Article

Interviewing Elites: Methodological Issues Confronting a Novice

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Abstract

This article explores issues that arise when a relatively inexperienced researcher interviews people who have an elite position or status. These issues include making preparation, gaining access, establishing trust, and facing interpersonal challenges during interviews. Additionally, there remains the need as with any qualitative research of ensuring authenticity and reliability of the views being expressed and recorded. This article is based upon extensive experience of interviewing senior managers operating within private higher education institutions in China. The article makes a contribution to research which rest upon gaining access to and identifying the views of elites who exercise authority and power within institutions.

Keywords

elites, power, spatiality, identity, reliability

What Is Already Known?

Interviewing individuals who have senior positions presents unique methodological challenges for the less experienced researcher because of imbalances of power that can exist between interviewee and interviewer. Therefore, a more empirical study is required to better understand the challenges and how to address them. A systematic and comprehensive analysis of empirical experiences is needed in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the emerging issues and the resultant strategy to be adopted.

What This Paper Adds?

This article is based on a research project for a doctorate degree at a major U.K. university. It focuses specially upon the forms of institutional governance of private universities in China. An added dimension was the need to include a reference as to how Communist Party leaders functioned within the constitutional and governance arrangements. As a result, I interviewed many senior managers who directly participated in governance of the university. These people are among China's elite and are used to directing large organizations involving thousands of people. This article considers how I prepared for the interview, gained access to the interviewees, and the process of the interview. It discusses the challenges and reflects on the interviews with the senior managers and finally considers strategies to answer the challenges confronted in interviewing elites.

Elites and Interviews

The concept of "elite" is variously defined in academic literature and can refer to different people or things depending upon the area in which the term is being used (Plesner, 2011). Zuckerman (1972, p. 160) suggests that the concept can be divided into ultraelites and general subgroups. Ultraelites are "the most highly placed members of an elite," while general elites are individuals who have "the ability to exert influence" through "social networks, social capital and strategic position within social structures" (Harvey, 2011, p. 433). Hunter (1993) and Zuckerman (1972) stress that elite status comes from the possession of knowledge and prestige and the close proximity to power (Lilleker, 2003). These elites are difficult to access in comparison with other social groups (Cochrane, 1998; Desmond, 2004). Similarly, Richards (1996) emphasized that these elites cannot always be accessed in the way that the researcher may have wished, especially if the interviewee presents a face that is awkward, obstructive, and unforthcoming. Elites remain relatively unstudied because of their ability to use

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their positions and authority to protect themselves from intrusion (Hunter, 1993). The study of interviewing elites should therefore always be placed in a "more explicit philosophical and reflexive framework" (Morris, 2009, p. 209), as such interviews often reluctantly conform to commonly accepted forms and approaches.

My study captures the perceptions and understandings of senior figures about the institutional governance of the private university, as these interviewees possess characteristics, opinions, and experiences related to this social reality (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Mason, 2002). The use of interviews became especially important when "neither past events and the feelings of people involved in them nor how they interpret their behavior can be observed" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). The interviews that I conducted were with people who included chairs and members of University Councils, presidents and vice presidents of universities, and senior managers of the educational administrative department of the government. Many were also shareholders of companies who are multimillionaires. Two thirds of the participants held more than one senior management position. For example, one president was a member of the National Review Committee in Higher Education; another president was a national inspector for education. All participants had been in their senior roles for more than 4 years, and most of them were among the founders of the private university system in China.

Preparation for the Interview

As elite interviews are difficult, careful planning is essential. The first stage in preparation for my study was to carefully design the interview questions. As Aberbach and Rockman (2002) emphasize, it is best to start with general questions about the person's background, as this can facilitate the interview because people usually like to talk about themselves. The interview questionnaire in this study therefore begins by asking general questions about the interviewee's roles and responsibilities before moving on to more specific questions. For example, the first question was often:

> What is your role and responsibilities in the current job? How have you been involved in the field of private higher education?

Healey and Rawlinson (1993) emphasize that the way questions are designed and how they are asked can affect the answers one receives. Following the advice of Dowling and Brown (2012, p. 68) that sometimes the interview questions should, "not consist of standard questions that are given to all interviewees in a fixed order," I prepared a pool of questions intending to keep the actual questions used and their order flexible for different interviewees because I realized that for some interviewees certain questions may not be appropriate or relevant.

At the same time, the questions that are asked depend on what the researcher wants to know (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). I continually asked myself what do I want to learn from the interview, and this helped me clarify the specific purpose of the interview. Generally, my study focused on the practices of institutional governance, as I wanted to understand the process, reason, and values behind the governance actions. In addition, as a PhD student at the time, I was able to discuss these questions with my supervisor, himself a senior manager of the university with a considerable research experience of interviewing elites. His suggestions on the question design were constructive and helpful. Thus, it is proposed that the inexperienced researcher would benefit from discussing the technical aspects of such interviews with a senior academic colleague.

The second step in preparation was to conduct two pilot interviews. Since I had no prior experience of conducting such research interviews, I interviewed two senior managers who I already knew in the hope that this would improve my interviewing techniques. Both persons provided useful suggestions on my interviewing techniques. They helped me to refine the interview questions and to be more specific and relevant to the research questions. They also suggested that I should respond to interviewees' ideas by nodding or encourage more responses using affirming words such as "uh-huh" or "ohh" and by asking follow-up "why" and "how" questions rather than interrogative "what" questions that might yield limited factual responses. In addition, they suggested that I took notes during the interview, so that if I was unsure of the meaning of an answer, I could ask for clarification at the end of the interview and not interrupt them with my need for clarification. Less experienced researchers might also consider undertaking such pilot interviews for the purpose of critical reflection before committing themselves to engaging in the full sequence of interviews.

The third step in preparation was to gain a deeper knowledge of an interviewee's personal and professional biography. As Mikecz (2012) states, knowledge of an informant's background, including life history and career, is an important aspect of preparing to interview elites. Before the formal interview, I researched the professional backgrounds and the recent work positions of the interviewees from the relevant websites. This preparation helped me become familiar with the interviewees, so making it easier to establish an effective rapport and to gain their trust (Conti & O'Neil, 2007; Stephens, 2007). In later interviews, some elite interviewees responded with surprise and pleasure when they realized I already had a good knowledge of their work and educational background. Therefore, it would be useful for all researchers to explore the background information of the elites so as to understand more about the personalities of the interviewees before conducting the interview.

Access to Interviewees

The number of participants needed is a significant factor in such research. Some scholars have discussed the question of the appropriate choice and numbers of interviewees (Creswell, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013; Seidman, 2013). Mears suggested that if the interviewer wishes to

achieve depth rather than breadth, six to nine interviewees are perhaps enough (Mears, 2009). My study had three types of participants: senior managers from case universities, those from government education departments, and those from other universities. Following Mears, and considering senior managers were not easily accessible, I planned to interview five of each type for each of the three case universities. Nevertheless, the study was flexible enough to add more participants who could provide useful additional information.

Gaining access to elites is challenging (Mikecz, 2012; Ostrander, 1993) and to build trust with them can be even more difficult (Thuesen, 2011; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2002. These are key issues when studying elite individuals (Hertz & Imber, 1995). Researchers not only need to understand how to get access to interviewees but also to find out what would be of interest to them (Emmel 2013). These elites are in powerful positions, which brings them certain privileges in the interview (Kvale, 2008). In addition, they might have a strict gatekeeper, and this needs to be considered in order to negotiate the barriers that are in place.

Guanxi (关系) is a common expression in Chinese and refers to relationships both in families and in the wider community. In a business context, *guanxi* occurs through individual interactions first before being applied on a corporate level, which enables one to prevail upon another to provide help or support (Buderi and Huang, 2007). An individual therefore seeks to establish a network of relations in order to gain assistance but recognizing the possibility of future obligations. In particular, a guanxi base which means two person share some aspects of their identification with each other (Jacobs, 1979) greatly affects the existence of guanxi between two people (Tsang, 1998). For example, they come from the same area, have the same family name, or they are classmates or colleagues, and so on. In this case, my work experience helped me to have access to the interviewees because to some extent, these prospective interviewees would perceive me as having a guanxi base with them. Some of these interviewees personally introduced me to their colleagues who were senior managers in the private higher education sector. They called their contacts to introduce my study and asked if I could have a face-to-face interview with them. Most responded positively apart from two who were away on business trips. I followed up the request for an interview by sending messages of appreciation and asking for an appointment. After that, I sent them a formal letter which included the interview questions.

An example of how guanxi was extended is illustrated in the following example. One of the managers gave me an introduction to a senior manager of the education department who happily accepted the request for an interview. When I arrived at his office, he said he was sorry not to have time to talk with me due to meetings, but as he thought my research topic was valuable, he asked if he could assist in some other way. I immediately asked if he could help me connect with two other senior leaders. He not only contacted them but also recommended another senior manager. I was thus able to interview three other well-known senior managers to whom I would otherwise have had difficulty gaining access. From this, it can be deduced that inexperienced researchers should be prepared for the unexpected and be quick to take up new opportunities as they arise.

The researcher's own profile is another factor in convincing an elite person to agree to the interview, since they might consider the rational and value of the interview in terms of the background of the researcher. In my case, I had achieved a bachelor and master's degree in the region where the interviewees work at, and before I commenced my doctoral studies, I worked for 5 years in private higher education field. This meant that I understood much about the current social and economic situations of the region. My professional experience in the private sector of higher education was helpful in securing access to interview senior managers.

Chinese civilization has been greatly influenced by Confucian teaching in which society is seen as a system of interdependent relationships. In this system, the lower level always gives obedience to the higher, the younger pay respect to the elders, and so forth. In Modern China, these still have an influence in daily life as people continue thinking in terms of status and hierarchy. I followed Chinese etiquette and always addressed the interviewees by the title of the position they held, such as president or chair. Even during phone calls and in letters, I was careful to respect their status and position.

Strategy for the Interview

Securing access to these senior managers is just the beginning of the process of the interview but still did not necessarily mean that the research would collect the required data from them. To ensure interviewees adequately expressed their opinions and the quality of data, the following strategies were employed: use of the native language of the interviewee, semistructured interview format, make a recording of the interview, find the most suitable location for the interview, write careful field notes, take notice of the incidental data, have a second interview, and continue to maintain a positive link with the interviewees.

First, all interviews were conducted in the native language of the interviewee. Mandarin is the official language in China, but each region has different dialects, and so the interviews were conducted in the language of choice of the interviewee. This enabled the interviewee to feel more relaxed and encouraged friendly free-flowing discussion.

Second, the semistructured interview format used with these senior managers allowed for flexibility when exploring key points (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2013) and provided the chance for interviewees not only to answer the questions posed but to introduce new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mikecz, 2012) drawing upon their own experiences, beliefs, motives, and perspectives. Using the semistructured interview format also allowed me to explore the interviewees' opinions on the questions, and as Crang and Cook (2007) have shown they allowed follow-up questions to be asked and stories to be explored. They were informed that they may skip any

questions which they considered to be confidential or too sensitive and if they wished we could always return to them later. This allows the interview to be structured by both the interviewer and the interviewees. As Schoenberger (1991) points out, this encourages the interviewees to see themselves as problem solvers and in this way allow problems to be built into the interview for them to solve. Interviewees often answered the same questions from different perspectives which helped me recognize the diversity of these senior managers and inspired me to listen to their different ideas. Although these people had a good educational background, I found it important to express myself in plain language rather than in the academic terminology common to the social sciences. As Oberhauser (1997) points out, although face-to-face interviews are time consuming and costly, it is an opportunity for participant observation. Face-to-face contact in an interviewee's office also allowed me to pay attention to nonverbal cues. It not only made it easier to probe for more detailed answers but also helped to familiarize me with the interviewees' environment and to acquire an insight into their surroundings. It helped to build trust between interviewees and me and enabled me to explore the research questions from an informed position.

In addition, each recording of an interview was transcribed immediately after and the transcription given to the interviewee for his or her approval. This helped to improve my interviewing skills and enabled me to get a clearer idea as to what was needed in the next interview thereby successively improving the quality of each interview. The total length of the transcripts of all the interviews finally amounted to some 420,000 Chinese words. Given the sheer volume of the work involved, researchers should maintain a realistic appreciation of what such research would mean in terms of time and effort. It is better to know in advance how transcripts will be finally formatted because, as in my case, this became a major issue as all the transcripts had to be further translated into English.

Initially, I was worried that senior managers might not allow me to record interviews. However, as Goldstein (2002) argues, many elites are familiar with the journalistic rules for use of information gathered in interview settings. To my surprise, more than 90% were happy about being recorded and several revealed that they used recorded interviews in their daily work. By making recordings, this allowed me to concentrate on the interview questions and respond appropriately. The audio-recordings also captured my own reactions to interviewees which helped to improve my interviewing skills because I was able to listen to my own voice and manner of address. I remember how disappointed I was with some of my own reactions when I later listened to some of the recordings. For example, in the first interview, I realized I talked too much, and in the second, I lost several chances to explore some answers in greater depth by jumping too quickly to another question. Recordings are a useful tool to help a less experienced researcher to reflect and improve upon his or her interviewing skills.

Nelson (1999) and Dowling, Lloyd, and Suchet-Pearson (2016) highlight the way that the sites and spaces in which the interview is conducted can shape the information collected. The choice of interview site serves to define the interviewees as having valuable knowledge to contribute and or situate them in positions of authority (Sin 2003). As Sin illustrates interview sites can reveal significant information on the way interviewees construct their individual and social identities, and these can influence the dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee. It can also reflect or refract the social geographies of interviewees (Elwood & Martin, 2000). As such, the result of the interview is influenced by the circumstantial detail during the interview (Hester & Francis, 1994). In my study, the majority of the interviews were held in the interviewees' offices, one took place at a participant's home while two were at a cafe. Interviews in an office have advantages, as it is usually quiet and allows the interviewee and researcher to concentrate undisturbed. If the interview is carried out in a more public place on campus, passing colleagues may stop to say hello or innocently interrupt. The quality of the recording is often affected by the location, so ensuring the interview is free from background noise makes transcription less difficult and time consuming. With elite interviewees, securing their time free from interruption can be difficult, so it may be worthwhile trying to specify a time and to ask if they can propose a suitable location. Holding the interview in the participant's workplace and personal space can provide incidental insights. Although my research was about administrative and executive processes, I wanted to place these general and abstract concerns into real-life settings. This often helped me gain a deeper understanding of what they meant. The offices I visited were usually functional and uncluttered, and the places for discussion were organized rather than being busy hubs of activity. Some office interiors were designed to reflect the high-level positions and status of their occupiers. An awareness of the environmental and spatial factors can provide an important insight into the character and priorities of such elites.

In order to remember important details, fieldwork notes were made during the whole process to record fresh information and to describe the things I had heard, experienced, and thought at the time. The notes helped give a deeper understanding of the whole discussion. The following is an abstract from a notebook of the second fieldwork period.

The university café has a separate area for the senior managers where they conduct discussions. Usually, the Council Chair, Council members and President have meals in this room at a fixed time. I had lunch with President there when I conducted the first interviews in 2014. As he did on my last visit, the President sat in the central seat opposite the door. According to Chinese culture, this seat belongs to the host. The Chair sits opposite the President which indicates that she is the second host. I did not recognise the special meaning of this arrangement until I interviewed one of the Vice Presidents. He said the President always sat in the host seat whenever discussions and meals took place, demonstrating his key role among senior managers.

Such note taking trained me to be aware of the context within which the fieldwork was happening and to be sensitive to incidental moments that might on reflection throw light upon the cultural and social influences at work. Another abstract from my field notes of the visit in February 2016 illustrates how it helped the study.

> I met the Council Chair at the construction site of the new campus of the university. The engineering truck generated a rumbling sound accompanied occasionally by heave-ho expressions of construction workers. I saw the Chair again after the last interview in August 2014 when he was busy planning to decorate the staff office in the old campus. He is 60 years old and 1.65 meters high. His clothes were covered with mud and he wore grey rubber boots. We found a relatively quiet place on the site and sat on the spot. A nearby worker came to give us a bottle of water and left without saying anything. He sipped his water and said "students can study here next academic year". He speaks the local dialect and his voice is huskier than two years ago. The driver told me he always starts work around 7:40 in the construction site since the construction began a year ago. He said that as long as the university developed well, all of the effort will have been worth it. During my two visits, the Council Chair ate with the construction workers in the canteen and wore the same uniform as them which gave no sense of him being wealthy or a senior management type of person.

This memo painted a portrait that is almost the opposite of that which one usually encounters among senior executive figures in prestigious institutions. However, it helped me to reflect upon why he acted and presented himself in such a manner and helped explain his active philosophy regarding vocational higher education. I came to realize that this council chair was in fact showing leadership and ensuring that he, above anyone else, understood every facet of the new college he was building. He was also less comfortable in the executive boardroom role than when among skilled building operatives. As usual, these field notes were written during the visit and immediately written up after leaving the site. The information contained within such field notes were divided into descriptive and reflective notes. The descriptive ones provided factual data such as visit dates and the environment of the interview, while reflective notes were about the observations made and included some questions and ideas. Field notes helped me to pay attention to everything I saw which later proved to be particularly useful in interpreting interview data. An extension of such notes maintained a continuous research reflective diary that included postinterview reflections.

Participants, and elites in particular, are often distracted during an interview, for example, by their telephone ringing or their personal assistant entering the room (Harvey, 2011). My interviews were also disrupted in both these ways. I agree with Dexter (2006) that when a respondent has to stop to answer the telephone, it is a good opportunity to catch up on notes and gather a clearer picture of the respondent. In terms of my study, it was useful to observe how these senior managers communicated with their colleagues and what kind of issues their colleagues discussed with them. The lesson for researchers is to be prepared to learn from the incidental data coming one's way rather than being exclusively focused upon the formal content of the transcripts produced from the interviews. Their physical movements and the spatial setting of the interview all reveal information that is potentially of value in understanding and exploring the questions.

Data collection and analysis is a dynamic and interactive process. After analyzing the initial interview data, a detailed picture of the governance forms of private universities emerged. The factors affecting governance and the developmental process of the universities that I researched showed considerable differences as well as some similarities. I realized that institutional governance in practice was much more complicated than I had previously thought. In addition, after the fieldwork in 2014, I kept in touch with some participants and found that the institutional governance of the case study universities was changing. To understand these changes, I decided to undertake additional fieldwork in 2016. This second period of fieldwork was not planned when my research was designed in 2013. I revisited 70% of the senior managers who I interviewed in 2014. In addition, five senior managers who I was unable to meet in 2014 were interviewed.

During the fieldwork, I managed some informal conversations with some of the interviewees. We talked about the challenges the university confronts and the strategies adopted to address them. Although this information was not used in the data analysis, it helped me to better understand the questions I was exploring. Based upon the trust and understanding which had developed during the first visit, these senior managers provided further useful information and insights. While this delayed completion of the research, I learned that the data obtained from repeat or follow-up interviews stimulated me to rethink the conclusions drawn from the data gathered from the first interviews. After considerable preparation, 38 senior managers were interviewed over the period from 2014 to 2016. The average age of interviewees was 58, the oldest being 74 and the youngest 42. The length of the interviews varied depending on different factors including the location and the time constraint of the interviewees. Stephens (2007) found that interviews with elites usually lasted 1.5 hr. In my study, the average length of an interview was shorter being around an hour, the longest taking 90 min and the shortest 30 min.

When interviews are concluded one should not assume that the work of the researcher is done. Each interview is an opportunity to establish and maintain a link. In my case, I sent a message to all the participants to express appreciation for their participation. When the whole study finishes, I promised to send them a copy of the findings of the research. Such follow-through contact can pay dividends such as with one interviewee who asked me if I could participate in and speak at a 2-day forum on the governance of private universities.

Arising from this, I met more senior managers of private universities. Such opportunity has greatly helped me to be more involved in the professional field and have opened the door to continuing professional and academic involvements.

Challenges That May Occur During the Interview

One of the first challenges that can occur in interviewing people in positions of power is that of the interview relationship. Senior managers are typically knowledgeable and have developed effective communication skills arising from their role as a leader. They are used to taking the initiative, issuing directions, leading strategic planning, and asserting themselves in relation to those with whom they work. Welch et al. have outlined how this can lead to an imbalance between the less experienced interviewer and the commanding interviewee leading to the interviewer feeling patronized and dominated (Welch et al., 2002). However, as Stacey (1988) argues, the interview relies upon human relationship, engagement, and attachment.

> It places research subjects at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the [researcher]…For no matter how welcome, fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave. (pp. 22–23)

This issue of power is a significant factor in interviewing elites and has attracted a substantial literature (Hunter, 1993; Ostrander, 1993; Welch et al., 2002). Likewise Burnham, Lutz, Grant, and Layton-Henry (2008) point out in interviewing elites, the power is in favor of the interviewees, and they tend to control the agenda (Burnham, Lutz, Grant, & Layton-Henry, 2008; Bygnes, 2008). Rice (2010) emphasizes that:

> Relationships of power, in which institutions are able to exclude and restrict what is uncovered, place researchers in the difficult position of having to maintain positive relations with those they are studying whilst developing critical perspectives. (p. 74)

Such challenges confronted me when embarking upon research into the positions and roles of senior managers. Dexter (2006) and Hunter (1993) point to the need to expect gatekeepers to block access to elite interviewees. After being introduced to a senior manager who is the owner and council chair of the university, I was granted an appointment. On arriving at her office, I was first questioned as to who I was by the doorkeeper of the building and then later by her assistant who told me the council chair was busy and in a meeting. After an hour, I returned but I was again asked to return in an hour. It is essential to make a good impression relationship with the gatekeepers. This is helped by dressing appropriately and speaking with polite confidence.

When the interview commenced, I always asked whether I might record our conversation. In the previous example, the lady was unhappy with this and refused the request. After this,

she selected some questions from the list I had sent her, and she spent around 30 min talking to me without any record being taken. During the interview, I was subordinated to the position of a passive listener unable to record or to engage in a dialogue. By the end of the interview, her assistant came into her office to check a meeting agenda with her, so I sat quietly waiting. To my surprise, she passed the list of interview questions to her assistant to ask for some documents relating to the questions. These documents provided important background information on the very subjects I was trying to explore. This interview not only gave me an insight into some of the facets of authority but also taught me patience and skill in how to relate to senior managers who have different leadership styles.

Another example comes from an interview undertaken with a university president who I had met twice before from my previous work. I contacted him directly to ask whether I might interview him and he agreed to my request. When I arrived, his office was locked. His assistant told me he was having a meeting. He returned after 1.5 hr, but people began streaming in and out of his office while I waited. After another hour, when he was on his own, I went into his office. He immediately asked me why I did not come on time. I was surprised but replied that I had in fact arrived at his assistant's office 2 hr ago. He then asked me whether I had a printed copy of the questions. He refused to allow me to record the interview or even to make any notes. After 10 min, I tentatively asked again if I could take notes on the interview, he hesitated a moment and then agreed. Toward the end of the interview, a manager from the local educational department came to visit him. I had already arranged an interview appointment with this manager for 2 days later. When he saw me there, he was very friendly and reminded me about our future appointment at his office. The president was surprised and asked how we knew each other and the manager explained. Upon receiving this information about me, the president changed his manner toward me and called upon his assistant to print some useful documents to give me. In this interview, I experienced how he had initially adopted a particular manner of address toward me based upon his prior perception of my status but changed during the interview to another mode of address when informed about me by someone of high status. This experience helped me to understand more about power relations and trust-building that existed within senior management circles.

The second challenge is how to avoid unnecessary distractions from a lack of preparation. A smartphone usually has an excellent record function, so I often used mine to record interviews, but initially I did not realize I needed to block incoming calls. During the fifth interview, there was an unknown caller, so I hung up immediately. After a minute, the phone number rang again and once again I hung up. I noticed the interviewee was frowning, but he kept talking. After another 2 min, it rang a third time, and although I was upset about this, I thought it might be somebody in an emergency, so I answered the call. A lady asked me if I had an interest in buying a car! Although I was annoyed at the unwanted interruption, I tried to keep calm and said that I was not interested and hung up. I

apologized to the interviewee for the interruption and sought to give the person my undivided attention and soon he relaxed, and we continued our conversation. After the interview, I called the number back because I was curious to know why the lady repeatedly called me after I had hung up 2 times. She replied that it was her first day of work as a telemarketer and that naturally she had to call me again after I hung up. I was dumbfounded to find that this young woman was, like me, a novice as well. After that, I always blocked incoming calls when using the smartphone as a recorder. The lesson for researchers is to be prepared well in all aspects in order to avoid unnecessary distractions and avoidable hitches.

A third challenge is when the technology one is depending on malfunctions. Once, after an interview was previously postponed, I finally met with my interviewee but only after waiting 2 hr in his personal assistant's office. He was friendly and gave me a lot of information. The interview lasted for 70 min and was, I believed, being recorded on my recorder. When at home I commenced transcribing the discussion, I found that only 5 min had been recorded. I called the company who had manufactured the recorder to see whether it was possible to recover more of the recording, and although I tried different suggestions they made, I failed to recover the recording. I was disappointed and quickly tried to remember all the points he made in the interview, but unfortunately, I was only able to recall a few comments from all he had said. From that time onward, I always used two recorders in case of any unexpected accident and checked that they were functioning before commencing with the full formal interview.

Issues of ethics also need to be addressed when an inexperienced researcher interviews elites. As all the people interviewed in this research had occupied a high-level position in the sector and many of them are multimillionaires, there was a degree of sensitivity as to their identities, which could affect what they felt able to say during an interview. They are usually sensitive to the boundaries of the investigation, and they may have established lines marking those boundaries before the interview. They were given an information sheet, the interview questions, and a consent form before the interview in order to ensure that the purpose of the research and their rights were understood. All interviewees were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time and could decline to answer any question; they were also told that it was not necessary to follow the questions in any strict order. Two potential informants refused to be interviewed after receiving the questionnaire because they thought some questions were too sensitive. As mentioned previously in this article, two interviewees refused to be recorded during the interview. In order to protect their privacy, they were identified using letters, and no actual names of people or institutions were used in the analysis so as to protect their anonymity. Sometimes such formalities appear painstaking and even unnecessary, but these procedures established in the minds of participants a sense that the researcher was professional and could be trusted.

Reflection on the Study

As Elwood and Martin (2000) emphasize, reflections on the microgeographies of interviews start before the interviewing and continue throughout the research. The researcher conducts the study between the researcher and the researched in which the researchers' characteristics and experiences construct the perceptions and interpretations of the data and the fieldwork experience (Hastrup, 1992; McDowell, 1992). My study explored a field in which I had previous working experience, and this is a common reason why many studies are initiated. However, if a study explores a field in which the researcher has prior experience, there is a potential danger for there to be a subjective bias in data collection. In my case, my first strategy to avoid bias was to be careful choose case studies universities which I did not familiar with. Indeed, it was the first time I had formally interviewed any of the senior personnel in the study, and the first time I had met three quarters of those interviewed. I was therefore able to approach these participants without preconceptions.

The second strategy was that documentary sources were used alongside interview transcripts to help identify any biases. Documents are a rich source of qualitative data, as they provide insights into the origins and meanings of the processes and practices being discussed (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Mason, 2002; Prior, 2004). Such data allow researchers to obtain information pertaining to the contexts being explored (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In particular, systematic searches for relevant documents such as laws, policies, and regulations play a crucial role in case study research (Yin, 2013). These different forms of data collection can enhance the reliability of qualitative research (Bailey, 2007). Altogether, 51 official documents were collected for this study to avoid the study being reliant upon a single source of data about the internal constitutional and administrative arrangements of a university. The third strategy used was to undertake a cluster of interviews within the same institution, as the data could then be compared and contrasted. In addition, the second series of interviews conducted 2 years after the first also allowed all information previously provided by the interviewees to be checked as to its consistency and coherence. These strategies not only helped avoid any potential bias from my personal experience but also checked the accuracy of the data from the elite interviewees. Therefore, various tools are required to avoid the prejudices from both the researcher and the interviewees.

The researchers occupy different positions arising a result from their gender, age, and ethnicity (Hastrup, 1992), which can affect the biographies, personal histories, and lived experiences they record (England, 1994). These subjectivities influence their research in the field (Herod, 1993), in which they are engaged. Regarding my position in this study, it would be inaccurate to characterize this into the simple "outsider" versus "insider" dichotomy. For example, in my study, being at the time a doctoral student at a university with an international reputation made me an outsider to the interviewees, but it also

conferred upon me a status because academics are highly regarded in Chinese society. However, as a Chinese lady with first-hand experience of life in China, and my professional work in the field of private higher education over several years, this made me more like an insider. I suspect that this combination of factors was crucial in securing some of the interviews. It is helpful if the researcher can establish in the mind of the elite individual some clarity about who you are and the purpose of the research. In my case, there was a recognized need for research because private universities in China were experiencing significant transformation at that particular period, and I wanted to capture what was happening. Had I left it for another 2 years, much would have changed in the sector. I was assisted by a general sense among the participants who they were involved in building something new and of national importance, so there was a willingness for them to speak about what they had been doing.

Another notable issue is the role of women in the field. In Peggy Golde's (1986) book *Women in the Field*, she sets the stage for a discussion of the dilemmas women researchers face during fieldwork. Women in the field may, for example, be denied access to male-dominated groups, be subjected to sexual advances, and they may be given labels that affect their emotional stability and access. When I did my interviews 30 years after Golde had written her book, many of the issues she describes did not arise; on the contrary, many interviewees expressed positive interest in and wished to provide support for the study. Marshall (1984) points out women researchers must be aware of research issues like role, reciprocity, and ethics. In particular, they may encounter the criticism that they take advantage of male participants who may respond to them differently to how they would if they had been male. Nowadays, with the increasing numbers of women in the professional field, being in the presence of women is common during the daily work of these male managers. Nevertheless, it is notable that the senior managers in my study are predominantly male.

Conclusion

Making sense of power relations in complex societies requires interviewing elite members of the society as well as subordinates who are usually more accessible. Face-to-face interviews of people in high-level positions are often time consuming and challenging, especially for younger researchers. Nevertheless, I argue that to do this process in person is a valuable for a researcher because it immerses them in the fine detail of the data. An immediate concern will be the need for careful preparation both in studying the background of key figures and in drafting an appropriate schedule of questions and topics for the interview. Second, there is the need to establish access to the elite person, which will usually involve the interviewer assuming a negotiated position. Third, there is the need to build a mutual trust between interviewer and interviewee, which requires not only integrity on the part of the interviewer but also their participation in relevant social networks. Fourth, holding the

interview in the participant's workplace and personal space provides additional insights as mentioned by Sin (2003). Personal aspects of the character and life of the elite participant can often be revealed through the setting where the interview takes place. For the new researcher, the challenges of interviewing elite are great, but they can be addressed if the changing roles of power and authority in modern society are to be studied.

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