



Power in elite interviewing: Lessons from feminist studies for political science



Anna Boucher

Department of Government and International Relations, H04, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 July 2016

Received in revised form 1 May 2017

Accepted 2 May 2017

Available online 10 May 2017

Keywords:

Elite interviewing

Qualitative research methods

Gender

Feminist sociolinguistics

Power

ABSTRACT

Power imbalances between participants are a central aspect of elite interviews. As feminist social scientists have argued, power imbalances can affect not only the practical structure of interviews but also experiential and normative dimensions of the relationship that emerges between interview parties. At present, there are limited means to concretely analyse power differentials in elite interviews. This article addresses this gap by drawing upon feminist sociolinguistics to develop an original “power index” to measure power in the elite interviewing context within the social sciences. The index is applied to interview text to explore its utility and develop a method that can be fruitfully extended in future studies. (108 words).

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Elite interviewing is a key qualitative research method in the social sciences. Elite interviews are useful for the purposes of political biography and to ascertain the perspectives of those at the centre of political debates (Richards, 1996). Elite interviews also allow researchers to trace the policy process that underpins key political events (Leech, 2002; Tansey, 2007). Although elite interviewing is foundational to social analysis, mainstream accounts often lack critical reflection upon the issue of power and how it is refracted, pervades and potentially influences elite interviews. In contrast, some feminist social scientists have long argued that power relations are central to interviews, although generally the focus is upon the protection and empowerment of vulnerable interview subjects, rather than interviews with privileged elites (i.e. Acker et al., 1983; Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Cotterill, 1992; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2005). More recently, feminist scholars focusing upon elite interviews have argued that female researchers may face inverted situations of power imbalance within elite interviews, and that certain strategies can be adopted to minimise control of interviews by respondents (Abels & Behrens, 2009; Puwar, 1997).

Given this focus upon power, we should elucidate the term. Although rarely defined in the elite interviewing scholarship, it can be viewed as both situational and institutional. Power is held by an individual “where a certain proposed difference to significant outcomes can be made or resisted” by one person over the other (Lukes, 1986, p. 15, cited in Deem, 1994, p. 153). Accordingly, in the elite interviewing setting,

power refers to the capacity of the interviewee to make or resist certain outcomes, with regard to responses to questions. The field of sociolinguistics centres on the analysis of social relations and power differentials, as reflected through language, and provides a useful tool to conduct a secondary analysis of elite interviews. Drawing upon and synthesising feminist sociolinguistics knowledge around language and power, this article develops a series of hypotheses about how language should look when a power relationship is in operation in an elite interview. The aggregate of powerful utterances of each participant in an interview is divided over the aggregate of powerless utterances in order to derive a “power ratio.” A lower power ratio indicates less power in speech and a higher power ratio indicates more power. The difference in power ratios can be compared to ascertain the extent of a power imbalance between interview participants. The final section of this article applies the power index to one elite interview undertaken for a project on immigration policy-making, complimented by qualitative analysis of the same interview. Through a detailed analysis it demonstrates that the power ratio can be fruitfully applied as a tool to assess the power dynamics within elite interview material. The article thereby critically reflects upon these dynamics both for future interviews and for the interpretation and analysis of interview data.

Critical scholars have identified how gender may operate alongside class, educational status, race, ethnicity, disability and cultural context to shape interview power relationships (Bergvall, 1999; Marx, 2001; May, 2014; Ortvals & Rinker, 2009).¹ My focus on gender in this article

¹ That said, the focus on intersectional features is generally within the broader interview scholarship rather than elite interviews per se, see only Ortvals & Rinker, 2009 for such a focus within political science.

E-mail address: anna.boucher@sydney.edu.au.

is not to discount the importance of intersecting forms of (in)equality, but rather to provide an initial foray into the measurement of power relations within elite political interviews. Future works could extend the power indicators to a broader array of factors. In order to control for the possible role of ethnicity and educational status in the current analysis, the empirical example selected in this article is of an interviewer and respondent of the same ethnic, educational and linguistic background. Furthermore, it is important to note that this article does not assume that power relations in elite interviews are problematic and must be eradicated entirely, rather, treats this as an empirical question that necessitates further analysis.

The mainstream elite interviewing scholarship and its limitations

The elite interviewing literature is a small but important area of social science research methodology. There are two key definitions of “elite” that emerge from this scholarship. The first focuses on those in powerful positions. This generally refers to individuals in senior elected political and executive government roles (see for instance Leech, 2002, p. 663; Lilleker, 2003, p. 207; Peabody et al., 1990, p. 451; Rivera, Kozyreva, & Sarovskii, 2002, p. 683) or those who hold positions of professional prestige, such as high level bankers (Littig, 2009; McDowell, 1998, p. 2135). Particularly in the German scholarship, definitions of “elites” may include functional experts who hold expertise even if they are of not high organizational stature (Bogner, Menz, Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009; Littig, 2009). Richards (1996, p. 199) provides a useful definition of positional elites as: “a group of individuals, who hold, or have held, a privileged position in society and, as such, as far as a political scientist is concerned, are likely to have had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public.” The focus here is on individuals who occupy institutional and social power.

Much of the political science literature dispenses practical advice to researchers on how to gain access to elites (Burnham, Lutz, Grant, & Layton-Henry, 2008; Dexter, 1970, pp. 28–36; Lilleker, 2003, pp. 208–210; Richards, 1996, p. 202; Rivera et al., 2002, p. 684). Scholars have also focused on the preferred structure of interviews (Berry, 2002, p. 681; Burnham et al., 2008, pp. 238–245; Dexter, 1970, pp. 23–5; 50–78; Lilleker, 2003, pp. 210–11; Peabody et al., 1990, pp. 451) or the importance of adequate preparation before interviews take place (Davies 2001, 76–7; Richards, 1996, p. 202). Some research identifies potential uses of elite interviewing data: Tansey (2007) sets out the key functions of data acquired through elite interviews, including making inferences about a larger population’s characteristics and decisions, such as a population of bureaucrats (Tansey, 2007, p. 767; see also Goldstein, 2002, p. 669) or “shed[ding] light on the hidden elements of political action that are not clear from an analysis of political outcomes or other primary sources” (Tansey, 2007, p. 767; see also Lilleker, 2003, p. 208).

Discussions of power are implicit within the mainstream social science literature on elite interviewing. Margaret Desmond (2004, p. 265) argues that “with elite interviewees, the [relationship] is inevitably asymmetrical regardless of the research strategies deployed.” The powerful elites (“very powerful and self-assured people”) are contrasted with “an obscure academic, who poses, so far as [the elites] are concerned, absolutely no threat” (Schoenberger, 1992, p. 217; see also Bygnes, 2008 and Leech, 2002). Power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee is viewed as not only inevitable but also as problematic. According to Richards (1996, p. 201) “by the very nature of elite interviews, it is the interviewee who has the power. They control the information the interviewer is trying to eke out.” On this basis, scholars warn of the risk that elites will take control of the interview and view the management of this exigency, as one of the key challenges for elite interviewers (Burnham et al., 2008, p. 241; Lilleker, 2003, p. 211, citing Seidman, 1998, pp. 89–90; Richards, 1996, p. 201). Social scientists frequently reconcile the risks posed by power imbalance for interview pragmatically on the grounds that elite interviewing may be the only research method available (Kogan, 1994, p. 77) or argue that the effects of

this power imbalance on measurement issues can be minimised through triangulation (Berry, 2002, p. 680; Brians, Willnat, Manheim, & Rich, 2010, p. 367; p. 375; Burnham et al., 2008, p. 246; Davies, 2001, p. 78; Dexter, 1970, pp. 14 16; 17; Lilleker, 2003, p. 208; Richards, 1996, p. 204). Alternatively, Richards (1996, p. 200) counsels that data gleaned from elite interviewing should only be taken as evidence of “an interviewee’s subjective analysis of a particular episode or situation” and not in any way as presenting “the truth” (Richards, 1996, p. 200; see also Brians et al., 2010, p. 367; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, p. 112). German scholars Bogner and Menz (2009, pp. 58–69) create a typology of forms of expert interviews ranging from the interviewer as co-expert, to the interviewer as expert, to him or her as a layperson, to interviewer as either accomplice or critic of the respondent. As these authors note, not only do these categorisations challenge the notion of a singular, “neutral” approach to elite interviews, they also invoke various forms of power relations that can shape the interview content. The current article provides a methodological approach that permits textual analysis of interview material and placement with typologies such as those offered by Bogner et al. (2009) or Abels and Behrens (2009).

Feminist approaches to elite interviewing

Feminist approaches to elite interviewing offer an important expansion of our understanding of power in elite interviewing. In contrast to the mainstream elite interviewing literature, feminist scholarship has historically focused on the perceived powerlessness of interviewees. Famously, Ann Oakley (1981, pp. 31; 41–9) argued from a normative perspective that an interview must not be viewed as an exercise in mere data collection, but also as an empowerment process for both parties. To attempt to maintain scientific objectivity in interviewing is not only impossible, Oakley (1981, p. 31) argued, it also overlooks the role of emotion in interviewing and presents a “masculinist paradigm.” The focus of much of this feminist scholarship is on an non-elite informant with an intention of reducing power imbalances between interview parties, pursuing an ethic of care towards research subjects, empowering the interview subject and ultimately and thereby enabling broader positive social change (Burgess-Proctor, 2015, pp.16–7; 2006). Researcher reflexivity around her of his own relative social power is a central component of this exercise (Acker et al., 1983; Burgess-Proctor, 2015, p. 126; Cotterill, 1992; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2005; for a discussion Puwar, 1997, p. para 11.1). More recently, Adrianna Kezar (2003) has proposed that this normative focus in the early feminist interviewing scholarship can be fruitfully applied to elite interviews. She argues that the interviewer in an elite interview should be concerned with both commitment and engagement with the interviewee. Mutual trust and egalitarian relations should be developed and oppression should be minimised in the interview space. In short, the “asymmetry in power” that is often present in elite interviews is critiqued and relative power imbalances should be “transformed” into a more equal relationship that leads to consciousness raising between interview participants.

There is a distinctly activist intention behind such feminist appraisals of interview methods (Kezar, 2003, pp.400–2). Yet, an assumption and preference for equality in elite interviews is not universally supported in the feminist scholarship. Lyons and Chipperfield (2000) challenge whether rapport is a worthy pursuit in and of itself and note that it could undermine the interview content. Further complicating the classic feminist perspective of a disadvantaged female interviewer, Abels and Behrens (2009, p. 47) argue that women researchers are less likely to be subject to what they call the “iceberg effect”, where the interviewer demonstrates “inert unwillingness to give out information”, due to a distrust of the interviewee. In this sense, a perceived lack of power but also heightened trustworthiness held by female interviewers, particularly young interviewers, may in fact act to their advantage (from the Anglo-Saxon scholarship, see also Marshall, 1984,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4942001>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4942001>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)