

Interview Methods in Political Science

The following essays are based on presentations given by the authors during a short course on elite interviewing, held at the 2001 APSA meeting in San Francisco. The short course, sponsored by the Political Organizations and Parties organized section of the APSA, drew nearly 100 participants.

The term elite interviewing generates some confusion and disagreement, as some researchers use “elite” to refer to the socioeconomic position of the respondent, whereas for others it has more to do with how the respondent is treated by the interviewer. There is an

interaction between these two situations, as political scientist Lewis Dexter pointed out in his book, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*:

“In standardized interviewing... the in-

vestigator defines the question and the problem; he is only looking for answers within the bounds set by his presuppositions. In elite interviewing, as here defined, however, the investigator is willing, and often eager to let the interviewee teach him what the problem, the question, the situation, is... Partly out of necessity... this approach has been adopted much

more often with the influential, the prominent and the well-informed than with the rank-and-file of a population. For one thing, a good many well-informed or influential people are unwilling to accept the assumptions with which the investigator starts; they insist on explaining to him how they see the situation, what the real problems are as they view the matter” (pp. 6–7).

The essays presented here for the most part focus on interviews of people in decision-making or leadership roles—members of Congress, members of parliaments, top-level bureaucrats, party leaders, and interest group leaders. More broadly speaking, however, elite interviewing can be used whenever it is appropriate to treat a respondent as an expert about the topic at hand. One of the essays on these pages, for example, involves interviews with activists, who while not “elites” in the socioeconomic sense of the word, are experts in their field and treated as such by the interviewer.

There have been relatively few resources in the discipline for training students and other researchers about the methodological challenges and informational benefits of conducting interviews with elite subjects. It is our hope that the short course and these essays help further discussion of these topics.

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Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews

In an interview, what you already know is as important as what you want to know. What you want to know determines which questions you will ask. What you already know will determine how you ask them.

Thanks to past jobs as a journalist and as an anthropological researcher, I've had training in both journalistic and ethnographic styles of interviewing. The two are at the opposite ends of the interview continuum. The journalistic style tries to verbally pin the respondent down by appearing to know everything already. The questions are direct and directed toward a particular outcome. The ethnographic style of interviewing instead tries to enter into the world of the respondent by appearing to know very little.

There are many types of interviews with many styles of questions, each appropriate in different circumstances. Unstructured interviews, often used by ethnographers, are really

more conversations than interviews, with even the topic of conversation subject to change as the interview progresses. These

“soaking and poking” experiences are most appropriate when the interviewer has limited knowledge about a topic or wants an insider perspective. But the tendency for such interviews to wander off in unexpected directions—although they may provide for fresh ideas—almost guarantees that the interviews will not be a very consistent source of reliable data that can be compared across interviews. Unstructured interviews are best used as a source of insight, not for hypothesis testing.

Sometimes, however, we already have a lot of knowledge about a topic and want very specific answers to very specific questions. When the researcher already knows a lot about the subject matter—the categories and all possible responses are familiar, and the only goal is to count how many people fall into each category of response—structured interviews with closed-ended questions are most appropriate. Political scientists are most familiar with this type of interview because of mass public opinion surveys. Such closed-ended approaches can sometimes backfire, however, if we assume we are familiar with an area but end up asking the wrong questions in the wrong way or omitting an important response choice. We may find ourselves with reliable data that lacks any content validity.

There is a middle ground, however, and one that can provide detail, depth, and an insider's

perspective, while at the same time allowing hypothesis testing and the quantitative analysis of interview responses. In this essay I will focus on that interview style—semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. It is a style that is often used in elite interviewing, and variations on this style are discussed in several of the other essays on these pages. My observations and suggestions here come not only from my past experiences as a journalist and an ethnographic researcher, but also from my current research among lobbyists and policymakers in Washington, DC, as part of the Advocacy and Public Policymaking project.¹

Gaining Rapport

Without rapport, even the best-phrased questions can fall flat and elicit brief, uninformative answers. Rapport means more than just putting people at ease. It means convincing people that you are listening, that you understand and are interested in what they are talking about, and that they should continue talking. There are several ways of doing this within the interview.

Putting Respondents at Ease

Some interviewing textbooks recommend that the interviewer “appear slightly dim and agreeable” (McCracken 1988, 38) or “play dumb” so that respondents do not feel threatened and are not worried that they will lose face in the interview. The danger here is that—especially when dealing with highly educated, highly placed respondents—they will feel that they are wasting their time with an idiot, or at least will dumb-down their answers and subject interviewers to a Politics 101 lecture. At the same time, the concern about respondents' feelings is valid. Even highly educated, highly placed respondents do not want to appear stupid in front of a university professor (I have had to reassure vice presidents of large organizations who were worried that they had “babbled” during an interview).

I recommend a middle road. The interviewer should seem professional and generally knowledgeable, but less knowledgeable than the respondent on the particular topic of the interview. So for me, I know a lot about lobbying and a lot about American politics, and I know what has been in the newspaper on a given policy issue, but I present myself as having little or no idea about what happened behind the scenes in the given policy issue I am interviewing about. I try to continue this

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approach even after I have conducted many interviews on the same policy issue. I don't want someone to leave something out because they assume I already knew it.

A second, related point to remember is that many of your subjects will be more nervous than you are. After all, after you've done a couple of these, you are experienced. Your respondents, however, may never have been the subject of an academic study before. Reassure them by being open and avoiding threatening descriptions of your work. "Talk with you" is less threatening than "interview you," for example (Weinberg 1996, 83). It is possible to be honest without being scary. There's no need to make your work sound like a medical procedure (at least until you are getting ready to submit it to a journal, that is). Approach interview subjects with a positive attitude. Act as though it is natural that people would want to talk to you. Appear friendly and curious.

An important way to make an interview subject feel at ease is to explain your project again. This is the one-minute version of your project, which should describe the topic you are interested in and the types of questions you will ask, without tipping your hand as to your hypotheses.² At this point you can remind respondents that their answers are confidential.³

Are You Listening?

During the interview itself, before moving on to the next question it often helps to briefly restate what the respondent has just said. (This should take no more than a sentence.) This shows that you are interested and have understood what the respondent has just said. It also provides a chance for the respondent to correct you if you have misunderstood. Avoid *reinterpreting* what the respondent has just said, as this has the tendency to work against rapport and leave the respondents feeling as if the interviewer is trying to put words in their mouths. Use the respondents' own language, if possible, to summarize what has just been said.

Anthropologist James Spradley suggests that when an interviewer does not understand a particular point, that it is better to ask for *use* rather than *meaning* (1979, 82). That is, "When would you do that?" or "What would you use that for?" are usually better questions for building rapport than "What do you mean by that?" The latter tends to shift respondents out of their own verbal word and to begin speaking to you as an outsider.

Question Order

Question order is important for substantive reasons (order affects occur in interviews, just as they do in surveys), but order is also important as a means of gaining rapport. As any journalist would tell you, in an interview you should always move from the nonthreatening to the threatening (Weinberg 1996, 85). That is, ask the easy questions first.

In the interviews I have conducted among lobbyists and policymakers, I find that it usually works better to ask things like age, background, title, and other personal things last. That way the interview doesn't come off as if it is about my respondent personally, but rather about the political issue or organization that we are talking about. This type of question order works for me because my other questions are not personal, and are therefore even less threatening than the demographic information I collect at the end. On the other hand, if your interview questions focus on an individual's own political and philosophical beliefs, then obviously questions about education, background, and title would be less threatening and would provide a good place to start.

When and how should you ask sensitive questions? It's usually best to wait until the middle or toward the end of the interview. Don't wait until the last minute—you may run out of time. Don't hem, haw, or make it seem as though any normal person would refuse to answer this question. Just ask. Then be quiet, and give the respondent time to answer. Most people will try to fill the silence, and you will get your answer.

A second thing to remember about sensitive questions—or any question, for that matter—is to use nonjudgmental, non-threatening wording. For instance, asking a respondent, "What kinds of help do you give to members of Congress as they are going about their work or daily lives?" is likely to gain you more information than if you were to ask, "Do you do favors for members of Congress?"⁴ Likewise, I know that nonprofit organizations with 501(c)3 charitable status are skittish about the word "lobbying," since the IRS restricts the amount of lobbying they can do. So I make a habit of referring to "advocacy efforts" or "policy work" instead.

When Did You Stop Beating Your Wife?

What are known as "presuming" questions are common in journalism, but are usually not good social science. There are circumstances, however, when such questions are necessary to make respondents comfortable enough to answer honestly. When the question is one that the respondent is likely to try to avoid and involves a matter that may have a stigma attached to it, a presuming question may be the only way to go. When I was working as an ethnographic researcher in Kenya, collecting reproductive histories from women, I first began simply by asking women to tell me about all of their pregnancies. It was clear from the first few interviews that no one was mentioning miscarriages, stillbirths, or deaths of children—and I knew that could not be accurate in a rural area with nonexistent prenatal care and high child mortality. So I tried probing: "Tell me about any children who died." I used this question only once, and it caused a respondent to jump up, mutter that she must go check on the goats, and run out the door. After some help from a language consultant, I did two things. I made my language less threatening, and I asked the question in a presuming way. "How many children are the lost ones?" I asked—"Aja inkera netala?" My respondents' faces would turn serious, they would sigh, then they would tell me the details I was seeking.

To return to the political world, instead of asking a lobbyist, "Did you give soft money donations?" it might make the question easier to answer to say, "How much did your organization give in soft money donations?" The latter presumes that it is normal to give soft money donations and that everyone must do it, and also shifts the onus away from the individual and onto the organization. (Actually, I should point out here that you should never ask for information in an interview that you could collect elsewhere, unless you are using the question to double-check the veracity and accuracy of a respondent. Asking for information you could easily collect elsewhere wastes precious interview time and risks insulting your respondents, since you are essentially asking them to do your homework for you.)

Presuming questions are presuming in the sense that they imply that the researcher already knows the answer—or at least part of it. So one danger is that the respondent will bluff to save face and make something up. That is why I suggest such questions should be used very sparingly and only when they are needed to take the edge off of questions that may otherwise have a stigma attached. In my examples above, a respondent would be relieved, not shamed, to be able to say "None."

Types of Questions

We all know that there are certain types of questions to avoid—loaded questions, double-barreled questions, leading questions, and (usually) presuming questions. But what types of questions *should* you ask in an open-ended, semistructured interview?

Grand Tour Questions

The single best question I know of for a semistructured interview is what Spradley (1979) calls a *grand tour question*. Like the name suggests, these questions ask respondents to give a verbal tour of something they know well. The major benefit of the question is that it gets respondents talking, but in a fairly focused way. Many good interviewers use this type of question instinctively. Jeff Berry, for example, used one in the research for his book *The Interest Group Society* when he asked lobbyists to describe an average day (1997, 94).

There are many different types of grand tour questions (see Spradley 1979, 86–88). The most common is probably the *typical grand tour* question:

“Could you describe a *typical* day in your office?”

“Could you describe a *typical* day on the Hill?”

“Could you describe a *typical* day in a member of Parliament’s office?”

Such questions have the benefit of giving you a sense of what an average day is like, but the drawback that you are not certain what is being averaged—that is, how much variation there is and how accurate the respondent’s sense of the usual really is. Respondents may have a tendency to focus on the interesting (which may not be usual), or on what they think *should* happen day to day (although it actually may not). If you are doing enough interviews to get a sense of the average by comparing across interviews, then you may want to turn to a *specific grand tour* question.

Specific grand tour questions ask for a tour based on some parameter decided by the interviewer—a day, a topic, an event: “Could you walk me through what you did *yesterday* in your office?” or “Walk me through what your organization did *in response to issue X*.” We used a specific grand tour question to begin our interviews for the Advocacy and Public Policymaking project, asking respondents to describe their organizations’ activities on the *most recent* policy issue in which they were involved.

Not all interviews need to be conducted sitting down, and not all grand tours need to be virtual. A *guided grand tour* is an actual tour: “The next time you are lobbying on the Hill, could you bring me along and show me what you do?” Related to this are *task-related grand tours*. Such questions ask the respondent to perform some usual task while verbally walking the interviewer through the task. For instance, I could ask a lobbyist to lay out talking points for a meeting with a legislator, or to compile a list of which members of Congress to talk to, explaining the decisions being made at each step of the process.

Example Questions

Example questions are similar to grand tour questions, but still more specific (see Spradley 1979, 87–88). They take some single act or event identified by the respondent and ask for an example: “Can you give me an example of a time that you used grassroots lobbying?” A related type of question is *native language questions*, which ask for an example in the respondent’s

own words. These can be *direct-language* questions—“How do you refer to these lobbying activities? What do you call them?”—or *hypothetical interaction questions*—“If you were talking to another lobbyist, what would you call that?” or “If I were to sit in on that meeting, how would I hear people referring to that?” Hypothetical interaction questions are sometimes easier to answer than direct language questions, because they help put the respondent in the mindset of talking to other experts, and can help shake them out of Politics 101.

Ethnographers use many other types of questions, many of which are of diminishing usefulness for most political scientists. However, the less you knew about an area, the more important such questions would become, to add direction to what otherwise would be a random conversational walk. *Structural questions*, for example, ask respondents to semantically structure their world through such exercises as listing all the different types of something and how they relate to each other (Spradley 1979; Werner and Schoepfle 1987). So, hypothetically, if I did not already know the different ways in which interest groups can lobby, instead of simply asking “What has your organization done in relation to this issue?”—I could ask something like this:

“We’ve been talking about your advocacy efforts on this issue and you have mentioned that you sent a letter to members on the committee, visited with members of the congressional delegation from your district, and put information on your website. Now I want to ask you a slightly different kind of question. *I’m interested in getting a list of all the different types of advocacy activities your organization has undertaken in relation to this issue. This might take a little time, but I’d like to know all the different types and what you would call them.* (Adapted from Spradley 1979, 122)

Note that the second question would get you a lot more information than the first. It starts off by showing that the interviewer has been listening, then asks for more information in a specific way.⁵ Be aware that if you really want a complete list then you may need to repeat the last part of this question many times to get all of them: “And are there any *other* types of advocacy efforts your group uses?” This is an example of a *prompt*, and leads me into my final type of question.

Prompts

Prompts are as important as the questions themselves in semistructured interviews. Prompts do two things: they keep people talking and they rescue you when responses turn to mush.

Let’s take the introductory question from the Advocacy and Public Policymaking project:

“Could you take the **most recent** issue you’ve been spending time on and describe what you’re trying to accomplish on this issue and what type of action are you taking to make that happen?”

One of my respondents answered, “Well, we’ve been talking to some people on the Hill and trying to get our message out.” He had just described the activities of every lobbyist in Washington. If I had stopped here, the interview would have been useless. Luckily, my interview protocol included numerous prompts, based on what we wanted to be able to code from this question, including who the targets of lobbying were, and what lobbying tactics were used. So at this point, possible prompts would include: “Who have you been talking to on the Hill?” and “What are you doing to try to get your message out?”

McCracken (1988, 35–36) identifies several different types of prompts. Prompts like the ones I just mentioned are *planned prompts*—prompts that are formally included in the interview protocol. At the end of each formal question we ask as part of the Advocacy and Public Policymaking project, there is an italicized list of specifics that the interviewer is supposed to probe for if the respondent doesn't bring them up. For example:

probe about coalition partners (formal or informal)
probe about who they are speaking with about this issue

One difference between a prompt and a question is that the prompts are not scripted as are the initial questions. The reason is that every interview is different and the list of possible probe situations could potentially go on for dozens of pages. That makes it important for the interviewer to have a plan for how the interviews will eventually be coded, so that the interviewer can make sure that the responses have covered the necessary points.

Probably the most instinctive type of prompt is an *informal prompt*. This is an unscripted prompt that may be nothing more than the reassuring noises and interjections that people make during any conversation to show that they are listening and interested: “Uh-huh.” “Yes.” “How interesting.” But the well-trained interviewer has a variety of informal prompts to use. *Floating prompts*, for example, are used to clarify (McCracken 1988, 35). These may be nothing more than raising an eyebrow and cocking one's head, or they may be specific questions: “How?” “Why?” and “And then...?” One way to ask for clarification and at the same time build rapport is to repeat the key term of the respondent's last remark as a question:

Respondent: “And the bill was completely whitewashed in committee.”

Interviewer: “Whitewashed?”

McCracken warns against leading respondents by putting words in their mouths (“Do you mean the bill was gutted?”) You risk losing rapport or having the respondent go along with your definition (“oh, yeah, sort of”), rather than clarifying further. The goal here is to listen for key terms and to prompt the respondent to say more about them.

Notes

1. My collaborators on the Advocacy and Public Policymaking project are Frank R. Baumgartner, Marie Hojnacki, David C. Kimball, and Jeffrey M. Berry. Research has been supported by National Science Foundation grants SBR-9905195 and SES-0111224. For more information on this project, including the complete interview protocol, see our website at <<http://lobby.la.psu.edu/>>. Also see Leech et al. 2002.

2. Elite interviewing subjects often are quite savvy about social science research, and it is not uncommon for an interviewee to ask, “So what is your working hypothesis here?” I respond to questions like these by explaining that if I told them I would risk biasing my results, but that I would be happy to send them information about the project and its hypotheses after the interview is over.

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Enough is Enough

One of the most important rules about asking questions has to do with shutting up. Give your respondent room to talk. If respondents get off topic, let them finish, then bring them gently back to the issue you are interested in. But don't try to control too much or you may miss important, unexpected points.

Conclusion

Used in combination, grand tour questions and floating prompts are sometimes enough to elicit almost all of the information you need in a semistructured interview (with planned prompts ready in case the floating prompts don't work!). I know that in many of my interviews for the Advocacy and Public Policymaking project, the answer to the first grand tour question took up half of the interview hour—and rendered many of the subsequent questions on the protocol virtually unnecessary. I would, of course, check, “You have mentioned x and x as people you worked with on this issue. Was anyone else involved in this issue?” But often the answer was no and we would quickly move on to the next question on the protocol. This was the best of both worlds, because it collected the information we wanted and provided it in the respondent's own language and framework.

Some of the question styles that semistructured interviewing borrows from anthropology may seem not very useful if you seek very specific information about a known topic and are not planning to write an ethnography of lobbyists, elected officials, or civil servants. On the other hand, if you take the time to ask these kinds of questions, you sometimes get surprising answers and learn something new. It's true that the type of interview you use depends on what you already know, but if you already knew everything, there would be little reason to spend time in a face-to-face interview. Semistructured interviews allow respondents the chance to be the experts and to inform the research.

3. An excellent way to convince your respondents that you really are serious about confidentiality issues is to decline to give them any information about the people you already have interviewed. A respondent may ask, “So who else have you talked to?” The interviewer can answer, “Oh, several people, although I can't reveal exactly who without their permission.”

4. These questions also raise an elementary point about interviewing: Don't ask a yes-or-no question unless you want a yes-or-no answer. “How,” “why,” “what kinds of,” and “in what way” usually are much better ways to begin a question in a semistructured interview.

5. This question also demonstrates that expanding the length of the question tends to expand the length of the response (Spradley 1979, 85). Be aware, however, that long questions can lead people off point or confuse them. If you want a specific answer, ask a specific question.

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Getting in the Door: Sampling and Completing Elite Interviews

Many factors are important when it comes to conducting high quality elite interviews. As my colleagues have noted in their presentations in San Francisco and in their essays in this issue, gaining valid and reliable data from elite interviews demands that researchers be well prepared, construct sound questions, establish a rapport with respondents, know how to write up their notes, and code responses accurately and consistently. Improving these skills will certainly reduce the amount of measurement error contained in interview data. Unfortunately, none of these skills matter if you do not get the interview. In other words, everything that my colleagues have talked about depends on getting in the door, getting access to your subject. A well-prepared personable researcher who would be able to control an open-ended and wide-ranging interview, while establishing a strong informal rapport with an elite respondent will never get to demonstrate his or her interviewing skills—or ability to decrease measurement error—if the meeting never takes place. Fur-

thermore and fundamentally, systematic error will also be introduced if researchers only get access to certain types of respondents.

Frankly, “getting the interview” is more art than science and, with few

exceptions, political scientists are not particularly well known for our skill at the art of “cold calling.” Even the most charming political scientist may find it difficult to pick up the phone and call the offices of powerful and busy government officials or lobbyists and navigate through busy receptionists and wary schedulers. Still, there are systematic commonsense things that you can do to make it more likely that you will “get the interview.” In addition, understanding how the goals of your project interact with the process of gaining access can help you to understand the types of error that are introduced into a study by what will be your unavoidable inability to interview some legislators, staffers, lobbyists, or judges. In this essay, I provide a few tips that should improve your chances of getting interviews and draw from work in survey research to outline a framework for understanding what sorts of error is introduced when researchers fail to get in the door. I illustrate some of these points with my own work as well as the work of colleagues.

There are three basic goals that researchers have when conducting elite interviews:

(1) gathering information from a sample of officials in order to make generalizable claims about all such officials’ characteristics or decisions; (2) discovering a particular piece of information or getting hold of a particular document; (3) informing or guiding work that uses other sources of data. Consistent with this last point, elite interviews can and should also be used to provide much needed context or color for our books and journal articles. In this essay I focus on research with the first sort of goal. Nevertheless, although the consequences of failing to get in the door may be less severe in the latter two cases, researchers want to make sure that they gather factual information and have their research informed from sources with different points of view. Even when one does not aim to generalize from interviews, researchers should obviously still strive to confirm the accuracy of documents and information. No matter the goal, good research practice demands that one use multiple sources.

At its core, “getting the interview” is a sampling issue. We typically think of the two research modes as distinct. Still, elite interviewers hoping to gather generalizable information about an entire population of decisions or decision makers can learn much from colleagues in survey research about sampling and about how nonresponse can lead to biased results. In the survey research world, we talk about random error and nonrandom error (systematic error.) Random error is sampling error and is the unavoidable noise that characterizes any research that tries to estimate a larger population’s characteristics from a smaller number of cases. Random error is a function of variance in the target population (if just about everyone in the target population has the same characteristics or attitudes, error is less) and the number of sampling units (the more sampling units, the less noisy the estimate.) Although matters can become a bit complicated with multistage designs, sampling theory is a well-developed area and calculating sampling error (the plus or minus figure that is dutifully reported in all publicly released polls) is a fairly straightforward exercise.

Many factors can introduce nonrandom error and it is difficult if not impossible to measure with precision. Measurement problems are obviously a major source of nonrandom error and many of the essays in this collection focus on reducing measurement error. Nonresponse can also introduce significant systematic error. Systematic error from nonresponse is a function of both the number of nonrespondents and

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the degree to which those who cannot be contacted or refuse to be interviewed differ in traits or attitudes from those who are successfully contacted and interviewed. Researchers often focus too much on the total number of nonrespondents and less on the degree to which nonrespondents are likely to differ from those sampling units who are successfully contacted and interviewed. Survey estimates of population parameters can be robust even with high levels of nonresponse if the traits and attitudes of nonrespondents differ little from the traits and attitudes of respondents. A major problem in survey research targeted at the mass public is that researchers often know little or nothing about the characteristics and attitudes of those whom they fail to contact or interview. As I will note later in this essay, elite interviewers actually have an advantage in this area because they typically know more about the characteristics and attitudes of their nonrespondents.

The first step is identifying the research question and your target population. In other words, you need to decide which doors you need to get in and why. "Who or what are you trying to generalize about?" The next step is to list a sampling frame. In a perfect world, the sampling frame would be identical to the target population. At the very least, it should be a representative sample of the target population. In some cases, figuring out the target population and coming up with a sampling frame is not a particularly difficult task. Although it was surely difficult to schedule interviews with Supreme Court justices, defining the target population was not the major hurdle for H.W. Perry (1994). Similarly, if one wanted to interview district court, circuit court, state, or local judges, or even lawyers involved in cases, widely available, easily accessible lists and databases would reveal the relevant parties. If the

The term "off the record," however, is often misunderstood and is often confused with "not for attribution" or "on background."

unit of analysis for the study is a member of Congress or state legislator, lists of elected officials and their contact information are readily available. The work of Richard Fenno (1978) and John Kingdon (1989) stands out as some of the best in elite interviewing and they are among our discipline's most skilled practitioners at the craft. Still, the one part of their work that was not difficult was devising a sampling frame of members of Congress. Although it may be difficult to actually schedule an interview with legislators, knowing who they are and devising a sampling frame is relatively easy. With other projects, however, it is not so easy to define a sampling frame.

In my work on the targeting decisions of lobbyists in grassroots campaigns, there was obviously no easily accessible list of all the tactical and strategic decisions made by lobbyists employing this particular tactic. Because lobbying disclosure laws do not require groups to report this tactic, there was no list available of groups that had even used it. I built a primary sampling frame by carefully following news coverage of lobbying activities in *the New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, and *the Wall Street Journal*, as well as inside the beltway publications such as *The National Journal*, *Congressional Quarterly*, and *Hotline*. I noted every instance in which an ideological group, union, corporation, or trade association was mentioned as using grassroots district-based tactics over a particular period of time. This list became the sampling frame from which I sampled 80 groups to interview (Goldstein 1999). Decisions on grassroots campaigns and lobbying choices—not the groups themselves—were the unit of analysis that interested me. Accordingly, in my interviews, I asked my respondents to name recent legislation in which they employed grassroots or constituency-based lobbying tactics. I then asked them specific questions about the tactical and strategic choices they made in each of these lobbying campaigns.¹

In their important and continuing project on lobbying, Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, and Leech want to analyze public policy issues as their basic unit of analysis. There are, of course, a limitless number of issues that are in play and no simple easy-to-access list of policy issues. Accordingly, Baumgartner and his collaborators also pursued a multistage sampling design. They first turned to a sample of organizational representatives to identify a set of issues. The sampling frame for these representatives was a database of lobbying reports that were filed in the Senate. Lobbying firms and other organizations were required to list the broad policy issues on which they were active. In the sampling frame, Baumgartner et al., listed an organization each time they reported working on a distinct issue. They then took a sample of organizations from this sampling frame and attempted to contact the staffer in charge of Congressional Relations or Government Affairs. This staffer was then asked to identify the most recent issue that he or she worked on. It was in this way that the scholars in charge of the Advocacy and Public Policy making project chose their sample of issues. Although they gathered and are gathering more extensive information on each of these issues, the interview also provided

crucial information on the major players and provided clues on where the researchers should look for additional intelligence. (See <<http://lobby.la.psu.edu/>> for results of the project, an extensive description of the methodology, and a list of working papers.)

In the two preceding examples, once the sampling frame was built, sampling was a relatively straightforward exercise. Of course, picking a good sample is of little use if you cannot get your sample units to speak with you. So, how do you get in the door? In survey research, there have been scores of studies systematically experimenting with different ways of increasing response rates. I am aware of no such systematic work with elite interviewing. I base the following suggestions on my own experiences as well as conversations with colleagues who have also done elite interviewing. I also include impressions from friends who have been the targets of scholarly interviewers. This topic, though, clearly deserves more systematic research.

The bottom line is that there are no silver bullet solutions, and scheduling and completing elite interviews takes a fair bit of luck. Still, there are things you can do to create your own luck. First, it is very important to send advance letters on some sort of official (usually department) stationary. The letter should clearly spell out the basic outlines of your research and be clear about the amount of time you are requesting. Be sure to provide phone, fax, and email contacts. Graduate students should put also put their advisor's name and contact information on the letter.

The letter should also be clear about what the ground rules for the interview will be. How will the information gathered in the interview be used? How will it be reported and where will it appear? Is the interview completely on the record? Will particular responses or reported behaviors be attributed to particular respondents or organizations. Will information gained in the interview only be released in aggregate or summary form? What steps will be taken to keep sensitive information confidential? Outlining and understanding the ground rules is not only crucial for getting the interview in the short run, but crucial for continuing our discipline's ability to conduct such research in the future.

Most elite respondents will be familiar with the common journalistic rules for use of information gathered in interviews settings. Obviously then, researchers need to be familiar with these rules as well. Most everyone thinks they understand the terms "on the record" or "off the record." The meaning of "on the record" is clear cut. The information can be used in any form the researcher desires and the comments or actions of the individual or group can be attributed by name. The term "off the record," however, is often misunderstood and is often confused with "not for attribution" or "on background." Technically, "off the record" means that you don't know what you were just told. You cannot use the information in any way, shape, or form. You cannot use it in an unattributed quote or even to inform your work. The term "on background" means that you can use the information to inform your own work and you can use the information as a clue to search for corroborating information or for organizations or individuals who will go on the record. "Not for attribution" means that the comments or information can be used and quoted as long as the organization or individual giving out the information is not directly identified as the source of the information or quote. My experience is that interviewees will often give all four sorts of comments in a single interview.

For inside-the-beltway interviewing, I firmly believe in "being there." Now, obviously one has to be in Washington to conduct the actual interview, but I think a sustained time period "in country" is key to making connections and being able to set up interviews. Elites will often have last minute breaks in their schedules and being on the ground and ready to conduct the interview at a moment's notice is a huge advantage. Furthermore,

Washington, DC is really a small town when it comes to politics and the more time one spends there, the more likely it is that one will make connections that can help one schedule an interview. Using connections, friends, relatives, friends of friends, friends of friends of friends, has its advantages and disadvantages. Join a softball team (really, I'm serious!)

Researchers need to be careful about straying from their target sample or using connections to get only one set of interviews. Still, with all the difficulties involved in scheduling elite interviews, I think it would be foolish not to take advantage of any points of access that one has.

If one has done a good job at

devising a sampling frame and drawing a sample, one will be able to determine if this reliance on connections is leading to an unbalanced set of interviews.

Whether you are on the ground in Washington for only a couple days or for a more extended block of time, it is crucial to take advantage of some easy and relatively inexpensive logistical support. A cell phone with voice mail is a must (remember to turn it off during the actual interview) for scheduling appointments and making sure that you are always reachable when in Washington. Leave a simple professional message. If you are using your home phone as a contact number before your trip, make sure the message is simple and professional. If you are staying with friends and leave their number, make sure that their message is relatively tame. (I learned this lesson the hard way.)

Also, make sure that you are able to check your email via a web-based program. With most university systems, it is possible to set up an account to check your email via the web. If your institution does not have such a system in place, use of one of the myriad number of free web-based email services that are available (Excite, Hotmail, or Yahoo for example.)

Good preparation does not only lead to good data for a particular interview, but credibility for future interviews for your project and colleagues' projects. In many instances, I have had my interviewees offer to help set up or gain access to other people and organizations on my target list.² If you have established a good rapport with a particular respondent, do not be shy about enlisting their help in getting in the door with others on your sample list. This is often called snowball sampling.

When all is said and done, no matter how good a job you do and how lucky you are, you will not be able to interview a portion of your target sample. What then are the consequences of nonresponse in elite interviewing? The answer to this question largely depends on the goals of your interviewing. If your goal is to gather particular factual information or to inform

Washington, DC is really a small town when it comes to politics and the more time one spends there, the more likely it is that one will make connections that can help one schedule an interview.

your work and write with a little real color, then confirming that you heard from different sides and different types of organizations can confirm that you do not have unbalanced or biased information.

Even when the goal is more broad generalization, this is actually an area where small N elite interviewers have an advantage over researchers doing surveys of the mass public. As noted above, nonresponse bias is a function of both the proportion of potential respondents or sampling units questioned and the degree to which those who are not contacted or refuse to be interviewed differ from those who were successfully contacted and interviewed. Unlike those doing survey research of the mass public, researchers using elite interviews actually know quite a bit about those who remain uninterviewed.

For example, if members of Congress are the target sample, an interviewer knows a lot about even those members who cannot be contacted or refuse to be interviewed. The researcher would know the member of Congress' party, state,

incumbency status, type of district (rural, urban, suburban), and past voting behavior. Such information can be crucial in determining whether there is a bias in the data. Similarly, one knows much about the past decisions of federal judges and the president who nominated them. If organizations are the target sample, a researcher can discover much about the ideological bent, areas of interest, membership, budget, size, and previous jobs of staff for just about any corporation, union, ideological group, or law firm in Washington. Although one still will not have information on unobserved or unanswered questions from the interview protocol, such observed variables can provide a clue as to whether bias exists.

Following the suggestions I outline in this essay will not guarantee that you get in the door. Given my experience and the experience of others, however, they should help. Understanding how sampling and nonresponse fit into the overall elite interviewing research mode should also help researchers evaluate the useability and generalizeability of the information they gather.

Notes

1. Admittedly, even without bias from nonresponse (41 organizations agreed to speak with me about 94 different lobbying campaigns), the way I built the sampling frame created a bias in favor of large and resource rich groups and high profile issues.

2. As a small editorial aside, I think, our discipline's access to elites in Washington, especially members of Congress has been hurt by massive amounts of poorly trained students and scholars being unprepared for interviews.

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Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews

Introduction

In real estate the maxim for picking a piece of property is “location, location, location.” In elite interviewing, as in social science generally, the maxim for the best way to design and conduct a study is “purpose, purpose, purpose.” It’s elementary that the primary question one must ask before designing a study is, “What do I want to learn?” Appropriate methods flow from the answer. Interviewing is often important if one needs to know what a set of people think, or how they interpret an event or series of events, or what they have done or are planning to do. (Interviews are not always necessary. Written records, for example, may be more than adequate.) In a case study, respondents are selected on the basis of what they might know to help the investigator fill in pieces of a puzzle or confirm the proper alignment of pieces already in place. If one aims to make inferences about a larger population, then one must draw a systematic sample. For some kinds of information, highly structured interviews using mainly or exclusively close-

ended questions may be an excellent way to proceed. If one needs to probe for information and to give respondents maximum flexibility in structuring their responses, then open-ended questions are the way to go.

In short, elite studies will vary a lot depending on what one wants to learn, and elite interviewing must be tailored to the purposes of the study. Our focus here will be on the types of studies we have conducted as reported in *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies* (coauthored with Robert D. Putnam, 1981) and *In the Web of Politics* (2000)—studies of elite attitudes, values, and beliefs—but from time to time we will make reference to other types of studies as well.

Designing the Study

Our goals were to examine the political thinking of American administrators and (in the first round of our study) members of Congress. We were interested in their political attitudes, values, and beliefs, not in particular events or individuals. A major aim was to examine important parameters that guide elite’s definitions of problems and these responses to them. We wanted to generalize about these

phenomena in the population of top administrators, both political appointees and high-level civil servants, and among high-level elected officials as well. This meant that we had to draw representative samples of members of these elites and use an interviewing technique that would enable us to gauge subtle aspects of elite views of the world.

Drawing a sample of members of Congress was quite straightforward. Lists of members are easily accessible and drawing them at random (stratified into two broad age groups in our case) was a simple process. Sampling high-level administrators was quite another matter. We wanted to study officials who worked for federal agencies primarily concerned with domestic policy (a requirement for a comparative aspect of the study), who were at a level where they might have a say in policymaking, and who, for convenience’s sake, worked in the general vicinity of Washington, DC. Further, we wanted to make sure that we covered both political appointees and career civil servants. To accomplish these goals, we had to compile lists of top administrators in each agency, determine who held top career positions in each hierarchy (our criterion was that civil servants had to hold the top career positions in their administrative units and report to a political appointee), and then sample in such a way that we had representative groups of career and noncareer executives. We eventually drew people randomly from cabinet departments, regulatory agencies, executive agencies, and independent agencies in proportion to the number of executives in each sampling classification within each agency.

The good news is that bureaucratic elites are little studied by political scientists, so response rates were very high (over 90% for career civil servants). They were lower for members of Congress—in the high seventies in the first round of our study (1970–71) and lower when we tried a second round in 1986–87, so low in fact that we did not feel it appropriate to use the second-round congressional interviews for anything but illustration. This points to an important problem facing those wishing to interview elites. One must get access, and it can be quite difficult to secure interviews with busy officials who are widely sought after. It helps to have the imprimatur of a major and respected research house like the Brookings Institution, and it is important to be politely persistent. One should not be too put off when told that your potential respondent is too busy to see you when you call (after writing a letter) and call back in an attempt to arrange the interview. One

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should write a letter laying out the general purpose of the study and be ready to repeat your “spiel” over the phone to the appointments secretary. Mention prestigious organizational sponsors if you have them and mention some past experience in studying the area of interest if you have it. It sometimes helps to mention what you’ve written, but do not expect respondents or those who schedule them to be impressed that you have published in *APSR* or its equivalents. They are more attuned to other types of journals (like *National Journal*) or to the press.

Getting in the door is important, but what you do next is even more important. We’ll touch only briefly on the suggestion that you refrain from spilling the coffee that may be offered to you or that you look reasonably presentable to the rather conservative dressers in Washington, and get to the heart of the matter—what you ask the respondents and how you ask them. What you ask is, of course, a function of what you want to know, but so also is how you ask the questions. As noted, we wanted to examine the political thinking of American political and bureaucratic elites. We wanted to know about their political attitudes, values, and beliefs. We were not trying to predict discrete behavior, for example, their choices of particular policies; rather, we were interested in examining the parameters that guided their definition of problems and their responses to them.

To accomplish our goals, we decided on an approach using mainly open-ended questions that allowed the respondents to engage in wide-ranging discussions. One of our main aims was to get at the contextual nuance of response and to probe beneath the surface of a response to the reasoning and premises that underlie it. Consequently, we decided on a semi-structured interview in which the open-ended questions we mainly relied on gave the respondents latitude to articulate fully their responses. This requires great attention from the interviewer since such an interview has a more conversational quality to it than the typical highly structured interview and questions may, therefore, be more easily broached in a manner that does not follow the exact order of the original interview instrument. There is an obvious cost here in terms of textbook advice on interviews—respondents may not necessarily have been asked questions in the same order—but in our experience the advantages of conversational flow and depth of response outweigh the disadvantages of inconsistent ordering. That suggests a key principle of real-world research—sometimes one does something that is not the ideal (in this case, vary the order of questions) because the less than ideal approach is better than the alternative (in this case, a clumsy flow of conversation that will inhibit in-depth ruminations on the issues of interest).

There are three major considerations in deciding on a mainly open-ended approach rather than one using more close-ended questions. One is the degree of prior research on the subject of concern. The more that is known, the easier it is to define the questions and the response options with clarity, that is, to use close-ended questions. Our study explored a series of rather abstract and complex issues in a relatively uncharted area at the time, the styles of thinking as well as the actual views of American political and bureaucratic elites. Emphasizing close-ended questions and tight structuring would not have served our major purpose, the exploration of elite value

patterns and perceptions, but we did recognize the cost—the kinds of data we collected made it more difficult to produce an analytically elegant end product, at least if one uses statistical elegance as the major criterion in evaluating analytical elegance.

A second consideration leading us to use an open-ended approach was our desire to maximize response validity.

Open-ended questions provide a greater opportunity for respondents to organize their answers within their own frameworks. This increases the validity of the responses and is best for the kind of exploratory and in-depth work we were doing, but it makes coding and then analysis more difficult.

The third major consideration is the receptivity of respondents. Elites especially—but other highly educated people as well—do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions. They prefer to articulate their views, explaining why they think what they think. Close-ended questions (and we did use some) often elicited questions in return about why we used the response categories we used or why we framed the questions the way we did. Parenthetically, in later rounds of our longitudinal study, we used close-ended versions of some of our earlier open-ended questions, but by then we had the benefit of great experience in ascertaining both the mind-sets of our respondents and the range of responses they would find tolerable.

We should stress again that there are costs in using open-ended questions. First, there are substantial costs in time spent in doing the interviews themselves, in transcribing them or otherwise preparing them for coding, and in the coding process itself (see below). Second, there are the related costs in money. The process is slow and the costs mount in direct relation to the time spent. Third, as mentioned above, there are costs in analytic rigor, certainly in terms of limits on what one can do in data analysis. But, going back to the maxim on purpose, answering the research questions one starts with in the most reliable way is more valuable than an analytically rigorous treatment of less reliable and informative data.

Conducting the Interviews

We noted earlier some of the practical considerations in getting an interview. They include such things as writing a brief letter to respondents on the most prestigious, non-inflammatory letterhead you have access to, stating your purpose in a few well-chosen sentences (no need to be too precise or certainly overly detailed); having a good “spiel” prepared for the appointments secretary and later for the respondent prior to the interview; and fending off questions about your hypotheses until after the interview is over. That prevents contamination of the respondents and also puts this part of the conversation on the respondent’s “time” and not the time reserved for the interview. Obvious advice includes the need to be persistent and to insist firmly, but politely (and with a convincing explanation) that no one but the person sampled, i.e., the principal, will do for the interview.

It can be a major undertaking in time and effort to secure the interview, but success there is only the beginning. We did most of our interviews in the respondents’ offices, but you should be prepared to do them where you can. Our most harrowing experience was interviewing an administrator as he drove to an appointment. He was very animated (and in a hurry) and nearly got himself and us killed as he weaved

Elites especially—but other highly educated people as well—do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions.

through Washington traffic late in the afternoon while presenting his views in a passionate and often amusing style.

We tape-recorded the interviews in order to facilitate use of a conversational style and to minimize information loss. Few respondents refused to be taped, and almost all quickly lost any inhibitions the recorder might have induced. Starting with innocuous questions about the person's background facilitates this since people find talking about themselves about as fascinating as any subject they know. Our judgment (and the judgment of our coders) is that the interviewees were frank in their answers, especially because our questions focused on general views and not information that might jeopardize the respondents' personal interests.

Coding Open-Ended Interviews

Coding procedures assume paramount importance when, as in our studies, one employs open-ended interviewing techniques to elicit subtle and rich responses and then uses this information in quantitative analyses. Particularly in elite interviewing, where responses to questions are almost always coherent and well formulated, respondents can productively and effectively answer questions in their own ways and the analyst can then build a coding system that maintains the richness of individual responses but is sufficiently structured that the interviews can be analyzed using quantitative techniques. The wealth of material contained in the responses, in fact, allows a varied set of codes, some recording manifest responses to the questions asked and some probing deeper into the meaning of the responses.

We developed three basic types of codes to achieve the purposes of our study (Aberbach, Chesney, and Rockman 1975, 14–16). *Manifest coding items* involved direct responses to particular questions (for example, whether differences between the parties are great, moderate or few). *Latent coding items* were those where the characteristics of the response coded were not explicitly called for by the questions themselves (for example, we coded variables dealing with positive and negative references towards the role of conflict from questions about the nature of conflict in American society and the degree to which it can be reconciled). *Global coding items* were those where coders formed judgments from the interview transcripts about general traits and styles (for example, coding whether respondents employed a coherent political framework in responding to political questions).

In the first round of the study we had two sets of coders independently code each interview and calculated inter-coder reliability coefficients for the various variables. Not surprisingly, on average, the manifest items were the most reliable, followed by the latent items, and then the global items. We increased reliability further (we hope) by having a study director reconcile any disagreements among the coders in conferences with the coders. Our experience with coding taught us that simultaneous coding by the two coders with immediate reconciliation yielded much more reliable coding than serial coding where large numbers of interviews were coded prior to reconciliation meetings.

Some Problems and Advantages in Doing a Longitudinal Elite Study

We encountered a series of problems in doing a longitudinal study, most of which impacted both the interviews themselves and the coding.

First, elite systems do not necessarily remain stable over time. This is particularly likely in the bureaucracy, which is

actually a much more dynamic institution than stereotypes might lead one to believe. Aside from reorganizations and the creation of new administrative units, which were easily dealt with when we constructed each successive sampling frame, the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 created the Senior Executive Service (SES) to replace the system of Supergrades that existed prior to the act. SES created a rank-in-the-person system in place of a rank-in-the-position system and made us reexamine our earlier criterion of interviewing the highest civil servant in each hierarchy. We eventually decided to continue sampling the highest civil servant in each hierarchy for purposes of continuity, but added a sample of other SES executives. In the end, this proved substantively beneficial, as readers of *In the Web of Politics* will see.

Second, by round two of the study we encountered a few executives who knew something of our earlier work published on the basis of round one. We interviewed these people, but there may be some unknown effects of their familiarity with the project.

Third, we had to decide whether to repeat questions in later rounds even though we knew we could ask better ones. Following the advice of Philip Converse, we tended to repeat items, choosing to keep whatever measurement error the original item introduced over the great problem of comparing results from different questions.

Fourth, as already mentioned, the costs of open-ended longitudinal studies are considerable. We dealt with this by shortening the instrument in subsequent rounds—retaining the questions we knew to be key as our understanding deepened over time. In addition, we supplemented with more close-ended questions in later years, and now have a basis for comparing open and closed questions in certain areas.

There were also advantages beyond those we have already mentioned to doing a longitudinal, heavily open-ended study.

First, once we actually developed our codes in the first round of the study, the costs of coding dropped substantially in subsequent rounds. We did some refining of the codes, of course, but the costs here were minor compared to our original investment.

Second, as noted above, in each succeeding round, as we developed a fuller understanding of what and how elites think, we were able to use more close-ended questions to supplement the open questions.

Third, our interviewing technique means that we have a raw product that should be of great use to historians. We interviewed during a turbulent period in American administrative history (particularly during the Nixon and Reagan administrations) and we have transcripts of in-depth conversations with people who are historically important. Because of confidentiality promises, these interviews will not be available until respondents are deceased, but eventually the interviews should prove valuable in understanding the era when our respondents wielded power.

Conclusions

To reiterate the key point, studies must be designed with purpose as the key criterion. Elite studies are no exception. We conducted our longitudinal study the way we did because of our desire to probe deeply elite attitudes, values, and beliefs, and also because of the state of prior research in the area, our desire to maximize response validity, and our sense that elites would be most receptive to the type of interview we conducted and would be well positioned to handle the types of questions we asked. While we would use more close-ended questions in future research because of what we learned

(and we used more as time went on), the basic approach of a semi-structured and largely open-ended interview still seems best to us. We learned a great deal from our subjects—and about our subject—through these conversations. Using a systematic coding procedure not only allowed us to employ quantitative techniques in our later analyses, but also kept us from allowing the colorful interviewee or especially enjoyable story to dominate our view of the overall phenomena we were studying. At the same time, the interviewing technique helped

us to use clues from the most insightful respondents to suggest hypotheses for our analysis.

We close with a general observation about elite interviewing studies; they take a lot of persistence, time, and whatever passes these days for shoe leather, but they are immense fun. You'll meet some of the most interesting people in the country and learn a huge amount about political life and the workings of political institutions. If you like both politics and political science, it's one terrific way to spend your time.

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Ethical Dilemmas in Personal Interviewing

There are many issues of ethics and openness in elite interviewing that I have learned how to deal with through the years.¹ My work has focused on people who cause trouble: protesters, litigants, defendants, sidewalk counselors, rescuers, and abortion providers, to name a few. Of course, in dealing with people you are studying you must be honest and ethical. It is important to remember that their activism comes from something they deeply feel. Their activism is because of their beliefs, opinions, experiences, and sense of community. They do not exist as activists so that you can add more lines to your vita or finish your dissertation. You must leave them in the same position in which you found them. You must do no harm to them.

Openness: Recently, my work has focused on reproductive politics (see *The Political Geographies of Pregnancy*, University of Illinois Press, 2002). I have interviewed dozens of pro-choice and pro-life (I use the terms they describe themselves with) activists, lobbyists, interest group leaders, litigants, and lawyers. This

work is often tricky ethically. For example, I am genuinely fascinated with pro-life activism. However, I have found it more difficult to book interviews with pro-life people than with

pro-choice people. This is probably due to my being an academic or my affiliation with a women's studies program. Pro-life activists might assume that I am very pro-choice and that my purpose in wanting to interview them or observe their meetings or demonstrations might be to belittle them. That is not my intention, but pro-life people are nervous for many reasons about letting someone like me learn more about their organization, tactics, resources, and plans.² When I try to schedule a meeting with a pro-life person, often they ask me, "What are you?" (i.e., are you pro-life or not?). Rather than tell them my position on abortion, I tell them that I am an academic researcher and that I study people who do more than simply vote about an issue. I tell them the truth, that I am fascinated in their activism and want to learn more about it. Usually (not always) a response along those lines satisfies them. You have to hedge sometimes in order to get an interview. However, you cannot mislead people.

Conflicts: Researchers sometimes find themselves with conflicts of interest concerning their access to interviewees and what they are going to write about. In some of the groups I have studied I have learned about

personal animosities between group members or untoward behavior by activists. If I write about this (and the activists find out about it), it can hamper my access to these activists in the future for follow-up interviews. Activists also travel in small worlds and can let each other know about less-than-satisfactory experiences with a researcher. So, my future interviews could be jeopardized. In group politics, conflicts are sometimes important since they add to the fragile nature of a group's mobilization. Thus I mask the conflict and discuss it in another way. I do not name people who hate each other, or who feel that someone is hogging the spotlight or using the group for his or her political career or personal agenda. But, I do write about factions within the group if it is an important part of the group dynamics. If it is just gossip, I don't use it. It is up to the judgment of the interviewer to know when these conflicts are a serious part of the story and when they are just part of the complexities of people's personalities and relationships and not important politically.

Context: Depending on who you are interviewing and what the context is, you might have to anticipate how to handle people telling you things that are very painful to them still. It helps you make these judgments if you are very well informed about the context in which your interviewees work. For instance, for my first book (*From Outrage to Action: The Politics of Grass-Roots Dissent*, University of Illinois Press, 1993) I interviewed people who organized into ad hoc, issue-specific groups in order to recall judges who they felt had made insensitive comments during the sentencing phases of two rape trials. One group successfully recalled Judge Archie Simonson in Madison, Wisconsin, who remarked that given the way women dress, rape is a normal reaction. Another group, a few years later in a rural area of Wisconsin, tried to recall another judge who said that a four-year-old sexual assault victim was a "particularly promiscuous young lady." Their recall was not successful. I knew before I did any interviews for these two cases that rape is an underreported crime, often kept secret by victims. As a scholar of gender I also knew how widespread rape is in any population. I surmised, then, that some of the people remembering their efforts to recall these judges had sexual-assault experiences in their lives. However, it was not my purpose to dredge up painful memories from someone's past. Since I am not a counselor or psychologist, I am not trained in how to help people who might be recalling something very traumatic in their lives. Yet, given the statistics on rape in this

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country, the issue comes up in my interviews. In a couple of the interviews when I asked why it was that this issue (a judge saying these insensitive things in a rape case) caused them to become politically active, the respondents would become upset. Some cried. Some revealed to me that they had been raped decades ago when nobody talked about it, no crisis hotlines or support groups existed, and they had simply kept the event to themselves. When the judge, however, said these things about another rape victim, they were in a place in their lives where they felt they had to do something about it. Their activism is an important part of my book. During the interviews, however, I was faced with upset people. What I did was tell them that I understood and that I was glad they were telling me their story. I also reassured them that their identities would not be revealed in anything I published. In fact, that pain even decades later is a research finding. In my case, it displays how important rape reform efforts are within the large and diffuse women's movement and how controversial sexual trauma is for people their whole lives long.

Additional tips: From my fieldwork I can offer some tips for others doing person to person interviewing. I often end my interviews with a question like this, "Is there anything you would like to tell me about which I haven't thought to ask you?" It is amazing what I learn from this question. Interviewers cannot anticipate everything and you need to give the respondents openings to tell you about an event, connection, or insight that you didn't think to ask them about. Don't let your interview schedule tie you down. I do most of my interviews in respondent's offices, homes, churches, or community centers. In one person's home I noticed two framed portraits on the dining room wall: Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy. I decided not to ask the interviewee what political party they affiliated with.

During my interviews, I take notes about the environment. This helps me to remember the context of the interview and to understand my interviewees. Since most of the activists I study are women, they are often balancing many other obligations as I talk to them. My field notes include, "Children kept running in and out of the room," and, "She paused while she took a phone call from her mother." One judicial recall activist took a call during an interview, and I could tell that she was speaking to a woman who could not afford an abortion; the activist was part of an unofficial local network that could piece together the funds for an abortion. Though I did not intend for this interview to cover abortion, I now knew more about the depth of this activist's commitment.

It is amazing what people will xerox and give to you once you are in their office. I have been given copies of confidential internal memos, drafts of amicus briefs, correspondence between brief signers that I would never be given if I met the person outside of their office. Even if they promise to send it to me when they return to their office, usually they never do. Either they are too busy or when they are back in their offices they think twice about handing the materials over to a researcher and then "forget" to do it. I have also witnessed interesting interactions while waiting in interest group lobbies. I once saw a UPS man pick up boxes of newsletters from a group that claimed to be separate from the interest

group whose lobby I was sitting in. I figured out that one group was really just an affiliate of the other, with a separate post office box, but running its operations out of the larger groups offices.

Another issue is whether to tape record. I have quit using tape recorders; it is up to you whether you use one. I find them intrusive for me and for the interviewee. I write notes during the interviews and flesh them out later. If it is something important that I might like to quote directly in my work, I read it back to the interviewee to make sure that I wrote it down correctly.

Ethically, it is important that we researchers send copies of what we write and publish to the people we have interviewed. It is more than a courtesy. It is an acknowledgment on the part of the researcher that without the interviewee, our work would be diminished. Many times people have called or written to thank me for sending them a copy of the chapter in which their interview is included in my works. They feel happy and vindicated that their stories will not fade away and that their activism and efforts were noticed and appreciated.

Finally, be sure to ask them if you can come back later, or call on the phone, if you have further questions or issues. Sometimes I must recontact someone I interviewed early in my rounds of fieldwork because later interviews brought up topics and issues of which I was not fully aware when I began the fieldwork.

Serendipity. Although it is probably a sin in political science to admit it, luck plays a big role in fieldwork and interviews. If you are interviewing someone and they ask you if you would like to accompany them to their next meeting, or ride in the taxi with them while they go downtown and file legal papers at the courthouse, make sure that you do so. People will be very candid when outside of their usual home or work environment. I have been able to secure interviews with additional people because they saw me while I was with an activist they know and respect.

Inspiration. Finally, I must report that this work has been fun for me. The people I have interviewed over the years are inspiring. Their activism and enthusiasm invigorates me regardless of whether I agree with their positions. They have taught me a lot about the nitty gritty of politics. They have been active on issues even when they knew it could hurt them in their small towns, in their business networks, in their neighborhoods and communities. They have picketed stores in Wisconsin snow storms. They have badgered pompous politicians to keep their promises and be more connected to people like them. They have directly challenged racism, sexism, and class bias. It has been an honor to talk to many of these people.

I hope that you enjoy your fieldwork as much as I have enjoyed mine (despite being stood up for interviews, rescheduled, ignored, and put off). In a discipline that sometimes doesn't value this kind of work, it is interesting nonetheless to notice how many political science classics are built on elite interviewing and fieldwork. You will most likely find that your interviews give you far more than you ever expected they would. If I can be of help to anyone doing this kind of work, just let me know.

Notes

1. Thanks to Beth L. Leech, Rutgers University, for including me in this workshop. I learned a lot listening to my fellow interviewers and gleaned wisdom from their experiences. Thanks also to Jeffrey Berry and the Political Organizations and Parties Section of APSA for putting the workshop on.

2. It is important to remember, also, that some pro-life organizations are nervous because of lawsuits against them and because some adherents have practiced violence. They are very reluctant to let a researcher into their community given the legal issues involved in some of their activities.

Validity and Reliability Issues In Elite Interviewing

Many of the early important empirical works on policymaking in Washington were built around elite interviews. We first learned about how Congress really operates from pioneers in elite interviewing such as Lewis Anthony Dexter (1969), Ralph Huitt (1969), and Donald Matthews (1960). No less revered is the scholarship of Richard Fenno (1978), John Kingdon (1995), and Robert Salisbury (1993), who have produced enduring and respected work from elite interviewing. Yet there are few other contemporary political scientists working on public policymaking who have built reputations for their methodological skills as interviewers. Elite interviewing is still widely used as the basis for collecting data, but most interviewing depends on a few trusted templates. Most commonly, elites in a particular institution are chosen at random and subjected to the same interview protocol composed of structured or semistructured questions. For example, state legislators are asked a series of questions about their attitudes on particular issues or institutional

practices. Or policymakers involved in certain issues are selected and then quizzed about those matters. Some confident and skilled interviewers, like William Browne

(1988) and Richard Hall (1996), combine different interview approaches in their work but they are the exceptions and not the rule.

When scholars use a sample of interviews, it is the statistical manipulation of the coded interview transcripts that is considered to be the rigorous part of the research; the fieldwork itself is largely viewed as a means to that end. Unless researchers pay close attention to the field methodology, though, the “error term” in elite interviews can easily cross an unacceptable threshold. What if the questions are poorly constructed, or the subjects are unrevealing, or, worse, misleading in their answers? More to the point, how does the interviewer know if any of these problems exist?

Despite the common use of elite interviews to collect primary data, it is a skill that is rarely taught in graduate school. In contrast, methods courses pay enormous attention to the most minute of statistical issues, and newly minted Ph.D.’s enter the profession with an impressive proficiency in quantitative methods. What little training graduate programs offer related to interviewing is usually restricted to matters of question wording and bias (and often this comes about in training in

survey research, which relies on different kinds of questions). This lack of attention mirrors readers’ expectations of published work using elite interviews. There simply isn’t a demand for political scientists to document the resolution of methodological issues associated with this kind of interviewing. It is usually sufficient merely to describe the sampling framework (if there is one) and to reprint the interview protocol in an appendix.

The methodological issues in elite interviewing are serious and involve both issues of validity—how appropriate is the measuring instrument to the task at hand?—and reliability—how consistent are the results of repeated tests with the chosen measuring instrument? I’ve confronted these issues for years as almost all my research projects have used elite interviews. I was lucky enough to be trained by a master—Robert Peabody of the Johns Hopkins University. As a graduate student I followed him around the Congress and sat in on his interviews with legislators, staffers, and lobbyists. He taught me some of the basic skills of an interviewer. None was more important than this: the best interviewer is not one who writes the best questions. Rather, excellent interviewers are excellent conversationalists. They make interviews seem like a good talk among old friends. He didn’t carry a printed set of questions in front of him to consult as the interview progressed; yet he always knew where he was going and never lost control of the discussion. He gave his subjects a lot of license to roam but would occasionally corral them back if the discussion went too far astray.

His method illustrates the paradox of elite interviewing: the valuable flexibility of open-ended questioning exacerbates the validity and reliability issues that are part and parcel of this approach. As I’ve followed my initial training and developed my own style of elite interviewing, I’ve thought about the methodological problems of open-ended questioning and tried to develop ways to minimize the risks associated with this approach. Here I focus on three methodological issues common to this kind of elite interviewing. In each case, I’ll offer some suggestions to improve the chances that the data acquired won’t be badly compromised by validity or reliability concerns. These suggestions are far from foolproof. Open-ended questioning—the riskiest but potentially most valuable type of elite interviewing—requires interviewers to know when to probe and how to formulate follow-up questions on the fly. It’s a high-wire act.

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Passion, not Dispassion. During a recent trip to Washington I interviewed a trade association lobbyist about ergonomics standards being considered by OSHA. He responded to my first question with a half-hour diatribe against OSHA. He repeatedly denounced its behavior, accused bureaucrats there of unethical actions, and never acknowledged that there might be something to the workers' health and safety problems that the proposed regulations addressed. At one point he mocked OSHA, saying a bureaucrat there boasts that OSHA has "a Zen to regulate." At another point he said OSHA "intimidated witnesses" at a hearing—a very serious charge. At the same time, he gave a wonderfully detailed history of the development of these regulations, which is why I let him carry on rather than try to move him on to other questions I had. The trade group lobbyist was bright, articulate, and persuasive and I walked away feeling I had learned a lot on this issue.

But what I had learned was certainly not the "truth" about the OSHA regulations. Since a main focus of the research was to study how lobbies use arguments to push their causes, I had an interest in having him state his organization's point of view as baldly as he wanted to. Still, if the goal of interviews is to find out the truth about what happened—how was the bill passed, how was the deal cut, how was the judge chosen?—there is a very high risk of finding one interviewee more persuasive than the others and having that one interview strongly shape our understanding of the issue. It's easy to make oneself believe that one account is more accurate than another because a subject was more knowledgeable or more detailed in her answers, rather than admitting that we liked that person better or her story was closer to our own take on the situation. In the case of the lobbyist on the ergonomics regulations, it was easy to recognize the lack of objectivity. It was more difficult for me to judge the OSHA bureaucrat that I later interviewed. He was much more measured, *seemingly* more objective. But then again his political point of view was much closer to my own.

Interviewers must always keep in mind that it is not the obligation of a subject to be objective and to tell us the truth. We have a purpose in requesting an interview but ignore the reality that subjects have a purpose in the interview too: they have something they want to say. Consciously or unconsciously, they've thought about what they want to say in the period between the request and the actual interview. They're talking about their work and, as such, justifying what they do. That's no small matter.

Sometimes all we want to know is the subject's point of view and this problem doesn't loom as large. Or we're studying just a single case so no one interview is likely to carry too much weight. Other times, though, we're trying to come as close to the truth as is humanely possible for a number of different cases. How do we try to minimize this problem then? Here are three suggestions:

- Most obviously, use multiple sources. Although this goes a long way in guarding against self-serving or "party-line" accounts, it's much easier to preach than to practice. Elite interviewing is highly time consuming. It takes me two hours of transcription for every half hour of interview. If you've traveled somewhere to conduct the interviewees, there's limited time (money) to conduct them. If one is studying multiple

cases, it's breadth versus depth, a familiar problem to field researchers (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). It's very tempting for interviewers to go for breadth over depth—doing more cases rather than doing more detailed cases—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.

- Ask the subject to critique his own case. Don't show skepticism and don't challenge the subject. With subtlety, move the subject away from his case to the politics of the situation. For example, "Well, you have me convinced. Why aren't the Democrats buying this?" Or a bit more pointedly, "I'm a little confused on something. I read in the *Washington Post* the other day that labor was making progress with the committee chair. What's the part of their argument that resonates with legislators?" This latter approach, using a third party [the *Post*], is a way of taking the subject away from his own perspective without demonstrating one's own personal skepticism.
- Use the interview for what it is. If you've got an ideologue or someone who isn't going to be terribly helpful in a particular area because of their bias, think about where you can spend the time most profitably. Move more quickly to questions that might have a higher payoff.

Interviewers must always keep in mind that it is not the obligation of a subject to be objective and to tell us the truth.

Excessive personal bias isn't a chronic problem. Some subjects are more than happy to tell you about the weaknesses of their cases or speak admiringly of the other side while detailing their successes. Even so, there's a danger here too. In interviewing a lobbyist for an airline trade group, I was struck by his tendency to lower his voice—so no one in the hallway could hear—when he criticized his own organization for its blindness about the industry's shoddy service. It wasn't until later when I was typing up the interview that I thought about how seductive this was. It's a little too easy to

believe you're getting the truth when it's coming from a source who is going out of his way not to give you the party line.

Exaggerated Roles. Before I spoke with this airline lobbyist I interviewed another lobbyist for a trade group in a different part of the industry. He quickly came alive and gave me a very animated, highly detailed account of the group's efforts on an important bill dealing with the aviation trust fund. (It became known as "Air-21" during its movement through the Congress.) In his rendition, his group was at the center of the lobbying effort. For years proposals to change the formulas in the aviation trust fund had gone nowhere but when former Representative Bud Shuster (R-PA), the highly influential chair of the Transportation Committee got behind it, the bill went through the House easily. The Senate was still problematic and in this lobbyist's history, a critical juncture came when:

We went to those who we wrote [PAC] checks to. We went to [Senator Mitch] McConnell and said "You know, you said you wanted to meet with stakeholders. Well, we're a stakeholder. You keep warning us what will happen if the other side takes over." So I said to him, "what difference does it make? You never do anything. You never do anything."

The hyperbole in this passage is obvious. Lobbyists don't talk to United States senators that way. Still, it is significant that he was in the room with Mitch McConnell [R-KY] to talk about what his group wanted. But while some of the hyperbole

was easily recognized, further research on the case made me rethink this group's role. Later, when I asked a staffer on the House Transportation committee which groups were active on the issue, this lobbyist's group was not included in the committee aide's list. And when I interviewed the other aforementioned aviation lobbyist, he mentioned a number of lobbyists active on this issue but not the one who said his meeting with McConnell was so pivotal.

There are at least three methodological issues illustrated here. One is simple exaggeration. All of us like to think that what we do has an impact and Washington-based elites may be among the worst of all since influence is the coin of their realm. It was easy to see the exaggeration in this case because it was so extreme. But it will usually be much more subtle, more skillfully conveyed, and much harder to detect. Second is the flip side of this coin. If the subject exaggerates his role, what got crowded out? There's always missing information in an interview, but exaggeration increases the amount of important information that's left out. Third, if there's exaggeration, doesn't that call into mind the credibility of everything the subject says, even the parts that have nothing to do with his role?

The good news is that there are some simple remedies for this problem. The bad news is that they can't fully solve it:

- Do your homework. One reason why I was misled by my interview with the first aviation lobbyist was because I walked in cold, not knowing a thing about the organization. If we're studying a single case or just a few, this usually isn't a problem. We've already become experts in the area under study before we do our interviews. But this project had many cases. Still, if I had just read one or two articles in *CQ Weekly* or the *National Journal* about this organization I would have recognized the problem a little more quickly and made an earlier movement away from his exaggerated and self-congratulatory account of the trust-fund issue.
- Ask about other participants and organizations. Don't assume because someone exaggerates their role that they'll minimize that of others. At the end of my interviews on this case I went back over this particular one and I noticed that he was relatively accurate about the other organizations that he discussed. My questions outside of his role turned out quite well. Once the pressure was off him to justify his personal effectiveness, he was an extremely helpful interview subject.
- Move away from impact questions. It's perfectly fine to ask about someone's personal role or that of their organization; you'll learn things other questions might not uncover. Nevertheless, when their account seems to place undue emphasis on their own role or that of their organization, it may be preferable to move quickly to other parts of your protocol. Again, your time with a subject is a scarce resource. Try to determine early on in an interview what part of the protocol is likely to yield the best answers. You can always circle back to a topic if you guess wrong. If you're using open-ended questions, there's no expectation that the conversation is linear and that you have to follow the order of the questions on your interview schedule.

To Probe or not to Probe. Elite interview protocols often rely on a limited number of open-ended questions. In a set of interviews I did for a current project on the political participation of nonprofits, I relied on a base list of just eight questions. Unlike the more passive role played by an interviewer using structured questions, this type of questioning allows the researcher to make decisions about what additional questions

to ask as the session progresses. Generally, these probes are prompted by two different situations. The first is probing to gather more depth about the topic of discussion. The interviewee may be terse, cautious or unsure about how much detail is appropriate. When this happens the natural tendency for the interviewer is simply to ask a follow up. Skilled interviewers know how to probe nonverbally as well. When a subject gives an answer that does not appear to contain all the information needed, the immediate response on the part of the interviewer should be to say nothing and stare expectantly at the subject. Silence immediately creates tension and the interviewer should be patient to allow the subject to break that uncomfortable silence by speaking again. If that doesn't elicit the information needed, the interviewer can ask a follow-up question.

The second reason to probe is the subject taking the interviewer down an unanticipated path. The interviewer must decide whether the subject has offered a distracting digression or an interesting new avenue to pursue. This kind of branching can be very rewarding and is one of the main benefits of open-ended questioning. Open-ended questions have the virtue of allowing the subjects to tell the interviewer what's relevant and what's important rather than being restricted by the researchers' preconceived notions about what is important.

For the interviewer the skill factor is knowing when to probe and when to continue with the sequence of questions on the interview protocol. Even allowing for some elasticity in the time the interview takes, there is a very real limit to how many probes one can ask. Instantaneous judgments have to be made to weigh the value of a probe on the subject you're talking about against "probe time" you may need later in the session. Subsequent probes may be more or less valuable and therein lie the difficult calculations that must be made quickly.

The critical methodological issue is that different interviewers might not probe at the same points in the session even if they hear the same answers to their initial question. The same interviewer might not probe at the same point or with the same question in two otherwise similar interviews. Consciously or subconsciously, we're always looking for certain things in an interview answer and our follow-up questions reflect this. The reliability issues become very serious if the responses are to be quantified or if more than one person is doing the interviews. As the interviewer prepares for a project where he or she must negotiate the tradeoffs between systematically following the interview protocol and following up intriguing (or incomplete) answers, some thought might be given to these suggestions:

- Write probe notes into the copy of the protocol you carry into the interview. Such scripted probes are for areas that you believe that most respondents will cover in answering the core question that you ask. Include critical material in these reminders and make a consistent effort to get the pertinent data even if it is not initially volunteered.
- Before the fieldwork commences, create an intermediate coding template. In the normal sequence of a research project built around elite interviewing, coding isn't done until after all the interviews are completed. Still, one can easily produce some outlining of what is to be coded before the interviews begin. Once this intermediate document is fixed in the head of all of the interviewers, it increases the chances that the probes will consistently fill in the information needed for each case or each subject.
- Create a set of decision rules as to what to focus on if time begins to run out. The order of questions on the protocol may have more to do with a logical flow of topics than a ranking of priorities. In a similar vein, have a clear

sense of what questions can be answered with a short answer, and those that require a longer explanation. Those questions where a briefer answer might suffice can be reworded on the fly so that they invite a more concise response. There is considerable variation in the expansiveness of interview subjects and the management of answers and probes can become pressing when the subjects are more talkative.

- Have some stock “bridges” to use when you need to get back to a subject area where you still need information. An unsatisfactory answer may go on for a while and take off into unproductive areas. Getting the subject back to the original question is tricky, particularly if an initial follow-up still didn’t get the information. One alternative is to move quickly to a new question rather than let the time continue to slip away. When I still haven’t gotten my answer I often circle back a few questions later. You don’t want to imply that the subject didn’t give you a satisfactory answer earlier, so it’s necessary to hide the sense that you’re going back to something you’ve already asked. I try to think of bridges that will get respondents back to my subject. Something like, “You know it’s really interesting you mentioned that about Congress because it made me think of a situation that’s common in the bureaucracy...” Bridges don’t have to make logical sense so don’t wait for a perfect opening. The subject isn’t going to stop to try to figure out how you got from A to B because they’re focused on listening to the question that you’re now articulating.

All these problems (and possible solutions) must be kept in mind and balanced as the interview moves along rapidly. If you’re taking notes rather than recording the interview, the challenge of dealing with the issues raised here becomes even more daunting. How can you make a clear-headed decision about your next question when you’re listening, trying to make sense of the answer, and taking notes all at the same time? Yet if you are conducting the interview correctly—as a casual, comfortable conversation—then the follow-up questions, the branching, the movement away from unproductive avenues to new areas, and the circling back should come across as a natural part of that conversation. If there are too many discrete areas where information is necessary, then open-ended questioning might not be the most appropriate alternative for research. For projects where depth, context, or the historical record is at the heart of data collection, elite interviewing using broad, open-ended questioning might be the best choice.

Even the most experienced researcher can’t anticipate all twists and turns that interviews take. The goal here is to encourage interviewers to think about their decision rules (or absence thereof) for guiding themselves through problems that emerge in this kind of research. One should not underestimate the value of flexibility to explore unanticipated answers. At the same time, it’s important to develop some consistency in the way one uses probes. Although each subject is unique, many of the problems we encounter in interviewing elites are common ones that we confront over and over again. Systematic approaches to those problems will enhance our confidence in the quality of the data.

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Interviewing Political Elites: Lessons from Russia*

The past decade has opened up unprecedented opportunities for scholars of post-communist countries. Throughout much of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, scholars can now engage policymakers and other elites directly through interviews—probing their decision calculi and obtaining unpublished information and data. Yet there are gaps in the scholarly literature that would prepare researchers for interviewing highly placed individuals in these countries.

This is largely because most of the related literature discusses techniques for interviewing elites in advanced industrial democracies (e.g., Aberbach, Chesney, and Rockman 1975; Dexter 1970; Peabody et al. 1990). While informative and to some extent applicable, there are significantly fewer works that address obstacles confronted by those working in the post-communist world. Even experience gained in other countries undergoing transitions from authoritarian rule may not be entirely applicable, since the post-communist countries arguably exhibit a number of unique

features that set them apart from other instances of authoritarian breakdown (Bunce 1998; Terry 1993). The experience of communist rule and its sudden collapse produced, in varying degrees, a disorganized and often disoriented civil society, poorly-institutionalized political parties, weak

and financially strapped states, only partially reconstructed security agencies, and in some regions, suspicion of the West. All of these features can pose unique problems for the elite researcher, examples of which include difficulties in constructing sampling frames due to incomplete information; problems in locating respondents who may work without receptionists or answering machines; a general apprehension towards foreigners and/or interviews; an aversion to advance scheduling; and suspicions aroused by standard demographic questions.

There is now a wealth of English-language studies spanning a range of post-communist countries that rely extensively on elite interviews and/or surveys (e.g., Fish 1995; Hahn 1993; Higley and Lengyel 2000; Jacob, Ostrowski, and Teune 1993; Lane 1995; Lukin 2000; McFaul 2001; Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997; Miller, White, and Heywood

1998; Remington 2001; Rohrschneider 1999; Sperling 1999; Steen 1997; Stoner-Weiss 1997; Szelényi and Szelényi 1995; Yoder 1999; Zimmerman 2002). However, there are few methodological tools to guide scholars of post-communist countries who either lack the resources to commission surveys by in-country experts or desire to conduct in-depth personal interviews.

Such concerns motivated us to write this article. We offer a few suggestions on interviewing elites in Russia;¹ our advice should also be applicable to other post-communist countries and possibly to other states that exhibit higher levels of political instability than do advanced industrial countries. We base our conclusions on a series of 133 in-depth interviews with top-level bureaucrats and parliamentary deputies which we conducted (in Russian) in Moscow and two regions of the Russian Federation (Nizhnii Novgorod and Tatarstan) in 1996, and which will be replicated in the Putin era.²

Selecting an Appropriate Sample Design

The selection of an appropriate sample design is a key decision that affects the type of conclusions that one can draw later during data analysis. In considering various ways of drawing a sample of Russia's national political elite, we initially believed that probability sampling would be impossible. We reasoned that although a sampling frame could be constructed without much difficulty, the polarized political context and general suspicion of foreigners would frustrate our efforts to arrange interviews with the individuals selected for the sample. Hence, we considered nonprobability sampling techniques that tend to rely more heavily on personal contacts and introductions, such as a referral (or snowball) sample.

Yet due to the limitations that nonprobability sampling would impose on our ability to generalize from our sample to the population of Russian national political elites,³ we chose to employ probability sampling.⁴ We used a stratified random sample design, in which the strata were defined by institutional affiliation. The political elite was defined by positional criteria, consisting of parliamentary deputies from the lower house of the national legislature and top-level bureaucrats working in federal ministries. Although Russia's "national political elite" arguably encompasses more sectors than just these two, we narrowed our scope in order to be comparable to the Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman (1981) study of

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bureaucratic and parliamentary elites in seven advanced industrial nations. Using their criteria for defining our survey populations, our bureaucrats directed departments, divisions, or bureaus in federal ministries; were situated in the nation's capital; and occupied positions roughly one to two rungs below the minister.⁵ The parliamentarians were members of the lower house of Russia's national legislature, the State Duma. Analogous samples were drawn in each of the two provincial capitals as well.⁶

For the national-level sample a sampling frame was readily available for only the parliamentary deputies and consisted of a published list of the 450 deputies elected in the December 1995 parliamentary elections. Constructing a sampling frame for the federal bureaucrats was considerably more problematic, although as Aberbach and Rockman (2002) point out, this is a challenge not restricted to the Russian experience. Over the past decade, government directories of all sorts have proliferated in Russia, but we did not find one that was entirely comprehensive and up-to-date. Consequently, we compiled our own list of ministry department heads (379 in all), using a variety of published directories to draft a preliminary list. We then personally contacted all of the ministries and cajoled them to verify and update the information. (Vestiges of Soviet-era secrecy still live on in Russia's federal bureaucracy: ministerial information centers were often quite reluctant to divulge information on their organizational structures, personnel, or contact numbers—especially to anyone speaking Russian with a foreign accent.) Within each stratum, a random sample of individuals was selected to represent the stratum.

From there it often took 15 to 20 phone calls to arrange a single interview, whereas a 1959 survey of U.S. members of Congress averaged 3.3 callbacks per respondent (Robinson 1960, 129). Yet sheer persistence paid off. Response rates mirrored and in some cases surpassed rates achieved in other elite studies in a variety of contexts.⁷ As Table 1 shows, we interviewed 81.8% of the national parliamentary deputies in our sample, 74.5% of the federal bureaucrats, and between 60.9% and 86.7% of the four regional samples. Moreover, most of the nonresponses were not outright refusals to grant an interview. Most failures to interview respondents stemmed from a problem endemic to all elite interviewing—the extraordinarily busy lives of the respondents. (Respondents were particularly busy at this time because the 1996 presidential campaign was in full swing.) This type of nonresponse was coded as unavailable,

meaning either that contact could not be made with the respondent or that a convenient time for the interview could never be arranged.

Although a great deal of persistence was necessary to convince respondents to grant us interviews, accessibility was greater than anticipated overall.⁸ Thus, although there are circumstances in which nonprobability sampling is the preferred option, probability sampling is a viable option for many countries outside of the developed world. The key to its success is perseverance in locating respondents and convincing them to grant interviews.

Gaining Access to Respondents

Some of the factors impeding access to highly placed officials in Russia are undoubtedly similar to those faced by elite interviewers in any context. However, those working in post-communist societies confront additional problems in securing interviews. First, the simple process of locating respondents and agreeing on a time for an interview is complicated by the fluidity of the political environment and the newness of various political institutions. For example, deputies in the Russian Duma often worked without receptionists and/or answering machines. Second, some respondents may be less familiar with the interview process than elites in advanced industrial democracies. This no doubt contributed to the greater apprehension about the interviews that we observed among the civil servants than among the parliamentary deputies, a finding also reported by Denitch (1972, 155) in the former Yugoslavia.

Third, respondents in more politically unstable environments may be a good deal more suspicious about the goals and purposes of the research project. As noted earlier, our project coincided with the highly politicized, polarized environment of the 1996 presidential elections, leading several respondents to suspect that the survey was merely a cover for their political opponents to acquire potentially damaging information. Several expressed concern that “someone wanted to learn about their views”—whether it be the Yeltsin administration, their political competitors, state security agencies, or foreigners. For instance, in answering the demographic questions, one regional deputy (D-115) remarked that it seemed as if the information was being collected for the “organs” [of state security].⁹ Deputies from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) were particularly guarded since a listening device reportedly had been found in their offices during the presidential campaign.¹⁰

Hence, the process of gaining access to respondents in Russia and then winning their confidence requires some special attention. We present a few suggestions for surmounting potential roadblocks in postcommunist and other countries in transition.

Have an Institutional Affiliation

All the interviews in our project were conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, with the interviewing responsibilities in Moscow divided between the American (Rivera) and the Russian (Sarovskii). Interviewers were affiliated with either the Institute of Sociology or another institute of the Academy of Sciences, and the questionnaire itself mentioned the institute's sponsorship and listed a contact name and phone number.

Table 1
Reasons for Nonresponse

	Interviews			Total
	Completed n (%)	Refusals n (%)	Unavailable n (%)	Sample Size n (%)
Duma deputies	45 (81.8)	2 (3.6)	8 (14.6)	55 (100.0)
Federal bureaucrats	38 (74.5)	4 (7.8)	9 (17.7)	51 (100.0)
N. Novgorod deputies	11 (73.3)	1 (6.7)	3 (20.0)	15 (100.0)
N. Novgorod bureaucrats	14 (60.9)	0 (0.0)	9 (39.1)	23 (100.0)
Tatarstan deputies	13 (86.7)	1 (6.7)	1 (6.7)	15 (100.1)
Tatarstan bureaucrats	12 (80.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (20.0)	15 (100.0)

Note: Response rates are calculated based on the number of eligible elements in each sample. In total, there were only four blanks (all in the federal bureaucratic sample), since four ministerial departments were no longer in existence. In Nizhni Novgorod, there was one substitution made for a deputy who refused an interview, and in two cases, deputy department heads were interviewed because the department heads were unavailable. Percentages may not sum to 100.0% due to rounding.

Despite the interviewers mentioning the goals of the interview and the sponsoring organization when introducing themselves, respondents often asked additional questions about who was sponsoring the research. The fact that the study was being undertaken in association with an authoritative, well-established institution seemed to assure respondents that the research was genuinely intended for academic purposes.¹¹ In a study of Yugoslav opinion leaders conducted in 1968, the role of having appropriate “legitimizers” is also clear (Denitch 1972, 153).¹² In China, however, interpersonal connections and relationships were found to be more crucial than official channels in obtaining access (Hsu 2000, Ch. 3).

Reassure the Respondent That There Are No Right Answers

Another problem we encountered in securing interviews was that some respondents apparently equated the interview situation with an examination. Some expressed concern that they would not be able to answer our questions; this was particularly true for bureaucrats, who said they could answer questions about the work of their ministries but not about more general themes. One Duma deputy was unconcerned about the confidentiality of the information, but rather wanted reassurance that the interviewer would not ridicule him (D-026). During the interview itself, some respondents became perceptibly guarded and tense, and when answering, they seemed to be searching for words that would demonstrate a certain level of competence and erudition.

Throughout the entire process, we tried to reassure respondents that there were no correct answers to our questions. We also stressed that they were members of a highly select group of individuals, whose task it was to make key decisions in the realm of public policy. As a result, any answers they could provide in and of themselves would constitute very valuable information for us. Such reassurances seemed to alleviate certain insecurities and anxieties felt by some respondents in this regard.

Establish an Appropriate Identity for the Interviewer

One of the issues that must be resolved by each researcher is how to present oneself to the respondents in the study. Some researchers believe that “in the typical interview there exists a hierarchical relation, with the respondent being in the subordinate position.” Accordingly, feminist researchers have suggested that a way of responding to these inequalities and minimizing status differences is for interviewers to “show their human side and answer questions and express feelings” (Fontana and Frey 2000, 658).

Yet to preserve our structured interview format, we chose to address these potential inequalities by emphasizing the status and rights of the respondents. For instance, when respondents were deciding whether to grant us interviews, we would remind them that since we were only the “requesting party,” they always had the last word. This reassured them that they had the upper hand in the interview and could refuse to answer any question if they so chose.

At the same time, elite researchers emphasize the need for balance when establishing the researcher’s identity. One potential pitfall is the tendency for the interviewer to be overly

deferential and concerned with establishing rapport, thereby losing the ability to control the direction and scope of the interview (Ostrander 1993). As a counterweight, some recommend conveying to respondents that you’ve “done your homework” on them so that the extent of preparation for the interview causes respondents to take you seriously (Richards 1996, 202–203; Zuckerman 1972, 164–66). However, we concur with

the views expressed by Denitch (1972, 154), whose interviewers in the Yugoslav context gave no indication that they knew anything about the backgrounds of the respondents. Revealing knowledge about the interviewees, he contends, might raise too many doubts about anonymity.

Another helpful factor was that the occupational status of the interviewers—by and large professional researchers—was roughly equivalent to many of the respondents. This appeared to foster mutual understanding and convince respondents that their answers and comments would be understood.

In much the same way, Alan

Aldridge (1993) notes that emphasizing the congruence between his occupational status as an academic and that of his respondents facilitated access, rapport, and high-quality responses. Occupational status seemed to outweigh potential problems created by gender. Despite 95.2% of the Moscow-based respondents being male, this was not a significant obstacle for the female (American) interviewer in any discernible way.¹³

Request Interviews in Person When Possible

In most elite projects (and indeed, in other projects described in this symposium), initial contact is made via an introductory letter explaining the goals of the project. This is usually followed by a phone call to set a date and time for the interview. Outside of the developed world, however, this approach is of less utility for a variety of reasons, both technical and cultural. Technical barriers to advance scheduling of interviews can include an undependable mail service, unreliable reception and delivery of mail in offices, and incomplete—or in some cases—nonexistent directories and phone books. Cultural barriers involve—at least in the Russian case and also in China—a penchant for day-to-day scheduling without much advance notice. As a matter of fact, when requesting an appointment for the following week, respondents frequently told us that it was too far in advance to plan and requested that we call back on the day that we wished to speak with them. Other interviewers working with Russian elites also found that introductory letters were of limited use and that it was necessary to approach potential interviewees by telephone (White et al. 1996, 310).¹⁴ Thus, rather than using an introductory letter, we simply phoned respondents directly with our requests.

Once we were granted a pass to a ministerial building or the parliament for one interview, it proved useful simply to appear unannounced at the offices of other respondents on our sample list who were located in the same institution. In most

One potential pitfall is the tendency for the interviewer to be overly deferential and concerned with establishing rapport, thereby losing the ability to control the direction and scope of the interview (Ostrander 1993).

cases, a request made in person increased the likelihood that the target respondent would agree to an interview.

Developing a Questionnaire

The methodological costs and benefits of open-ended queries versus closed-ended questions have been discussed in the literature (Aberbach, Chesney, and Rockman 1975; Schuman and Presser 1981, 79–112), and we will not repeat them here. Like several other authors in this symposium, we wish to highlight the importance of open-ended questions for elite interviewing. In our experience, Russian elites strongly resisted the imposition of categories or choices on their reasoning processes. One Duma deputy remarked that “sociologists aren’t inclined to understand that it’s impossible to answer some questions in the way that they’ve instructed us to. They are not inclined to make a notation to the effect that a certain answer is not precisely as stated but is rather slightly different” (D-013).

Yet we did not use open-ended questions exclusively; rather, we used a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions (refined through pretesting and back-translation), presented in alternating fashion. The first five questions were very general open-ended queries, followed a couple of closed-ended questions, and so on in a similar fashion. This sequencing had several advantages. First, once the introductory open-ended questions had been covered, it was easy to elicit answers to the more formulaic questions. We had demonstrated respect for the complexity of their views through the open-ended questions and thus had “earned” the right to ask questions posed exclusively from our frame of reference. Also, the closed-ended questions probably allowed respondents to recover a bit from the more demanding open-ended question format. Second, since political elites can expound on their responses at great length, especially in the early stages of an interview, we tried to channel such tendencies toward subjects on which we desired elaboration. Third, although the interview was fully structured, the frequency and format of the open-ended questions (with scripted probes written into the interview protocol) gave it a more semi-structured feel.¹⁵

The oral interview also included a series of background questions, which we anticipated would be perceived by some as threatening since they included not only standard demographic questions such as age, education, and place of birth, but also questions dealing with past and present political activities, travel abroad, business dealings, and the like. By contrast, elite interviewers working in Austria and France several decades ago encountered an entirely different situation. According to them, asking personal and biographical questions at the beginning of the interview “served to relax respondents and involve them in the interview” (Hunt, Crane, and Wahlke 1964, 68). In the Russian context, however, these types of questions can raise suspicions, and thus we heeded the following advice—to put threatening behavioral questions “near the end of the interview so that the interviewer has a chance to establish good rapport with the respondent” (Sudman and Bradburn 1974, 143). In an attempt to minimize response effects, we

asked the background questions after all of the substantive questions and also phrased them in the most general and non-threatening way. For example, when questioning elites about their residence abroad, we formulated the question as follows: “Did you ever happen to live abroad (not including the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltics) for a period of three months or more?” By phrasing the question in this way, we tried to: (1) draw attention away from their reason for living abroad, and (2) downplay their having been in a position to live abroad during the Soviet era, as this was a right granted only with Communist Party approval. This was important because in the post-communist era, some respondents may be reluctant to disclose the extent of their previous involvement with the Party.

Another means of putting respondents at ease during the interviews was to assure them that their identities would remain confidential, be presented only in aggregate or anonymous form, and be used only in academic research. Several other phrases also proved helpful in coaxing answers out of reluctant respondents: asking them to say “something—if only a few words” in response to a question; telling them that there are as many different opinions as there are people (*Skol’ko lyudei, stol’ko mnenii*); and reminding them—if they objected to a question—that they had the last word in deciding whether to answer it.

After completing the oral part of the interview (which was conducted in Russian and, in the vast majority of cases, tape recorded), we asked all respondents to fill out a short, self-administered written questionnaire consisting primarily of closed-ended value questions. Again, building on the rapport that had developed over the course of the interview, most respondents completed this questionnaire on the spot, in the presence of the interviewer. Occasionally, time constraints required that questionnaires be left with respondents; in those cases, we usually expended substantial efforts on retrieving them. In the end, only 7.5% of all 133 respondents (from Moscow and the two regions) failed to complete the self-administered written questionnaires.

One additional issue that affected our use of both open-ended and closed-ended questions was the challenge of translating certain concepts into Russian. For example, the phrase “authoritarian rule” can be translated literally as *avtoritarnaya vlast’*. Alternatively, a more commonly used phrase, “strong hand” (*zhestkaya ruka*) can be used, although the latter phrase has a weaker connotation and its meaning is subject to a wider variety of interpretations. In such cases, the American researcher deferred to the judgment of native Russian speakers, aiming above all to capture the spirit of the phrase or concept. Several pretests with “debriefings” by native Russian speakers as to how they understood problematic concepts were also helpful, as was back-translation of the questionnaire into English by a native English speaker fluent in Russian. In cases where conceptual problems arose with the meanings of standard closed-ended questions that had been used previously by other researchers, we retained the original Russian-language wording. We regarded the ability to conduct reliable comparisons with prior findings as more important than linguistic clarity.

Notes

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1. For insights on conducting surveys of the mass public in the post-communist region, see Gibson 1994; Swafford 1992.

2. For details on the interviews, sample, and methodology, see Rivera 1998, 2000.

3. As Judd, Smith, and Kidder (1991, 133) succinctly state, “Probability sampling is the only approach that makes possible representative sampling plans. It makes it possible for the investigators to estimate the extent to which the findings based on their sample are likely to differ from what they would have found by studying the population.”

4. We recognize that nonprobability sampling may be the most appropriate vehicle for certain projects where accessibility is much more problematic (e.g., interviewing economic or business elites, as in McDowell 1998) or where the sample size is very small. Nonprobability sampling also has the advantage of convenience and cost effectiveness, which may outweigh the researcher’s desire to be able to “specify the chances that the sample findings do not differ by more than a certain amount from the true population values”—a feature of probability sampling (Judd, Smith, and Kidder 1991, 134–136). See also Kalton 1983, 90–93.

5. Following Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman (1981, 27), we excluded (1) the Ministries of Defense and Internal Affairs (though we included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and (2) departments that “performed obvious staff functions.” In the Russian case, first deputy ministers and deputy ministers were considered to constitute one level.

6. We are grateful to Yuri Gapeenkov and his team, Liliya Sagitova, and Guzel Stolarova for their help in the regions.

7. Robert D. Putnam (1973, 15) reports response rates of 85% for British MPs and 78% for Italian parliamentarians. See also Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981, 26; Hoffmann-Lange, 1987, 36; McDonough 1981, 253; Verba et al. 1987, 280–81.

8. In both the Yugoslav and American contexts (Denitch 1972, 146; Ostrander 1993, 9; Zuckerman 1972, 161), researchers imply that the difficulties of gaining access to certain elites have been overstated.

9. These numbers identify the interviewees in the study. “D” denotes deputies and “G” stands for government bureaucrats.

10. Interviews conducted in non-election years should meet less politically charged suspicion. Moreover, if Michael McFaul (1997) is correct that the 1996 presidential race was the last “revolutionary,” highly ideological, and polarized election in which the principal divide was between

pro-reform and anti-reform groups, even interviews conducted during election campaigns in Russia should be less problematic in the future. On the other hand, a certain measure of secrecy on the part of the CPRF has extended beyond the 1996 elections. Deputies will not say in advance when plenary sessions of the party’s Central Committee will be held. As one deputy, Yurii Chunkov, explains: “We want to keep the location secret as long as possible so they won’t tape us. They listen to everything. One hour after a conversation, the transcript is on the desk of whoever needs to see it” (Bohlen 1998, 1).

11. In the context of this single study, it is difficult to measure precisely what difference such an affiliation made in terms of access and information supplied to the interviewers. For reflections on the impact of sponsorship by an elite interviewer working in London, see McDowell (1998, 2136).

12. This is also an important factor in Zuckerman’s access to Nobel laureates in science (Zuckerman 1972, 162–63). For more on sponsorship, see Dexter 1970, 50–55, and Javeline 1996.

13. In a series of interviews with high-status employees of merchant banks in London, McDowell (1998, 2140–41) expresses a similar viewpoint. To her surprise, most of her male interviewees “seemed to feel surprisingly free to be open with [her],” even when discussing gender relations and respondents’ attitudes toward their women colleagues. Similarly, in a study of local elites in Scotland and France, Sabot (1999, 334) concludes that gender “becomes secondary to other positional factors,” such as nationality. However, in other contexts (e.g., rural areas in India), interviews conducted by a person of another gender can be problematic in many respects.

14. However, one study of elites in Russia sent prospective respondents an interview schedule and accompanying letter that described the goals and character of the research, achieving a response rate of 70% (Mikul’skii et al. 1995, 35–36).

15. We should note one drawback to this approach. Some elites, especially civil servants, found the lack of specificity inherent in the opening battery of questions disconcerting. They felt that the questions were too general and wide ranging.

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