The Profession

The Truth about Interviewing Elites

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This article reviews the small literature on how to interview elites. It examines the veracity of three sets of assumptions embedded in the literature: about the nature of truth; dishonest respondents; and sophisticated but powerless researchers. It suggests ways forward, including ensuring that researchers place their work in more explicit philosophical and reflexive frameworks. This would result in more rigorous research and improved pedagogy.

Introduction

The interview is one of the most, if not the most, commonly used research tools in social (King, 2004) and political science (Berry, 2002; Lilleker, 2003; Richards, 1996). Indeed, it is estimated that '90% of all social science investigations' use interviews of some sort (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 1). The contribution of the interview to research and knowledge is therefore a substantial one, and getting it right is important.

Books on research methodology from a range of domains include chapters on how to conduct interviews (Bowling, 2002; Bryman, 2001; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Pope and Mays, 2000a; Saunders, Thornhill and Lewis, 2006; Walford, 1994). These focus on issues such as the appropriate use of open and closed questions, the need to avoid leading questions, and other such tips deemed essential to successful interviewing. There is a much smaller literature on how to research elites (Burnham et al., 2004). It is this literature that forms the focus of this article.

Elites can be 'loosely defined as ... those with close proximity to power' (Lilleker, 2003, p. 207) or with particular expertise (Burnham et al., 2004). This can include corporate, political and professional elites such as medics (Becker, 1995). 'Elite interviewing is characterized by a situation in which the balance is in favour of the respondent' (Burnham et al., 2004, p. 205), and this can lead to additional challenges in gaining access and the respondents' tendency to seek to control the agenda (Burnham et al., 2004; Bygnes, 2008). These difficulties tend to result in the majority of research interviews being undertaken with less powerful people, who may also be less skilled at deflecting questions (Homan, 1991; Ostrander, 1995), and less likely to be able to pass the researcher to a public relations department (Burnham et al., 2004).

To help address some of these challenges a number of sources on interviewing elites include 'how to' tips – how to gain access (Burnham et al., 2004; Dexter, 1970;

Lilleker, 2003; Richards, 1996); how to present yourself as 'researcher' (Batteson and Ball, 1995; Berry, 2002; Burnham et al., 2004; Dexter, 1970; Herod, 1999; Leech, 2002; Lilleker, 2003; Richards, 1996; Sabot, 1999); how to ask questions (Berry, 2002; Leech, 2002; Woliver, 2002); how to interpret responses (Berry, 2002; Goldstein, 2002); and relatively few on how to write up data (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Gusterson, 1995). Together these provide helpful guidance on the actual process of interviewing.

This article does not therefore aim to offer more 'how to' advice. Instead it focuses on three related sets of issues that are embedded but left implicit in many of the papers: assumptions about 'truth' and how it can be discovered, assumptions about duplicity on the part of the interviewee and assumptions about the superiority of the interviewer. This article explores these issues and considers the implications for research practice.

Issues

Objective truth

The majority of advice on interviewing elites assumes that the truth is 'out there' (Kogan, 1994). This places the papers in a particular space within a wider debate on 'ontology' (the nature of being), 'epistemology' (the nature of knowing) and methodology (Murphy et al., 1998; Grix, 2002). There are several ways to organise and label the underlying concerns, or 'paradigms' (Bowling, 2002; Bryman, 1998; Grix, 2004; Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Murphy et al., 1998; Saunders, 1983). A paradigm is 'a set of propositions that explain how the world is perceived; it contains a world view, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world, telling researchers and social scientists in general "what is important, what is legitimate, what is reasonable" (Patton 1990: 37)' (Sarantakos, 2005, pp. 31–32).

The positivist paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 2005) is associated with a view of reality as 'everything that can be perceived through senses; is independent of human consciousness, is objective, rests on order, is governed by strict, natural and unchangeable laws and be realised through experience. All members of society define reality in the same way, because they all share the same meaning' (Sarantakos, 2005, pp. 31–32). Constructivism (Grix, 2002; Guba and Lincoln, 2005) (sometimes called 'constructionism', Bryman, 2001, pp. 17–18), on the other hand, is premised on the belief that people have agency, and their observed behaviour is guided by subjective meaning. This implies that social phenomena are not only produced through social interaction but they are constantly in a state of revision (Bryman, 2001).

The complexity of the propositions that make up paradigms is often seen as an unattractive distraction to research (Aspinwall, 2006; Grix, 2004), and is left under-developed (Aspinwall, 2006; Grix, 2002 and 2004) in political science as a result (Bates and Jenkins, 2007). Yet their importance lies in the assertion that methods, methodology, epistemology and ontology are interrelated (Grix, 2002 and 2004) and each influence what is 'produced' by the research process, and the claims that can be made for it. Jonathan Grix argues that methods themselves are neutral

(Grix, 2002 and 2004), but in practice different methods yield different sorts of data and allow different kinds of interpretation (Sarantakos, 2005). Grix (2002 and 2004) argues for logical consistency and an explicit statement of overall position.

Many of the papers reviewed here appear to be premised on the belief that 'truth' is 'out there' (Kogan, 1994). In some cases the author explicitly states a presumption of a truth whose existence is independent of the social actors: '[as] a dedicated researcher I was concerned with the pursuit of truth', writes Robert Phillips (1998, p. 13). In other cases one can only infer the ontological position from the fact that researchers seem not interested in the particular interpretations of their interviewee, but rather in some unstated thing behind, which is assumed to be hidden. However, semi-structured interviews are associated with constructivist approaches which derive from an opposite set of ontological and epistemological assumptions.

If the researchers are looking for meaning (Lilleker, 2003; Richards, 1996), the semi-structured interview method is a valid one (Sarantakos, 2005). However, this position would normally also be associated with a constructivist ontological position. In constructivist paradigms the research task is to search for the meaning that actors use to make sense of their world (Sarantakos, 2005), and not to search for an objective meaning independent of the actors. Thus, there appears to be a lack of logical consistency (Grix, 2002 and 2004) in the approach taken.

This matters more because using constructivist methods for positivist ends forces the researcher to be the final arbiter of what is 'truth'. The researcher becomes the 'enlightened academic' (Hay, 1997, p. 48), seeing the truth where the interviewee does not. Hugh Gusterson (1995), for example, notes how researchers seek to explain the career choice of weapons designers through some negative pathology because the researchers disapprove of the career choice and cannot accept the interpretation of their respondents. Omitting reference to these philosophical issues conveys an authority of meaning which is increasingly recognised as unjustified and problematic (Bates and Jenkins, 2007; Grix, 2004), and relies on an informed reader to critique the assumptions and analyse the implications.

Dishonest respondents

Many writers on interviewing elites assume they are going to be lied to. It is argued that elite respondents agree to be interviewed as they have something to say (Berry, 2002), and will use an interview to 'present themselves in a good light, not be indiscreet, to convey a particular version of events, to get arguments and points of view across, to deride or displace other interpretations and points of view' (Ball, 1994, pp. 97–98). Charles Batteson and Stephen Ball (1995) refer to policy elites' ability to 'skilfully employ tactics' used in their daily practice to derail the interview's purpose: they shut down questions, deflect questions and 'weave narratives of justification' (p. 203). They exaggerate their roles and contribution (Berry, 2002), emphasise some things and neglect others (Berry, 2002; Lilleker, 2003; Richards, 1996).

A few authors recognise that elite respondents when asked to talk about past events may get them wrong, as it can genuinely challenge their memory (Davies, 2001; Lilleker, 2003; Richards, 1996). Others see the process of narrative as an essential

feature of human interaction, placing emphasis on the development of meaning rather than judging truth through the interview process (Bailey and Tilley, 2002; Dexter, 1970). Here the focus of study tends to be on the creation of meaning rather than what lies behind it.

Erving Goffman (1959) saw all interaction as a 'performance', one shaped by environment and audience and designed to convey particular impressions. Individuals have a 'front stage', an 'official stance' and a 'back stage' which is more how we are 'behind closed doors'. Goffman also recognised that front-stage performances may be 'cynical'. By this he meant that the cynical performers lie because their audience does not want the truth. Goffman recognises some objective truth, but does not seek to judge it. This issue of front and back stage, public and 'off the record' (Goldstein, 2002, p. 671) is one familiar to political studies although the emphasis tends to be different. Albert Hunter (1995), for example suggests that 'although the public frontstage may reflect the power of ... elites, it is the backstages where the power itself is most often wielded' (p. 154).

The idea that research subjects might orientate their responses to others is well recognised in social science (Holden, 2001), and not one that is unique to elite interviewing. The issue of 'positionality', such as being an insider/outsider (Becker, 1995; Desmond, 2004; Herod, 1999; Sabot, 1999), is also a recurrent one in the literature on elite interviewing. As for researchers, Andrew Herod, for example considers the benefits of being a 'British-born permanent resident of the US' (Herod, 1999, p. 315) and doing research on 'foreign' elites, and he found that others' perceptions of his insider/outsider status changed over time. This change is assumed to influence the interviewees' responses. Emmanuèle Sabot (1999) also found herself being given better access and more information as a 'foreigner', but less as a woman.

Sophisticated researcher

A third set of issues relates to the assumption that we should expect interviewees (elite or otherwise) to be honest, when there appears to be no such onus on ourselves as researchers. Susan Ostrander (1995, p. 147), for example says: 'I have *developed three strategies* for asking hard questions that elites may perceive as threatening' (emphasis added). At the same time she suggests that, when asked about one's research, 'It is best to be straightforward' (p. 149). Ostrander is not alone in either 'developing strategies' or overlooking the inconsistency of the two positions.

Managing positionality is one aspect of this. Herod (1999) sought to present himself in such a way that he felt would optimise the response of his subjects. He used different terms depending on whom he was talking to in his study of trade unions: 'when interviewing managers I tend to use the term "employee" ... rather than "worker" which may raise questions about my own politics and thus limit the types of information to which I am given access because I am, perhaps, seen as less sympathetic to managers' goals' (p. 319). Laura Woliver (2002) notes how the responses she got from interviews with 'pro-choice' respondents in a study of reproductive issues probably depended on their perception of her own position. She managed this by deflecting the question of whether she is 'pro-life or not' when asked.

Indeed, the literature abounds with recommendations on how interviewers should behave in order to gain access (Burnham et al., 2004; Dexter, 1970; Leech, 2002; Lilleker, 2003; Richards, 1996; Walford, 1994) or disarm their respondents (Leech, 2002; Lilleker, 2003). Roger Homan (1991) argues that the need for informed consent is often seen by researchers more as a challenge to be overcome than as a means to protect respondents; hence David Richards's (1996, p. 202) suggestion to 'Flatter the prospective interviewee by emphasising that his or her input would be beneficial to your research. However, do not go overboard; sycophancy is easy to spot'. Herod (1999, p. 321) sought to present himself in a way that he felt would optimise the response of his subjects, so he also requested interview as 'Dr' in Eastern Europe, where the relationship between academia and the labour move-ment is closer, but never in the US as he was fearful that this might sound too 'ivory tower' to be attractive to would-be respondents.

Once in, the challenge becomes one of getting honest accounts, and there are 'strategies' available here too. Some are simple: move from non-threatening to threatening questions (Leech, 2002; Lilleker, 2003). Others are more complicated, often involving judgements about what to 'let on' to the interviewee (Leech, 2002). The interviewer should be knowledgeable (Ball, 1994), but there is some debate about how much knowledge the researcher should reveal. For example, Richards (1996, p. 203) suggests 'citing from earlier interviews, as it shows you are knowl-edgeable, establishes your credibility and allows you cross-check sources'. Beth Leech (2002) advises the opposite – to show commitment to confidentiality.

Christopher Pollitt, Stephen Harrison and Gordon Marnoch (1990, p. 184) recom-mend the use of a 'phased assertion' technique in interviewing in order to explore 'individual reticence'. They comment that 'Like many other interviewers we have sometimes been awarded additional information simply because we have appeared to know more than we actually did' (p. 184). On the other hand, Margaret Desmond (2004, p. 265) claims to have had material disclosed to her by elite interviewees because her role as 'supplicant' made her seem unknowing and 'unthreatening'.

In practice these are probably very effective strategies, but they are also duplicitous; a point not acknowledged by those offering the advice. They involve the researcher doing precisely what they criticise elites for doing – being selective in what they present in order to elicit a particular response in others. This is reminiscent of *Blackadder*'s General Melchett describing German spies as 'Filthy Hun weasels fighting their dirty underhand war!' and 'our' spies as 'Splendid fellows, brave heroes, risking life and limb for Blighty' (Lloyd, 1989).

Powerless researchers

One justification of this position might be that researchers lack power relative to elites (Bygnes, 2008; Leech, 2002) and therefore need clever strategies. However, one question for researchers is whether this legitimates the approaches that could be described as manipulative. Another, more critical, point rests in the lack of recognition that researchers do have power over the respondent through the process of research. There are a number of elements to this: control of the interview, control of what is published and control of meaning. Gaining access to reluctant

respondents is also relevant, and covered above (Desmond, 2004; Sabot, 1999; Smith, 2006; Walford, 1994). There are also recommendations on how to 'take charge' of the interview agenda (Leech, 2002; Lilleker, 2003; Pollitt et al., 1990; Woliver, 2002), when the respondent wants to move it (Ball, 1994; Phillips, 1998) and how to get reticent people to talk (Dexter, 1970; Richards, 1996). Silence can produce social discomfort and the respondent should be the one who breaks the silence (Berry, 2002; King, 2004). These recommendations are premised on a hidden assumption that the researcher should take charge. Ostrander (1995) argues explicitly that elites cannot be allowed to maintain their superior position in research interviews; they should be challenged. Polite interviews are likely to reproduce the voices and agendas of the powerful (Fitz and Halpin, 1994; Kezar, 2003). The power of the researcher, if discussed at all, is assumed to be justified.

There is, however, a question of how powerless researchers are. They not only develop interview questions and interpret the responses, but select pieces of an interview that support their claims. Most commonly the focus in the literature is the researcher being censored or self-censored in order to protect future access (Fitz and Halpin, 1994; Kogan, 1994; Lilleker, 2003; Ostrander, 1995; Phillips, 1998; Sabot, 1999; Walford, 1994). Woliver (2002), for example describes the dilemma of being told things in interview that would be damaging to the respondent were they published and how this would 'hamper' access in future. While the published output of the interview is potentially controlled by the interviewee, interviewers also make choices about what to publish in their own interest. What is published influences the meaning that is created.

The published account is not an objective rendering of 'reality', but it is the researcher's interpretation of the facts that is published for public view. While sometimes the outputs of research are validated with respondents (Lilleker, 2003; Sabot, 1999; Woliver, 2002), more often they are not. By judicious selection of what is published, particular meaning is created. Declining to be interviewed may also be interpreted by the researcher as carrying 'meaning' (Leech, 2002; Pope and Mays, 2000b). This has the potential to give power to researchers. The main concern here is not that power is created, but that the impact of this position is not considered. Where analysis is presented in positivist language, these issues are hidden (Dexter, 1970).

Ways forward

The argument above responds to a number of papers aimed at students and others undertaking interviews for the first time. These papers are excellent and very welcome, but they rest on ontological and epistemological assumptions that are hidden yet critical to understanding the research process. This does not negate any of the practical advice of the papers, but does demand that interviewers are clear and explicit in the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which their research is placed (Grix, 2004; Murphy et al., 1998; Pope and Mays, 2000b) and that they should approach the research process self-critically and reflexively (Gusterson, 1995). 'Reflexivity refers to the recognition of the influence the researcher brings to the research process. It highlights the potential power relationships between the researcher and the research participant ... It also acknowledges

how a researcher's [characteristics] ... influence the choices made within the study, such as the research question itself and the methods of data collection' and they should consider the implications of this for their research (Kuper, Lingard and Levinson, 2008, p. 689).

Accepting the inevitability of subjectivity in interviewing also creates opportunities for reframing the interview as a collaborative process (Dexter, 1970), one through which all participants can learn (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Mishler, 1986; Smith, 2006). This approach is most commonly associated with feminist and critical perspectives (Mishler, 1986). Feminist and critical researchers often seek to give voice to those who are silent or under-studied and explicitly aim to raise consciousness and bring about social change (Herzog, 1995; Kezar, 2003; Ostrander, 1995). In terms of process these interviewers are typically more giving of themselves (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Anne Oakley, a feminist researcher, places value on equality between women and does not seek to control interviews, instead viewing them as interactive conversations (Oakley, 1981). Critical researchers claim to be more challenging in their questioning, as they aim to bring about social transformation (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Adrianna Kezar (2003) argues that the same techniques can be used with elites to 'aid participants to transform their views and work towards breaking societal hierarchies' (Smith, 2006, p. 649).

Conclusion

There is a small but significant literature on how to interview elites. It makes a welcome contribution to knowledge and practice, but could be usefully developed by being placed in a more philosophical and reflexive framework. Reporting these processes improves students' knowledge and understanding of research principles (Bates and Jenkins, 2007; Grix, 2004; Kuper, Lingard and Levinson, 2008) and can help them develop professionally (Bates and Jenkins, 2007). It will also bring more rigour and validity to the study of politics (Aspinwall, 2006; Bates and Jenkins, 2007; Grix, 2002 and 2004). A more collaborative approach to interviewing elites may provide a positive way through the difficulties of subjective methodology, but has yet to be really tested.

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