn on and forget about.

a rapport. I found that my interviewees were happy to ‘teach’ me all I wanted to know, just as my bosses had done in my previous career.

GOING DEEPER

I realise an interview is going well when a senior professional says to me, ‘That’s a good question – I have never thought about that before’. I sense a change in how they are holding themselves, and even in how they are breathing. They become more energised, no longer professionally detached. Once an elite interviewee is engaged intellectually, they are more likely to follow wherever my questioning leads, provided they feel confident in me and in what I am trying to do with them. As one senior partner I interviewed on numerous occasions explained: ‘Laura, I always felt when being interviewed by you that my answers wouldn’t be accepted at face value. You would gently but firmly challenge and push to take answers to a deeper level.’

Senior professionals have typically received press training and are likely to be highly skilled at answering and avoiding difficult questions. They are often asked the same questions repeatedly and are supplied with stock answers by their press departments. Thomas explains that it is ‘quite common to watch an executive mentally “rewinding the tape” in search of an appropriate phrase’ (1993: 89). A senior partner complained to me of researchers who are ‘easy to fob off with jargon and bullshit answers’. A managing partner explained: ‘You only start talking bullshit if you are getting bored – when the interviewer lets you keep painting in broad brush strokes and doesn’t know how to get you to drill down.’ As another stated: ‘We are testing you with our responses to your broad questions – trying to establish if you really know your stuff and if it’s worth opening up to you – trying to work out if there is something worthwhile on the other side so we can have a sensible conversation. If the interviewer lets you stay general, you wonder "why should I do the hard work for them?"'

Over the years I have developed a variety of rhetorical strategies to help me go deeper.

- If I want to stop a senior professional talking about something uninteresting, or to stop patronising me, I may say: 'Yes, I understand all about …, but I really need your help in understanding ….'
- If their comments remain superficial, I may emphasise that I am thinking very deeply about what they are saying (thus highlighting the fact that they are not): 'What you are saying has sparked some very interesting thoughts in me which I am keen to hear your views on. I wonder what you think about…?'
- If they seem nervous about revealing sensitive information, I may remind them that I am a fellow professional: 'Academics have our own professional ethics. I would always/never…'. I offer them a choice, to enable them to feel in control of the situation: 'Would you like me to turn off the tape recorder?'
- If they ask cautiously, as they sometimes do, 'Do this sound odd to you? Do you think I am wrong to say this?', I may reply: 'There is no judgement here. I just want to hear your truth. That's all that matters right now.'
- If I need to ask a really difficult question and I do not want to risk disengaging them by appearing too critical, I may say: 'Someone else hearing you say that might think you had acted unwisely/ were being economical with the truth. How would you respond to their criticism?'
- And if someone is clearly being inconsistent or concealing information, I may say: 'But earlier you said /or other people have told me … and I'm afraid I don't

understand how that fits with what you have just said. Could you help me make sense of this?'

Silence can be useful also, as elite interviewees often keep talking to fill the space – they are not typically the ones who listen in meetings -- but silence only works if you have first established your credibility. Professionals will not respond well to an interviewer who appears too passive or seems to have nothing interesting to say.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT INTERVIEWS/EES

No matter how badly the interview is going, you may be able to salvage something from it. If I find myself in a really unpleasant interview with a senior professional, I try to swap consciously from interviewer to ethnographer mode. I try to step back from my own feelings of anger, frustration, or anxiety to observe the dynamics between the unpleasant interviewee and myself as interviewer. The experience may be telling me something about how they treat their colleagues, and how their colleagues feel about them.

Perhaps my most unpleasant interview happened early in my PhD when I was attempting to negotiate access with the CEO of a consulting firm. He subjected me to 45 minutes of sustained, aggressive, and occasionally offensive questioning. He was clearly a bully and was enjoying exerting his power over me. I realised I had nothing to lose and responded extremely assertively, not conceding any point, and mirroring his aggressive posture, disrespectful manners, and obscene language. My supressed anger created a surge of adrenalin in me and provoked a fight response. At the end of 45 minutes he burst out laughing and said ‘You’ve passed. I didn’t manage to break you.’ He granted me access, and his firm became one of the core case studies in my PhD.

In another of my PhD case studies I interviewed a managing partner of a leading global accounting firm who would only allow me 20 minutes and looked at me throughout with a degree of hostility which I found genuinely frightening. His staring eyes were the blackest I had ever seen and his demeaner was chillingly clinical. Whereas in the previous interview my supressed anger and rush of adrenalin provoked a fight response, in this interview my supressed fear and rush of adrenalin provoked a flight response. I literally had to stop myself from bolting out of the room, but I forced myself to behave as though nothing was wrong, conscious I was revealing my vulnerability by getting redder and redder. On replaying the interview recording, I realised the managing partner had given me all the information I needed in those 20 minutes, and some of his comments had been very insightful. His aggressive and curt answers were content-rich and exceptionally concise. He clearly did not want me in his office, but he had not intended our 20 minutes together to be a waste of either his or my time.

Most difficult interviews are far less memorable. Ostrander talks about ‘a simultaneous sense of being put in one’s place by elites at the same time that they are being warm, friendly, open and communicative’ (1993: 19). Time management is a common way in which elite interviewees subvert the interview process. ‘The elite subject may keep the interviewer waiting beyond the appointed interview time, may announce at the onset of the conversation other demands on his or her schedule, and may interrupt the interview to conduct other business.’ (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002: 310). In my experience of interviewing large numbers of lawyers, it is normal for one third of them to cancel at least once – sometimes failing to notify me until I arrive for the interview. Rather than take this personally, a word of advice from a managing partner is helpful here. ‘Sometimes things go wrong because we screw up at our end or we just get hit by a wall of work. It can be really helpful if the interviewee offers to reschedule. At that point I can either recommit to spending time with them, then and there, or I am relieved to be given a second chance to see them another day.’ With an elite interviewee who is clearly distracted I sometimes stop the interview after a few minutes and offer to return at a more convenient time. This demonstrates that their views are *very* important to my research, and because I am doing ‘very important research’, I am prepared to return at a time more convenient to them. They typically take the hint and decide to give me their undivided attention.

CONCLUSIONS: MAINTAINING CRITICAL DISTANCE

Whilst there is an extensive body of methodological writing on elite interviewing within other research disciplines, elite interviewing has received very little attention within the management and organizational literature. Consequently, the focus of this article has been on helping management and organizational scholars reflect upon and improve their own professional practice when conducting elite interviews. I have sought to articulate my hard-won lessons from 25 years of interviewing elite professionals and to provide a rare opportunity to hear from the senior professionals themselves, to find out what they think of *us* and our interviewing practices -- what works well and what can be disastrously ineffective.

While I have emphasised lessons learnt from some of my most challenging interviews, it is worth noting that, in my experience, most elite interviewees are not unpleasant. The more likely challenge, as highlighted by Mikecz (2012), is maintaining critical distance.

According to Rice, 'relations of power … place researchers in the difficult position of having to maintain positive relations with those they are studying, whilst developing critical perspectives from the empirical material they have obtained' (2010: 74). Or, as Thomas says, 'it is easy to be drawn in by the articulateness and, in some cases, by the charm of top executives.' (1993: 85).

The ability to empathise, to walk in the shoes of a senior professional, and to try to see the world from their perspective, is crucial to building rapport and collecting high quality data about sensitive topics. In learning to empathise with the elite interviewee, however, we risk losing critical distance. When I am conducting multiple interviews in a single organization I often go through a phase of 'client capture', just as professionals may do when they lose the requisite professional distance from the clients they seek to advise. I start to enjoy spending time in the organization. When this does not happen, it is telling me something important about the organization, but also about myself as a researcher.

In one elite consulting firm I found myself feeling progressively more cynical and irritated. This bothered me because everyone I interviewed was charming and said they were very happy to work at the firm. I realised that I was experiencing a strong reaction against the interviewees' relentlessly positive and blandly conformist rhetoric. I also realised that I should challenge my own individualistic tendencies, to react less judgementally to what I was hearing, to allow for the possibility that they were telling me something that was truthful and very meaningful to them.

I once spent a week interviewing partners in a New York law firm. By Friday evening I was suffering from a deep depression and sense of hopelessness. I realised that I had absorbed the unexpressed unhappiness of the New York lawyers with whom I had spent the week. I also realised that I retained somewhat idealistic aspirations for the workplace and was simply sad to spend time with so many people who were unhappy in their working lives.

In order to build a rapport with elite interviewees, I need to enter into their emotional as well as their intellectual space. In starting to see the world through their eyes, I inevitably start to feel a degree of compassion for them. I allow this to happen in the interview and then step back to re-establish critical distance during the analysis phase. Once the interesting and engaging person I met some months ago is reduced to a series of anonymised text fragments in an analytical software programme, my critical distance is re-established.

When analysing this depersonalised and coded data, however, I believe I still have a responsibility to the individual who once spoke those words. If you are a good interviewer, elite interviewees will want to open up to you. They rarely allow themselves to experience vulnerability in their professional lives, but your research interview gives them an opportunity to speak with uncharacteristic honestly. In return they may give you something that is precious to them – their truth. As researchers, we have a responsibility to treat it with care.

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