INTERVIEWING ELITES: TIPS AND TRICKS FOR A NOVICE

SHAHBAZ ALI KHAN

School of Government, University Utara Malaysia & The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan.
Email: shahbaz.ali@iub.edu.pk

Dr. NOR AZIZAH ZAINAL ABIDIN

School of Government, University Utara Malaysia. Email: norazizah@uum.edu.my

Abstract

Interview is a common data collection tool used in qualitative research. While qualitative interviews provide an excellent means to gain in-depth knowledge of people's experiences from their own perspectives, a few potential risks can emerge during their conduct. Interviews will become more challenging when the potential participants involve a group of elites. Considering challenges related to access, power dynamics, technological issues, ethical considerations, and methodology, the purpose of this study is to identify some tips and tricks for a novice researcher in conducting elite interviews. Using a reflection method in conducting interviews with police elite in Pakistan during my PhD study and analysis of related books and journals, this paper outlines tips and tricks for novice researchers who plan to interview elites as respondents of their studies.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Elite Interviews, Challenges, Tips and Tricks.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers confront a variety of challenges while conducting elite interviews. Elites are individuals with a high degree of knowledge and authority in their respective domains (Desmond, 2004; Gill & Baillie, 2018a; Hammett & Sporton, 2012; Higgins & Kunz, 2022; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). These may include politicians, bureaucrats, policymakers, academics, media figures, etc. The information and insights they provide can lead researchers to develop a better understanding of the phenomena under study and adequately help them understand intricate political, social, and economic complexities. However, communicating and comprehending with such elites requires specific skills and methods (Edwards & Holland, 2020). There is a core difference between a standard interview and an elite interview (Gill & Baillie, 2018). The power imbalance is evident in elite interviews and the equilibrium is shifted toward the elites. Further, these elites are not easy to access due to their tendency to guard them from frequent interactions and their official commitments. Reaching out to them is time-consuming and requires sophisticated progression (Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013) The purpose of this paper is to investigate the challenges and difficulties associated with the conduct of elite interviews for a novice. This research specifically addresses the challenges related to access, power dynamics, technological issues, ethical considerations, and methodology. This research will help future researchers comprehend the complexities related to the conduct of elite interviews and navigate the challenges.

Defining Elite Participants

The term "elite" has varied definitions and has been discussed in academic literature in multiple ways. It can refer to distinct individuals or entities that can change the decisions of others under

their authority or position (Desmond, 2004b). Elites are individuals who can influence others via societal links, social capital, and strategic standings within social systems (Goldstein, 2002). Some studies propose that elite status is derived by possessing knowledge, prestige, and being close to authority (Abels & Behrens, 2009). Accessing these elites is more challenging than accessing other social groupings. It can become more challenging if the interviewee is uncooperative, unhelpful, or less communicative (Desmond, 2004b). Elites are not extensively researched due to their capacity to shield themselves from investigation via their power and influence. Before delving into the methodological challenges, defining who qualifies as an elite participant is crucial. In the context of qualitative research, elite participants typically refer to individuals who occupy positions of power, influence, or prestige within a specific domain (Sabot, 1999). This could include top-level executives, government officials, renowned scholars, or industry leaders. Engaging with such participants requires researchers to navigate a unique set of challenges that extend beyond the traditional dynamics of qualitative interviews.

STRATEGY FOR INTERVIEWING ELITES: TIPS & TRICKS

Pre-Interview Considerations

Before the conduct of the interview, it is very important for a novice researcher to clearly figure out the rationale of the study. They should have a clear understanding of research objectives, methodology and criteria for selecting participants which suit the study setting. The area of my PhD research was police reforms, which had been a long-standing issue in Pakistan. Reforms initiatives are aimed at improving the efficiency and accountability of law enforcement agencies. Despite this, the realization of these reforms has been mired with numerous challenges leading to success. My research highlights some challenges and strategies to overcome them by investigating views from senior officers both involved directly with or who were implementing these reforms thereafter. In pursuance of the research objectives, selecting senior police officers as participants is a logical decision. Senior officials are also steeped in the institutional know-how of organization dynamics and structural impediments to police reform implementation. Their voices are important to understand the visible and hidden problems encountered during this reform. By including these main stakeholders, the research ensures that the results are representative of all aspects of a comprehensive reform process supported and controlled from within police management layers, which allows for further nuanced reflection on challenges. Novice researchers can use this tip and look for the participants in their related domains which aligns with their study setting.

Reaching Out to Interviewees-Networking

One of the important strategies to reach out to the elites is networking. As elites are not easy to access, it would be challenging for a novice to access them and get them as interview participant without networking. Before approaching elite participants for formal interviews, novice researchers should invest time in preliminary relationship building. This could involve attending relevant events, engaging with the participant's work or initiatives, or establishing connections through mutual contacts. Building familiarity beforehand increases the likelihood of obtaining consent and cooperation (Knott et al., 2022). Relationship building extends to

initial communication, where researchers should clearly articulate the purpose of the study, the potential impact of the participant's involvement, and the ethical considerations guiding the research. This phase sets the tone for a collaborative and mutually beneficial engagement (Goldstein, 2002).

I am currently employed as a Faculty Member in Public Administration at a government-sector institution. My professional experience in the public sector university helped me secure access to interview senior police officers. They viewed me as a credible and reliable researcher due to my role as a teacher and researcher in a government sector university. One senior police officer helped me a lot. I established a good rapport and relationship with him during his posting in my hometown and his frequent visits to my university in seminars and academic gatherings. He introduced me to his colleagues who held important senior positions in the police force. He contacted his acquaintances to present my research and inquired about the possibility of arranging an in-person interview.

Most people answered positively, except for three individuals who were preoccupied with their professional obligations. I followed up on the interview request by expressing gratitude and requesting a meeting. Subsequently, I contacted them via email and WhatsApp, sending a formal letter with the interview questions, protocols, and other relevant information. An IGP introduced me to a senior police official who willingly agreed to be interviewed. Upon my arrival in his office, he expressed regret for not being able to engage in a conversation with me due to prior commitments.

However, recognizing the significance of my study topic, he offered his assistance in an alternative capacity. I promptly inquired whether he might help me get in contact with two top executives of the police. He not only reached out to them but also suggested other senior police officers. I interviewed three other prominent senior IGP's who would have been hard to get otherwise. Inexperienced researchers should anticipate the unexpected and promptly seize fresh chances. Furthermore, the researcher's profile can also influence an elite individual's decision to agree to an interview based on the researcher's history, reasons, and perceived value of the interview.

Communication

Good and formal communication to reach out to elites is very crucial. Novice researchers should consider the cultural context as well while contacting elites. In Pakistani society, a significant power distance prevails, where deference to authority is deeply ingrained. This cultural dynamic dictate that those lower in rank defer to those higher and that the younger generation show reverence to their elders. Such norms continue to shape daily interactions, with individuals often viewing the world through the lens of status and hierarchy.

In my interactions, I adhered to these indigenous customs, always addressing interviewees by their official titles, such as Inspector General Police (IGP), and employing respectful prefixes like "respected sir." Even in phone conversations and text messages, I made a conscious effort to acknowledge and honor their positions of authority. An illustrative example is provided below.

"Slam respected sir.

I am doing PhD in Police Reforms from a public sector university in Malaysia. If you allow me, I can share my research brief and questions with you. I would be honored to have your valuable time and input for my research thesis.

Best regards"

Selection of Participants

Accessing elites can be tricky, and establishing trust with them can be even more difficult. These are crucial factors to consider while examining top people. Novice researchers must comprehend how to gain access to interviewees and determine what topics would capture their interest. (Mikecz, 2012). My research focuses on the views and insights of senior police officers in Pakistan regarding the institutional governance and challenges of police reform implementation, as these individuals have qualities, perspectives, and experiences relevant to this social context. Interviews are crucial when historical events and individuals' emotions and interpretations cannot be directly observed (Aksom & Tymchenko, 2020). Several senior police officers, both present and retired, were interviewed. These officers included the serving Inspector General of Police in different provinces and the capital territory. One IGP served as the Federal Ombudsman, and three were part of a police reform group established by the government of Pakistan, one of them is among the senior most serving Inspector General of the Police in the country. All participants have held high positions for more than 25 years and have experience in policing reforms at national and international levels. Summary of the participants who were selected for this study is as follows: -

Participant	Designation	Years of Service
P01	Inspector General of Police (IGP)	25
P02	Commandant National Police Academy (IGP)	27
P03	Inspector General of Police (IGP)	31
P04	Inspector General of Police (IGP)	34
P05	Inspector General of Police (IGP)	29
P06	Inspector General of Police (IGP)	28
P07	Inspector General of Police (IGP)	27
P08	Inspector General of Police (IGP)	32
P09	Inspector General of Police (IGP)	30
P10	Director General National Police Bureau (IGP) BureauInspector General of Police (IGP)	33

Source: Authors' Compilation

Designing and Preparing Interview Questions

Due to the challenging nature of top interviews, meticulous preparation is crucial. My initial step was to carefully craft the interview questions. Researchers like Gabriele Abels and Maria Behrens (2009), suggest beginning the interview with broad inquiries about the individual's past to encourage conversation, as people typically enjoy discussing themselves (Abels &

Behrens, 2009). I have started my interview questions by asking about the respondents' current role, overall responsibilities, and tasks they tend to perform as senior police officers, before progressing to more detailed inquiries. For instance, the initial inquiry frequently pertained to "your position and duties in your present employment". "How long have you been engaged in law enforcement and what are some of the significant responsibilities you have held during that time"? Some experts stress that the form and phrasing of questions can influence the responses obtained (Beamer, 2007).

Based on Margaret Desmond's suggestion to avoid using standard questions in a fixed order for all interviewees (Desmond, 2004b), I created a set of questions to maintain flexibility in selecting and arranging questions for different interviewees. This approach acknowledges that certain questions may not be suitable or pertinent for some interviewees. Continuously questioning myself about the desired outcomes of the interview aided in defining its precise aim. My work primarily examined the challenges in implementing policing reforms in Pakistan from the viewpoint of senior police officials. I aimed to comprehend the method, rationale, and principles guiding the implementation of police reforms. Furthermore, as a Ph.D. student, I had the opportunity to engage in discussions with my supervisor, who has vast experience in qualitative research. Her input on the question design was beneficial and productive. It is suggested that novice researchers should talk to a senior academic colleague about the technical components of these interviews (Khemlani David, 2014).

Pilot Interviews

It is always a good tip for novice researchers to go for a pilot interview before going for actual interview. Two pilot interviews were conducted before I proceeded with the actual interviews. Due to a lack of expertise in conducting such discussions, I interacted with two police officers recommended by a friend (serving as a Brigadier in the Pakistan Army) to enhance my interviewing skills. The individuals offered valuable recommendations. It helped improve the interview questions and ensured they were more precise and directly related to the study questions. The advice was to acknowledge respondents' ideas and stay focused. It was also recommended to ask for clarification if something remains unclear. Ask for follow-up questions such as "why" and "how". They also advised me to take notes during the interview to seek clarity at the end without interrupting the interviewee. Novice researchers should conduct pilot interviews for careful evaluation before proceeding with the complete series of interviews (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002).

Background Information of Elites

Another important step in preparation involved acquiring a more profound understanding of the interviewee's personal and professional background. Prior understanding of the interviewee's backdrop, such as education, life history, and work, is crucial when preparing to interview someone of high status (Smith, 2006). Before the actual interview, relevant websites were researched for professional background checks and to track the recent employment positions of the interviewees. This helped me develop a good picture of the interviewee and it was convenient for me to communicate and interact with them by knowing certain stuff about

them and earning their trust. During an interview, one of the interviewees expressed astonishment and satisfaction upon discovering that I was already well-informed about his profession and educational history. In the beginning, I told him "You started your professional career as a lecturer in quantum physics and later you joined the police service of Pakistan". This was a pleasant surprise for him as he was convinced that I came prepared for the interview. Novice researchers should investigate the background information of the elites to gain a better understanding of the interviewees' characteristics before conducting the interview.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS & TIPS DURING THE INTERVIEW

Flexibility

There are certain things which novice researcher should consider while conducting interviews. Gaining access to these senior officers marks just the beginning of the interview process; it doesn't guarantee data collection. To ensure interviewees freely express their opinions and provide quality data, various strategies were employed: utilizing the interviewee's native language, adopting a semi-structured interview format, recording the interviews, selecting appropriate interview locations, meticulous field notetaking, observing incidental data, and maintaining positive rapport with interviewees.

Initially, interviews were conducted in the interviewee's native language, Urdu being Pakistan's official language. However, since senior officers were proficient in English as well, interviews were conducted bilingually or as per the interviewee's preference. This approach fostered a relaxed atmosphere, encouraging open and friendly discussions.

Initially, I harbored concerns that senior officers might refuse to be recorded during interviews. However, as mentioned by Gabriel and Maria, many elites are well-versed in the journalistic rules governing interview settings (Abels & Behrens, 2009). Additionally, seeking prior permission by submitting consent forms yielded positive results, with over 90% of participants consenting to recordings.

Interviewees were informed they could skip questions deemed confidential or sensitive, promoting a collaborative interview structure where both parties could shape the conversation. Kenneth Goldstein suggests this approach encourages interviewees to perceive themselves as problem solvers, thus incorporating challenges into the interview process for them to tackle (Goldstein, 2002).

Additionally, each interview recording was promptly transcribed after its completion. This process greatly enhanced my interviewing skills, providing valuable insights into what was necessary for subsequent interviews, thereby progressively enhancing the quality of each interaction. Given the extensive workload involved, researchers need to have a realistic understanding of the time and effort required (Desmond, 2004b). It's advisable to anticipate how transcripts will be formatted beforehand, as I encountered challenges in translating all transcripts into English. To overcome this challenge, I took help from one of the Professors in the English department at my university.

Elaborative

The semi-structured interview format used with senior officers allowed flexibility in exploring key points and encouraged them to introduce new ideas based on their experiences, beliefs, motives, and perspectives (Knott et al., 2022). This format also facilitated follow-up questions, ensuring comprehensive responses. It's fascinating how interviewees often provided diverse perspectives on the same questions, allowing me to appreciate the breadth of viewpoints among these senior officers and motivating me to attentively listen to their various ideas.

Recording interviews allowed me to focus on questions and respond appropriately, while also capturing my reactions to interviewees. Reviewing these recordings proved insightful, highlighting areas for improvement in my interviewing skills. For instance, I noticed instances where I spoke excessively during the first interview and missed opportunities for deeper exploration in the second by transitioning too quickly between questions. Reflecting on these recordings proved invaluable in refining my interviewing techniques.

Contextual Understanding

As elaborated by Glenn Beamer, face-to-face interviews demand time and resources, but they also offer valuable opportunities for participant observation (Beamer, 2007). Conducting interviews in person, especially in the interviewee's office, enabled me to observe nonverbal cues, delve deeper into responses, and gain insights into their environment. This direct contact not only fostered trust between the interviewees and myself but also provided me with a nuanced understanding of the research questions.

Sarah A. Elwood and Deborah G. Martin emphasized how the choice of interview location can influence the information gathered. Conducting interviews in various settings offers unique insights into interviewees' perspectives and experiences, thereby enriching the data collection process (Elwood & Martin, 2000). In my research, most interviews took place in the interviewees' offices, one occurred at a participant's home, and two were conducted at a café. Conducting interviews in office settings offers advantages such as tranquility, allowing both the interviewee and researcher to engage without distractions. Conversely, public places on campus may invite interruptions from passing acquaintances, potentially affecting the quality of recordings and subsequent transcription efforts (Jenner & Myers, 2019).

Securing uninterrupted time, particularly with elite interviewees, can pose challenges. Hence, specifying a convenient time and discussing suitable locations can be beneficial. Conducting interviews in participants' workplaces or personal spaces may offer unexpected insights into their perspectives and experiences (Bolderston, 2012).

The selection of interview venues not only acknowledges the valuable knowledge of the interviewees but also positions them as authorities in their field. As I have observed, the interview setting can unveil crucial insights into how interviewees shape their individual and social identities, ultimately influencing the dynamics of our interactions. Moreover, it can mirror or alter the social landscapes within which interviewees operate, thereby impacting the outcomes of our discussions (Halse et al., 2023).

Dominating Attitude of the Participant

When conducting interviews with people who hold positions of authority, one of the first issues that may arise is the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. Senior managers often possess a high level of expertise and have developed the ability to communicate effectively (Smith, 2006). The act of taking the initiative, issuing instructions, leading strategic planning, and asserting themselves with people with whom they collaborate is something that they are accustomed to doing (Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013b). Researchers have hinted at how this could end up in an imbalance between the interviewer having less expertise and the interviewee with more experience, which may lead the interviewer to feel patronized and dominated by the interviewee (Lammers et al., 2013). The power is to the interviewees' advantage, and they tend to dictate the agenda (Hammett & Sporton, 2012b; Li, 2022; Smith, 2006). This is something that may be observed by novice researchers as well. Relationships of power, in which institutions can exclude and restrict what is discovered, put researchers in the challenging position to retain positive interactions with the people they are studying while simultaneously forming critical perspectives, as emphasized by Rosalind Edwards & Janet Holland(Edwards & Holland, 2020b).

At the start of every interview, I made it a point to inquire about the possibility of recording our talk. As was demonstrated in the first interview, the gentleman was dissatisfied with this and declined the request. Following this, he chose a few questions from the list that I had supplied him, and he then decided to talk to me for almost thirty minutes without any record being taken of our conversation. During the interview, I was relegated to the role of a passive listener, and I was not permitted to record conversations or participate in conversations. By the time the interview was over, his secretary had arrived at his office to check the agenda for a meeting with him, so I sat quietly waiting for him to return. The fact that he forwarded the list of interview questions to his assistant to request some documents that were relevant to the questions came as a complete surprise to me. The publications I was looking at provided me with essential background knowledge on the exact topics that I was attempting to investigate. Not only did this interview teach me patience and the ability to relate to senior officers who have diverse leadership styles, but it also provided me with an understanding of some of the aspects of authority that I was previously unaware of.

In another interview that was conducted with an IGP who I had previously met twice in some conferences related to policing affairs in Pakistan. I made direct contact with him to inquire about the possibility of doing an interview with him, and he consented to my request. His office was locked when I arrived at the location. I was informed by his assistant that he was scheduling a meeting. Although he returned after a period of one and a half hours, people started coming in and going out of his office while I was waiting. Following an additional hour, when he was by himself, I went into his office to speak with him. Without delay, he inquired as to the reason for my tardiness on arriving. Though I was taken aback, I responded by stating that I had in fact arrived at his assistant's office two hours earlier. Afterwards, he inquired as to whether I possessed a printed copy of the questions which I provided him. The interview was not recorded, and he did not even permit me to take any notes during the conversation. After

waiting for ten minutes, I asked him once more if I might take notes during the interview. He hesitated for a bit before finally agreeing to let me do so. When the interview was ending, a retired IGP visited him. Earlier, I had already scheduled a meeting with this officer for an interview that would take place two days later. When he spotted me there, he welcomed me with open arms and reminded me that we had an appointment scheduled to meet at his office shortly. IGP was taken aback and inquired about our familiarity with one another, to which the visiting officer explained.

In response to the information that was provided to him about me, the IGP altered his demeanor toward me and asked his assistant to print out certain documents that would be of use to me. During this interview, I had the opportunity to see how he had first adopted a particular style of address towards me based on his previous opinion of my position. However, during the interview, he changed his tone, when he realized that I am already familiar with the senior policing circles. Through this experience, I was able to get a deeper comprehension of the power dynamics and trust-building processes that were prevalent inside senior management spheres.

Interviews with elite participants can have a major impact on the quality and authenticity of responses due to the power dynamics that are inherent in the interviews. There is a possibility that responses will be guarded or curated due to the perceived power difference that exists between the researcher and the selective participant (Bolderston, 2012). Elite participants may be aware of their public image or the obligations they have within their organization, which could potentially influence the information that they choose to release (Beamer, 2007).

While conducting the interview, the novice researchers must try to reduce the power dynamics, by building an open and collaborative environment. It is possible to contribute to a more egalitarian conversation by recognizing the participant's knowledge and putting an emphasis on the potential for mutual learning. In addition, researchers should make it a priority to establish a secure environment in which high-level participants can freely express their opinions without worrying about the consequences of doing so (Kirkevold & Bergland, 2007).

Technological Malfunctions

Sometimes technological malfunction may ruin the quality of the interview recordings (Gill & Baillie, 2018b). As in my case, I was relying on my smartphone as it has an excellent recording function. Further, it also saved me from the hassle of having extra gadgets with me during my travel to the places of the interviewee as all my interviews were hundreds of kilometers away from my hometown and workplace.

During one interview, I forgot to put my phone on airplane mode to block incoming calls to avoid disturbance during an interview. During the middle of the interview, my phone started ringing and I had to rush to the table of the interviewee as I placed my phone before him for recording. This whole scene was very unpleasant as the interviewee got annoyed with this and he did not like the event. I apologized to him and switched off my phone. But this was a blunder as switching off my phone also halted the recording function (which I did not realize at that time).

When I finished the interview and tried to save the recorded file, I was shocked to realize that my phone was switched off. I had no other option but to regret it. I tried to remember the key points and the discussion but not all can be memorized.

I realized my mistake and remained careful in the future. Another thing that I encountered after the first interview was that the quality of the recording was not good, and the voice of the interviewee was hardly audible as he was soft-spoken and had a low-pitched voice. Luckily, with the help of some professional audio editors I managed to get better voice quality which helped me during transcription. Keeping that in mind I always tested voice quality by recording for a few seconds during the subsequent interviews. Novice researchers can learn a lesson from this by preparing themselves for any unseen event that may happen during the interview. Furthermore, no technology is flawless, and any malfunction can happen with the devices being used to record the interview. It would be good to have an extra device to avoid any unwanted loss.

Tailored Interview Approaches

Recognizing the unique dynamics of elite interviews, novice researchers should adopt tailored approaches that align with the participant's preferences and comfort levels. This could involve offering flexible interview formats, such as in-person or virtual options, to accommodate the participant's schedule and preferences (Jenner & Myers, 2019). Tailoring interview approaches also means customizing questions to suit the participant's expertise and experiences. Avoiding generic or formulaic questions and delving into specific aspects of the participant's domain of influence can elicit more nuanced and insightful responses (Donner, 2004).

Reflexivity and Positionality

Acknowledging and navigating one's own biases, assumptions, and positionality is crucial when conducting interviews with elite participants. Novice researchers should engage in ongoing reflexivity, reflecting on how their background, experiences, and perspectives may influence the research process and outcomes (Palaganas et al., 2017). This self-awareness contributes to the researcher's ability to adapt their approach based on the nuances of each interview. It also ensures that biases are recognized and mitigated, allowing for a more objective and credible study.

CONCLUSION

Qualitative research with elite participants is a dynamic and rewarding endeavor, but it comes with a set of challenges for novice researchers. Navigating these challenges requires a combination of strategic planning, ethical considerations, and adaptability. By understanding the unique dynamics of engaging with elite participants and implementing thoughtful methodological strategies, researchers can unlock valuable insights that contribute to the broader body of knowledge in their respective fields. The tips and tricks discussed in this paper serves as a guide for novice researchers venturing into the realm of elite interviews, offering practical insights to enhance the quality and impact of their qualitative studies.

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