The truth about interviewing elites (Morris, 2009)

Defining 'Elites'
- Those in positions of significant power and influence (politicians, senior executives, and high-ranking public officials)
- These individuals have the potential to provide insider perspectives but are often difficult to access and interview.

Access Challenges
- One central challenge in interviewing elites is gaining access. Morris points out that elites are usually shielded by layers of gatekeepers and are constrained by tight schedules.
- The article suggests leveraging professional networks, utilizing formal requests, and sometimes relying on social connections to facilitate access.

Interview Dynamics
- Elites may try to control the interview, use jargon, or steer the conversation to serve their interests.
- Morris advises researchers to be thoroughly prepared, assertive, and clear about their research objectives to navigate these dynamics effectively.

Mutual Understanding
- Establishing a connection with the interviewee is crucial. Morris emphasizes the importance of demonstrating knowledge of the subject matter and showing respect for the interviewee's expertise and position.
- This can help in making the interview more fruitful, as the interviewee becomes more willing to share information.

Persistence
- Persistence is often required when dealing with elite interviews.
- Delays, cancellations, or initially superficial answers should be expected, and researchers should be prepared to follow up and probe deeper to gather valuable insights.

Ethical Considerations
- Ethical issues can arise in elite interviews due to the potential implications of the topics.
- Morris highlights the need for clarity about how the information will be used and advises maintaining a high level of professionalism to handle sensitive information responsibly.

Data Quality and Bias
- There is a risk of receiving polished, rehearsed responses from elite interviewees.
- Morris suggests using open-ended questions that encourage reflection and genuine responses.
- Additionally, cross-verifying the data obtained with other sources is recommended to enhance the reliability of the findings.

Morris, Z. S. (2009). The truth about interviewing elites. Politics, 29(3), 209-217.

My take on
The truth about interviewing elites
(Morris, 2009)

- I picked this article because I was interested in learning about interview situations where there is a status imbalance between the interviewee and interviewer.

- When I was doing my Master's thesis, I was interviewing doctors and sometimes I felt a power-imbalance in those situations; I was "just" a student conducting some interviews and taking their valuable time from productive patient work. Afterwards, I think that this did affect my approach to the interviews. Somehow, I felt that I wasn't in the position to ask elaboration on some topics as time was running out and I felt that they had already "done enough" by allowing me to interview them so I didn't feel I had the right to contact them for elaborations or further discussions.

- If I were to do interviews again with people who I perceive to have a higher status than me, I would use Morris's insights to prepare myself for the situation – doing a good due-diligence on the interviewee and depicting myself as a knowledgeable professional (sometimes I have the tendency to underestimate my expertise).

- On the other hand, some of the discussed elite interviewing strategies seemed a bit strange to me. For example, that the interviewee should be the one who breaks the silence in the interview situation as this asserts that the researcher is in control. This kind of places the interviewer (the researcher) and the interviewee (the elite) in opposite teams with conflicting agendas. Maybe I am just naïve, but does there need to be such a juxtaposition? At least in management, when you are researching ways to improve organizations and work, I would want to assume that both the researchers and the leaders strive to this common goal. Sure, there can also be the abuse of power in the organizational context just as well as in the political sphere, but is it the research community's responsibility to find these grievances or should the organization be the one auditing itself? I guess when there is power to be used, external eyes and ears ensure accountability regardless of the context being political or organisational.