
Doing Politics

Elite Interviewing: Approaches and Pitfalls

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Interviews are one of the major tools in qualitative research, although there is a limited literature on the subject of interviewing generally and elite interviewing particularly. The aim of this article is to introduce some of the issues involved in elite interviewing to researchers new to the use of the technique. Emphasis is also placed on the need for the interviewer to know his/her subject thoroughly, and to be prepared to be flexible in an interview situation. The information is based on the author's own recent experience of interviewing a number of top civil servants, both serving and retired.

The ordinary and the elite

A number of political scientists have addressed the issue of interviewing and the problems involved. Yet, their work mainly concentrates upon non-elite interviewing – see Gordon's *Interviewing: Tactics And Strategy* (1978), McCracken's *The Long Interview* (1988), Weller and Romney's *Systematic Data Collection* (1988) or Seldon's *Contemporary History* (1988). Scant attention is paid to the particular problem involved in elite interview-

ing, which will be the focus of this paper. What is elite interviewing and in what way does it differ from 'ordinary' interviewing? One of the few books to address these questions is Dexter's *Elite and Specialised Interviewing* (1970). Yet, the obvious flaw in this work, is the author's failure to address the issue of what constitutes an 'elite'. The nearest he comes to a working definition is: '...people in important or exposed positions may require VIP interviewing treatment on the topics which relate to their importance or exposure' (Dexter, 1970, p.5). Dexter fails to analyse why such individuals have, in the first place, attained the exalted tag of an elite. There is no definitive answer to this question. However the whole notion of an elite, implies a group of individuals, who hold, or have held, a privileged position in society and, as such, as far as a political scientist is concerned, are likely to have had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public.

One of the most important functions of an elite interview is to try to assist the political scientist in understanding the theoretical position/s of the interviewee; his/her perceptions, beliefs and ideologies. Such information can

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rarely be gleaned from examining books, documents or records. By their very nature, elite interviewees provide a subjective account of an event or issue. Thus, elite interviewing should not be conducted with a view to establishing 'the truth', in a crude, positivist manner. Its function is to provide the political scientist with an insight into the mind-set of the actor/s who have played a role in shaping the society in which we live and an interviewee's subjective analysis of a particular episode or situation.¹ Furthermore, by definition, elites are less accessible and are more conscious of their own importance; so problems of access are particularly important. At the same time, and inevitably, elite interview samples tend to be a lot smaller.

This paper examines the advantages and problems of elite interviewing. Some practical guidelines are offered upon obtaining access and on preparation for an interview. The paper then addresses the actual interview situation, providing a number of suggestions which may help the interviewer to maximise the information to be gleaned from an interviewee.

Advantages

Why conduct interviews at all? What benefits do they provide for the researcher? One of the fundamental questions a researcher has to ask is whether conducting a series of elite interviews will be of benefit to his/her research? To determine this, one can pose the simple question; would interviewing shed any further light upon your research? There are a number of putative advantages:

- They can help in interpreting documents, or reports, particular if you gain access to the authors responsible for putting together a relevant document or report.
- They can help in interpreting the personalities involved in the relevant decisions and help explain the outcome of events.
- They can provide information not recorded

elsewhere, or not yet available (if ever) for public release.

- They can provide a series of accompanying benefits:

They can help you to establish networks, or provide access to other individuals, through contact with a particular interviewee. What I call the snowball effect.

They can help you to understand the context, set the tone, or establish the atmosphere, of the area you are researching. As Seldon (1988, p.9) in his own chapter on interviewing colourfully notes: 'Warm, vivid contemporary history has almost always been written by authors who have conducted interviews; dull, clinical history is often produced by those who have buried themselves away in libraries and archives'.

Problems

Elite interviewing is certainly not a precise skill and there are a number of methodological, operational and interpretational problems involved:

- Although unrepresentative sampling is not often an issue in elite interviewing, where it is so, it may be due to problems of access. Sometimes, it is simply not possible to obtain a representative sample, because certain individuals or categories of individuals (possibly those with something to lose from being interviewed), refuse a request for an interview. Where this is the case, the political scientist must acknowledge this fact.
- The reliability of the interviewee is sometimes questionable. This often results from failures in his/her memory. The older the witness, and the further from events they are, the less reliable the information (though the more willing they may be to talk). This is partly a result of the stretch of time, but interviewees also have the problem of confusing what they can actually

remember of events, with what they have later read on the same subject. They may also adjust their interpretation of an event in order to avoid being seen in a poor light or, in some cases, they may have an axe to grind. Thus, the interviewer must constantly be aware that the information the interviewee is supplying, can often be of a highly subjective nature. In the extreme, an interviewee may deliberately set out to mislead or falsify an issue or event. Some groups prove to be far more reliable than others. Evidence suggests that the least satisfactory group are [ex] politicians who: 'often encounter pathological difficulties in distinguishing the truth, so set have their minds become by long experience of partisan thought' (Seldon, 1988, p.10). Alternatively, Seldon suggests that civil servants can be the best interviewees, arguing with a wonderful turn of phrase that: 'Civil servants tend to be dispassionate creatures by nature and profession: cat-like, they observe action, storing the information in mental boxes that can yield a rich harvest to those who take the trouble to prise them open' (Seldon, 1988, p.10).

- Interviewees asked about the same event can say different things at different interviews or alternatively, they can change their mind in the course of a single interview (though this can sometimes be the fault of an interviewer trying to force his interviewee down a certain avenue).
- The problem can arise of interviewers being too deferential in their interviews. This can work on a sliding scale – the more famous (notorious) the individual, the more deferential the interviewer can become. Also, there exists an issue of power relations: an interviewee, concerned with presenting his/her viewpoint may want to control and dominate the interview. If so, the interviewer may not be able to control the format, or direction of the interview. A corollary of this, is that, by the very nature of elite interviews, it is the interviewee who has the power. They control

the information the interviewer is trying to eke out. Therefore, it is of vital importance that the interviewer carefully considers his/her approach to the interview. The norm, is not to use a questionnaire, sticking to it rigidly, but to adopt a semi-structured approach, using an aide memoir, that can be referred to as the interview develops. This helps ensure that all relevant topics have been covered.

Approach and preparation

There are a few fundamental issues a researcher must address, before approaching individuals for an interview. At what stage in your research do you conduct the interviews? In the vast majority of cases, elite interviewing is probably most productive in the latter stages of your work. This is particularly important, as there is a tendency for elites not to 'suffer fools gladly'. Their time is often limited, and if you fail to have a very good command of your material, then this can have a wholly detrimental effect on the interview. A further downside to this is that the 'snowballing' effect, mentioned earlier, will not be triggered, if an interviewee is not impressed by your all-round knowledge.

The selection of your interviewee is vital. Obviously, you wish your sample to be as representative as possible. Do not be deterred by the eminence of the individual you wish to interview, but at the same time be realistic. This is very much a hit and miss area. As an interviewer, all you can do to try to guarantee success, is to ensure that your approach and use of the networks/contacts available, has been as thorough as possible.

Having decided who to interview, you need to gain the agreement of the prospective interviewees. Below, I outline the approach I adopted which, although by no means perfect, did provide me with considerable success.

Write a letter setting out clearly your status [to legitimise the work], explaining *briefly* the

nature of your research, what benefit you hope to gain from conducting the interview and how you intend to use the information. 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. If you are in a position to mention authors, or individuals of importance, who are supporting you in your research, do so, as it provides credibility and legitimacy to your work. Where possible, mention other individuals already interviewed, to add credence to your work.

If you have been successful in gaining the consent of an individual, send a letter thanking him/her for his/her co-operation. At the same time include a brief synopsis of your own research, perhaps two to three sides of A4 and include a section identifying the various areas which you wish to discuss. Do not be too specific. What is required is a broad outline, to prepare the interviewee. Establish, at this stage, whether the interviewee will allow you to tape the interview. Obviously a taped interview enables you to concentrate more on what the interviewee is saying and, also, it provides you with a verbatim transcript of the interview. The downside is that some interviewees may be less forthcoming in the information they provide, if their comments are being recorded. If, however a taped interview is agreed upon, ensure that when establishing a mutually acceptable meeting place, the acoustics will be conducive to recording. A pub or restaurant often has too many background disturbances.

When approaching the interview itself, the need to be well prepared cannot be over-emphasised. You must have a thorough and detailed knowledge of your whole field of research. The more professional and well-informed you appear to your interviewee, the more likely you are to gain his/her respect and with it the whole tone of the interview will be improved.

Have a thorough knowledge of the individual's social background and career. The obvious sources to use to obtain this are:

Who's Who, *The Whitehall Companion*, *The Times Guide To the House Of Commons* and *The Parliamentary Companion*. Also, follow up on any references to the interviewee in newspapers, periodicals, etc. or articles which the individual has written. Using appropriate CD ROM, build up a dossier on the interviewee.

In terms of structuring the interview, the key requirement is flexibility. The first, obvious point, is to target the individual you are to interview and know the areas you wish to cover with him or her. In addition, I found it far more useful to approach the interview with a broad number of themes/areas, rather than a rigid set of formal questions. If you can prompt the interviewee into telling a chronological story of the subject in which you are interested, this is far more effective than firing a series of disjointed questions at him/her.

Check, where possible, that the individual has not already been interviewed in the area you wish to cover. There is little point in going over ground already covered and the interviewee may become bored, distracted or detached.

Finally, in preparation, think about how you can make the interviewee feel as comfortable and relaxed with you as possible. For example, in terms of appearance – think carefully about the best way to dress for the interview. As a male interviewing a top civil servant, I wore corduroys, a white shirt, tie and a black blazer, and carried a battered old brief case with me. If I had turned up in a pin-stripped suit and a filofax under one arm, it may not have created quite the right impression!

The interview

At the start of the interview there are a number of things it is important to ascertain.

- How much time the interviewee is prepared to give you. This is important, as it is

necessary to know how to tailor your questions, in the time available, to ensure you cover all the major areas. Of course, this is another reason why you need to have a definite, but flexible, idea of the questions you want to ask.

- Establish with the interviewee, where he or she stands, as regards the use of the material you are about to collect. I started by saying: 'I would be quite happy to send you a transcript of the interview, for you to correct or amend.' At the same time, ask the interviewee to specify any area/s on which he/she does not wish to be directly attributed. This establishes a degree of trust between you and the interviewee and places him/her at ease. This is very important, as they are then more likely to be open about the information they are willing to provide. Also, mention if it would be possible to include, in the transcript, one or two additional questions which might have arisen from your reflection on the interview. This effectively provides a safety net allowing you to raise any issues you may have missed
- During the interview itself *stay alert*. Essentially, it is a matter of being able to react to what the interviewee has said. Also, ensure that the interviewee does not go too far off the subject. Politely, but firmly, draw him/her back round to the topic you wish to discuss.
- If there are any common interests you can establish with the interviewee, then do so. For example, if it states in 'Who's Who', the individual was born in the same town as you, attended the same University as yourself, or has a similar recreational past time, then casually mention it. It is a matter of establishing a rapport.
- Give the interviewee chance to answer a question before going on to the next question. This is particularly true when conducting a series of interviews over a short space of time. There is a danger that you will assume you know how an interviewee will answer your initial question, so that you do

not allow him/her enough time to answer that question, in your eagerness to move on to the next stage. It can result in you speaking far more than the interviewee and, thus, having less material from which to quote.

- Having conducted a number of interviews, start citing from earlier interviews, as it shows your knowledge, establishes your credibility and allows you to cross-check sources.
- Wait until you have established a rapport with your interviewee and have been involved in discussion for a while, before asking contentious, critical or tricky questions. This is particularly true, if you wish to ask an individual about possible mistakes they may have made in their work. If you plunge into these types of questions from the outset, in all probability you will alienate your interviewee, who may become defensive and unforthcoming.
- Always end the interview by asking if there are any further areas, you have not touched on, upon which the interviewee may wish to comment.

The post interview period

If you have taken notes during the interview, or you are working from memory only, once the interview has ended, try to write up your notes as soon as is possible. The longer you leave it, the more hazy your recollection will be.

Take the time to write to the interviewee, thanking him/her for providing you with the opportunity to talk to them. Not only is this common courtesy, but it may help in providing you with an opportunity for a possible further interview. Also, include in the letter any questions you may have omitted during the interview, or areas/issues that were raised on which you would like further clarification.

The interviewer has now reached one of the most important stages – analysing the

information provided by the interviews. This, in itself, is no small task.

Conclusion

Elite interviews are a key tool of qualitative analysis for political scientists, but they do present problems. In particular, interviewees can be awkward, obstructive, unforthcoming, or even deceitful. Likewise, the researcher will often not be able to interview all those he/she may wish to, resulting in gaps in the information gathered. However, what this type of interview does provide is an account by a major player in an event or issue of importance to the researcher's work. This allows the interviewer to understand the perceptions of that player and what may, or may not, have led that individual to think or act in the way s/he did. If the political scientist can combine the information gained from elite interviews with other sources of data, such a combination produces a powerful research package. However, elite interviews should, normally, only be regarded as one of a number of research aides to enhance study in a parti-

cular field. Only in very rare cases, can they be relied upon as the sole tool for research.

Notes

1. This section obviously raises wider epistemological issues that cannot be properly dealt with in an article of this length. For a broader discussion of the topic see Devine (1995).

References

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