Rethinking Qualitative Methodology around Masculinity

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Given the predominance of men among elites, it is remarkable how little scholarship there is on the challenges of qualitative empirical work on elite men, especially work that interrogates the intersection of gender and class. We have both sought to include elite men as subjects, noting that the gender of our subjects, their social power, and our own gender performance have played a central role in defining our efficacy as researchers. Darren has researched top French corporate boards (e.g., Rosenblum and Roithmayr 2015). Janet has researched male dominance in the politics of Iceland and Russia (e.g., Johnson 2016; Johnson, Einarsdóttir, and Pétursdóttir 2013). This essay elaborates the challenges in researching elite men and explores the tactics we developed in response to the dynamic gender performances in the interviews, bringing Darren's insights as a legal scholar looking at economic elites to questions about male overrepresentation in politics.

MALE ELITES AND THE CHALLENGES OF "INTERVIEWING UP"

The scholarship on interviewing elites suggests key challenges, such as gaining access, establishing rapport in order to elicit honest views, and addressing the researcher's positionality (Mikecz 2012), but we argue that it is essential to foreground gender. Most elites are men, and, as feminist theorists have noted, elite men reflect "hegemonic masculinity," the masculine ideal that confers the most power in a society (Bjarnegård 2013). With an unusual insider-outsider perspective, Jón Gnarr (2015), the gender-bending satirist-turned-mayor of Reykjavik, describes the male elite in politics as a "bully" who "strides through airports and takes the pulpit … He always has the right of way. He knows everything better than anybody else and he is always right." Elite men are also are bound by homosociality, same-sex social bonds, usually between men.

These gendered characteristics are part of the research challenges. Hegemonic masculinity requires that male elites are "inaccessible," even if their names are readily available, because they are busy "getting things done." To speak to this gendered performance, Darren was advised to request only a

petite heure, a "short hour." In Russia and Iceland, Janet has found that such masculinity and homosociality masks the informality of how politics really works — with elites meeting with their chums in saunas and backyards — making even the identification of elites very difficult. Hegemonic masculinity and homosociality among elite men potentiate problems of eliciting honest views. Penalties for violating these norms are high — from social exclusion and reduced spoils of their status to even death in authoritarian regimes. Might there be an inverse relationship between performance of masculinity and truth telling? If much of homosociality is unarticulated — what LeBlanc (2010) describes as "the art of the gut" — male elites may not be able to describe what they are doing, even if they wanted to.

The researcher's positionality is particularly gendered. Bjarnegård (2013, 24–25) argues that homosociality is a form of "bonding social capital" that makes male-dominated elite networks rational, as being of the same sex can help individuals "understand and thus predict each other's behavior." This suggests that male elites will be more honest if they perceive the interviewer is similarly masculine. What does a researcher do when they cannot meet those ideals?

DARREN: SNOWBALL SAMPLING AND HOMOSOCIALITY AMONG FRENCH ECONOMIC ELITES

In my interviews with corporate leaders, I was researching how France's 40% quota for women on corporate boards would affect corporate governance. I began my project with the hope that I would be able to interview a sizeable number of top firm board members — a challenge given the closed nature of French elite society. Given the difficulty of obtaining my first interview, it became clear that the project's success depended on the interviewee's willingness to contact other potential interviewees. These male bankers, including my first interviewee, nearly exclusively wear Hermès ties, tied with rear of the tie left dangling so that the Hermès name might be visible. I wore my New York banker's outfit — conservative suit, conservative tie — and, substantively, this first interview went well. At some point, he noted that he had agreed only to a petite heure, so I inquired whether he would forward my name to other board members. He looked at me, paused, and then looked at my Hermès tie up, down, and up again. He then told me he would help me because I was an *honnête homme*, literally an "honest man" but better translated as a "man of his word." This success

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in demonstrating the cultural competence of elite masculinity opened doors to further contacts.

The interviewing process educated me about the tight-knit French elites, which became a key element of how the snowball method worked for my interviews. Many of the board members of France's top companies served on interlocking boards and had attended a set of elite schools known as the Grandes Écoles, the French equivalent of the Ivy League. Others were members of controlling families, "self-made" success stories, and even union representatives (as required on most boards). My arrival via their professional network proved to be my key source of legitimacy. In short, one's network plays a larger role than one's actual experience. This seemed true for all my interviewees, even though they were quite diverse with regard to their career paths to the corporate board. My relatively traditional masculine self-presentation in that context allowed me to gain men's trust while hampering it with women.

This same sex and gender framework allowed some male board members to speak more frankly with me as a "man." Perhaps this owed to my passing as heterosexual in France, while in the United States, I get coded as gay. A standout was when one interviewee referred to a fellow (female) board member as a "bitch." While he meant it as a compliment for her "aggressive" posturing, he probably would have restrained his language for me had I been a woman.

JANET: INDIRECT OBSERVATION IN RUSSIA AND ICELAND

In analyzing male dominance in the politics of Iceland, I probably could have done somewhat similar interviewing as Darren did. Even as the male elites are in a tight-knit network, with shared experiences in Reykjavik's exclusive Latin School, Iceland is small, and elites are more accessible than in France. In contrast to Darren's performance of elite masculinity, I would have performed the contextually appropriate "emphasized femininity" for Iceland (i.e., dressed in European clothing and jewelry, with subtle but well-done makeup). I eschewed this method for several reasons. Most importantly, my study was comparative, and in Russia, my experience with elite men has been, at best, uncomfortable, and at worst, hostile and dangerous; top male political elites have ties to intelligence services and organized crime. Moreover, I do not enjoy dealing with hegemonic masculinity, and, as I have argued elsewhere, "enjoyment is a fine feminist goal" in research (Johnson 2009, 323).

Instead, I chose to study male elites and their male dominance indirectly, arguing that male dominance can be seen in the rare enforcement of informal rules and through elite women informants. In Russia, for example, rule enforcement for male dominance includes the use of *kompromat*, real or made-up compromising materials, to undermine competition or limit disloyalty (Johnson 2016), which became familiar to Americans in 2017 with the release of a supposed dossier about Donald Trump's behavior in Moscow. When kompromat is used, you do not know whether the information is true, but you can glean a violation of the rules about hegemonic masculinity and homosociality, such as about self-presentation or loyalty. For example, in 2012, compromising information about an affair by Russian defense minister Anatoly Serduukov was released, losing him the protection of his father-in-law, a former prime minister and friend of Vladimir Putin, and his post. As explained by a feminist in an opposition party, Serdyukov violated Putin's unwritten code by openly living with his girlfriend while still married. Using examples of gendered rule enforcement allows me to rely upon data from intrepid journalists, like most Russianists who are interested in corruption and coercion. In Iceland, I benefited from homosocial bonds with women interviewees, who would tell me stories that they "really shouldn't." One elite woman described how a male colleague would undermine her by harassing her female assistant, telling her to "come well-dressed next time," making a joke about her being a naked prostitute, and then calling her a "cunt."

When I wanted to collect data more directly, I observed elite men in their native habitats. In Russia, this has included high-level events, such as a European Union conference on Russian civil society at which one of Putin's spokesmen refused to stop talking (Johnson 2009). This bluster was topped at a nonofficial event when a special forces veteran silenced a room by proposing a toast that the women might find a "man who takes a long time to climax … that it will take your minds off" politics. In Iceland, I have found observing and even talking with elite males at the city swimming pools, where all Icelanders go, to be a great way to disarm them. In my female body, mentioning that I was a foreigner interested in Icelandic politics in one hot tub led a former minister to explain "the ways things are done." Of course, he did not tell the whole truth, but, as Alena Ledeneva (2011) has found, informants give us "knowing smiles," expressing ambivalence and pointing to an "open secret." In the end, because I had more access in Iceland than in Russia, I came up with a strategy of double-blind interviews, in which recent émigré research

assistants confidentially interview well-placed contacts back in Russia. I had less control over the interview, but the double blindness allowed the informants to speak more safely and honestly.

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

From comparing our experiences, we have learned that relationship to power and our sexed bodies matter when trying to gather data from men elites. As academics interviewing elites, we are outsiders to people for whom power is a daily experience. Conforming one's gender performance to one's sex is essential, rendering one more acceptable as an interlocutor. Some male researchers can perform enough masculinity to "pass" as "in network," but female researchers can use their homosociality with women who work with male elites or play unthreatening to create situations in which men can bluster into some truths. Even across our sexes, we both had some of the "locker room talk." Both of us feigned ignorance, to be less threatening, in the hope of getting deeper and potentially more honest explanations. The subject matter of the interview affects the conversation — in discussing the effects of gender equality on corporate governance, Darren may have benefited from some distance from a charged topic, whereas Janet's subject cut more closely to her own lived experiences. For both Janet and Darren, cultural awareness and gender performance affected the interviewing process and occasionally facilitated access to elite men's experiences.

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