Positionality, Power, and Positions of Power: Reflexivity in Elite Interviewing

Aarie Glas, *Northern Illinois University*

ABSTRACT There is growing consensus in political science methods literature that positionality is consequential for interview research in variable and important ways. At the same time, however, much of this literature reinforces a categorical distinction between elite and non-elite contexts and participants, and it assumes "elite" to be a static category that presents researchers with discrete challenges that require uniform strategies to address. This article draws on my experience in conducting interviews with more than 100 "elites" to address this divide in two ways. First, I show that the category of elite is not as monolithic as often asserted. Rather, speaking with educated and authoritative individuals is fraught with variable challenges related to positionality. Second, to address these challenges, I argue that researchers must engage in active reflexivity, interrogating the relational effects of positionality across all aspects of research. I focus particular attention on issues of access and interactions within interviews.

There is growing consensus that the relational dynamics between interviewer and interviewee are consequential for political science research. Positionality impacts access to participants, working relationships, and the generation and interpretation of knowledge (Fujii 2017). Therefore, a growing body of methods scholarship argues that reflexivity is a requirement of interview research. At the same time, much of the methods literature in political science reinforces a categorical and consequential distinction between elite and non-elite contexts and participants (e.g., Beckmann and Hall 2013). "Elite" often is assumed to be a static category that presents researchers with discrete challenges that require rather uniform strategies to address. Within this literature, there remains less clarity and structured discussion on the importance of positionality and the challenges of engaging in reflexivity during elite interviewing.

This article addresses this disjuncture in two ways. First, I show that the category of "elite" is not as monolithic as often asserted in political science interview literature. Speaking with educated and authoritative individuals is fraught with variable challenges of power and positionality. Second, I argue that to navigate these complexities, researchers must be "actively reflexive"—that is, adopting a posture to consistently interrogate the relational effects of positionality across all aspects of research (Glas and Soedirgo 2018; Soedirgo and Glas 2020). This article, which focuses on illustrating the challenges and importance of doing reflexivity within "elite" contexts, is intended for students and scholars who are navigating elite interviewing. I center attention on issues of access and interactions within interviews. In advancing my arguments, I draw on my experience of interviewing more than 100 "elites" within diplomatic settings, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU), among others (Glas 2017; 2018; Glas and Balogun 2020), alongside the experience of other scholars.

ELITES AND POSITIONALITY

"Elite" is a category applied to individuals at the "top" of or "well placed" in varied social, organizational, and political hierarchies (Conti and O'Neil 2007, 64; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, 208). The category regularly includes political operatives (Beckmann and Hall 2013), business leaders (Harvey 2010; 2011), and policy makers (Weldes 2006), among other participants widely relied on in political science literature. Implicitly more often than explicitly, the category is presented as part of a binary: elites and *not*. Whereas definitional discussions rarely define the latter, most include markers such as "educated" (Aberbach and Rockman 2002); "influence, prestige, and power" (Zuckerman 1972); or simply being "in the know" (Mikecz 2012) to define the former. Moreover, it often is assumed that this dichotomy applies vis-à-vis the researcher as well. Burnham et al. (2004, 205), for example, assert that "Elite interviewing is characterized by a situation in which the balance is in favor of the respondent." Common wisdom in methods literature, therefore, often suggests that elites are both *uniquely* and *similarly*

Aarie Glas *is assistant professor of political science at Northern Illinois University. He can be reached at aglas@niu.edu.*

doi:10.1017/S1049096520002048

authoritative or influential in both professional and research contexts. Although there is intuitive appeal and the category may remain useful for researchers across contexts, starting from static assumptions about all elites is problematic.

As pioneering feminist scholarship explores, we simultaneously hold multiple identities and positionalities that are variably salient across contexts (e.g., Carbado 2013). Positionality is ever present and relational, a quality of interactions shaped by how varied physical and social biographical aspects of the self take on meaning within contexts over time (Fujii 2017, 17). This is the case in elite and non-elite settings alike. Only through active and ongoing critical interrogation, or active reflexivity, of our positionality can we confront how power operates and with what effect on our research (Berger 2015; D'Arcangelis 2018; Soedirgo and Glas 2020; Townsend-Bell 2009). Absent an actively reflexive approach, however, much of the literature on elite interviewing articulates and attempts to mitigate challenges related to access and the conduct of interviews as one-way exercises of power in problematic ways (cf. Mason-Bish 2019; Morris 2009).

Positionality is ever present and relational, a quality of interactions shaped by how varied physical and social biographical aspects of the self take on meaning within contexts over time (Fujii 2017, 17).

ACCESS

According to common wisdom from an array of methodological statements, one of the most pressing challenges for elite interviews is access. Elites are busy. They have demands on their time, including from other researchers, and organizational structures present barriers to access (Morse 2019; Odendahl and Shaw 2002; Peabody et al. 1990; Wu and Savić 2010). As a result, researchers may find their calls and emails ignored or be offered only tight timelines or challenging settings for interactions. Aberbach and Rockman (2002) illustrate the point by documenting their experience in interviewing an administrator in the only time available: as he drove between appointments in busy Washington rush-hour traffic. Mason-Bish (2019), similarly, was forced to conduct an interview during her respondent's dangerous wintry drive to a remote Scottish village. Beyond elites' schedules making access challenging, many accounts of elite interviewing suggest a foundational difference from non-elite interviewing in that elites may "purposefully erect barriers [to access], which set them apart from the rest of society" (Mikecz 2012, 483).

Many of my own experiences mirror these claims. At the AU, for example, I found many officials disinterested in speaking to a foreign researcher and, rather simply, I was barred from access by a lack of returned emails and telephone calls. However, other experiences complicate this appraisal. At ASEAN, many interviewees seemed keen to speak and they removed barriers to access, meeting over weekends, before or after work hours, at their homes, or over coffee or a meal. Herod (1999, 317) writes of a similarly warm reception among Czech and Slovak trade unionists who perceived him as someone who had "obviously put in a great deal of effort" to speak with them.

From an actively reflexive foundation, it is clear that the challenges of access are not limited to elites; neither should we assume that all elites will similarly limit access. On the first point, researchers are asking much of any interviewee—elite or otherwise. Non-elites may be busy or disinterested, of course, and the interest and ability to erect barriers to access and information are not limited to those at the top of an organizational structure. Armitage (2008), for example, found that immigration-reform activists—many of whom do not easily fit the elite label—were hostile to requests for interviews as a result of long-held distrust of journalists and academics. Similar issues may face those engaging marginalized or victimized communities (e.g., Taylor 2004). Issues of access, therefore, are likely a result of the relational positionality of researcher and participant, as my own experiences underscore.

As with Armitage, I attributed my lack of access at the AU at least in part to salient aspects of my positionality within that context. As a white North American researcher, I expected that access to would-be interviewees was relatively limited. This was confirmed by interviews with officials from Europe and North America at the AU (Soedirgo and Glas 2020, 528). Salient and interrelated aspects of my positionality—in this case, my race and foreignness—necessitated a distinct approach to access. It was only by developing what Fujii (2017) describes as good "working relationships" with scholars and practitioners adjacent to the organization that I was able to successfully solicit interviews with practitioners within it. Conversely, at ASEAN, my positionality seemed to facilitate access. There, I perceived that many interviewees welcomed me and granted access because I had traveled far to speak with them and/or because my status as a then–doctoral student indicated a level of experience as "a real ASEAN expert," in the words of one European official. My positionality, therefore, had distinct effects on issues of access within what common wisdom would assume to be similarly elite settings. From a foundation of active reflexivity, we should critically assess how aspects of our self—including race, foreignness, and experience—will be variably salient to issues of access in different elite contexts.

From a foundation of active reflexivity, we should critically assess how aspects of our self—including race, foreignness, and experience—will be variably salient to issues of access in different elite contexts.

More narrowly, and building on these lessons, a researcher should reflect on the motivations that elite interviewees have for participation and how our positionality affects their appraisal. Some elite interviewees may perceive a threat or a benefit—personal or professional—by participating in an interview. In my

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520002048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2014 interviews with ASEAN officials, for example, I had a persistent sense that some (but not all) high-ranking officials welcomed the opportunity to speak with me because of my positionality as a foreign researcher. I perceived that I was seen as means to extol the organization's recent successes, including the 2015 ASEAN Community, and some also seemed keen to highlight their personal role in that development. At times, this hindered the intended focus of conversations because it required wading through seemingly strategically employed and optimistic generalities regarding the organization's accomplishments. Being cognizant of this motivation and how perceptions of foreignness shaped it helped me to refine both my requests for interviews—that is, noting that I wanted to discuss both recent successes and persistent challenges—and the questions and conduct of interviews because I could avoid repeated talking points regarding the organization's recent developments. Motivations among elites may be narrower as well. In a 2019 interview with one ASEAN official, for example, I was implored to reach out to universities in the region to develop academic networks between my North American university and these schools. Speaking to me, at least in part, was perceived as a possible means to advance an underlying interest in expanding regional educational ties. Similarly, during a 2019 interview with a North American official in Jakarta, the interview concluded with the official questioning me on an issue of US policy; the official viewed me as "an expert." The official took notes. Although I could not provide either interviewee what they wanted, these experiences underscore the relational nature of positionality within elite interactions. Some elite respondents may grant access in part because they see interactions as exchanges of information or expertise. Reflecting on these experiences, we should consider the wider contexts in which interviews occur and how elements of positionality, including our foreignness, may be read.

More generally, and contrary to much of the elite interviewing literature, some officials with whom I have been privileged to speak seemed to have genuinely enjoyed our interactions. Many elites have dedicated their personal and professional lives to their work. I have found that many officials are pleased to find that others have a similar interest—even passion—for their work. In my experience, this has led to many detailed conversations extending well beyond the time requested and punctuated with laughter.[1] As one illustration, an ASEAN official with whom I had spoken years prior agreed to a second interview, suggesting that it was "a nice way to spend the afternoon." Contrary to cold, dismissive requests, researchers may find some elites warm and welcoming. This has consequence for issues of access because it may be more forthcoming if a researcher can underscore an appreciation for the interviewee's work. These dynamics also shape how interactions unfold within interviews.

INTERACTIONS

A second widespread and related piece of common wisdom is that interactions with elites are one-way exercises of power: that the interviewer is relatively powerless within interactions and the elite interviewee is able to manipulate the interaction through intent or disinterest. On the first claim, several scholars assert that the role of the researcher within elite interviewing is innocuous, distant, and unthreatening—"sophisticated but powerless," as Morris (2009) summarizes. As Schoenberger (as quoted in Smith 2006, 647) suggests, we may be seen only as "an obscure academic who poses, so far as they [elites] are concerned, absolutely no threat." From this foundational assumption, some scholars suggest that researchers should attempt to uphold a nonthreatening image (Mason-Bish 2019) or to wrest control of the interview, lest the interviewee dominate and control it (Ostrander 1995; see also Morris 2009, 214). On the second claim, Mikecz (2012, 483–84) notes that "Elite interviewing is characterized by a situation in which the balance is in favor of the respondent"; thus, "the researcher may easily find him- or herself in a situation of being patronized." Female researchers are likely to face these challenges in often male-dominated "elite" settings (Marshall 1984, 245–48).[2] Elites may have numerous motivations for evasiveness or seeking to control interactions (Morris 2009, 211–212). They may want to "present themselves in a good light" (Ball 1994) or to derail an interview that they perceive challenges their views (Batteson and Ball 1995). Common wisdom suggests that these risks are heightened by a researcher being ill prepared (Leech 2002, 666) or an elite interviewee becoming distracted during a conversation (Conti and O'Neil 2007; Harvey 2011).[3] Interviewers also are regularly cautioned to ensure that elites are able to retain agency in conversations. As Aberbach and Rockman (2002, 674) explain: "Elites—but other highly educated people as well—do not like being put in the straitjacket of closed-ended questions. They prefer to articulate their views, explaining why they think what they think" (see also Harvey 2011, 434). Similarly, common wisdom suggests the importance of being transparent with elites and as "open as possible with their research goals and attempt to instill trust and a common understanding about what they hope to achieve" (Harvey 2010, 201; see also Berry 2002; Goldstein 2002).

This common wisdom is useful for preparing for and interacting with elite interviewees. However, these assertions are not exclusive to elite contexts and are unlikely to map neatly onto all elite interactions. That interviewers may be ill prepared, that interviewees may be distracted, or that gendered dynamics will impact interactions is not limited to conversations with elites. Moreover, the importance of rapport and transparency extend to *any* ethical research interaction, not only those with elites. Similarly intuitively, the claim that elites value agency to articulate their views is not limited to the category. For example, consider Fujii's unexpected experience interviewing a "non-elite" prisoner in Rwanda who took his own notes during their conversation. As Fujii (2017) later surmised, this was a way "to 'equalize' an inherently unequal relationship." Higate documents similar experiences with his Kosovar Albanian interpreter and host who became a gatekeeper to interviewees and information (Henry,

Rather, an actively reflexive approach asks us to assume that power dynamics will affect our interactions and also to interrogate how—examining how relational power dynamics operate within specific research interactions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520002048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Higate, and Sanghera 2009, 476). These attempts at asserting agency and negotiating power within interactions are more likely a *human* than an elite quality, and researchers across contexts should reflexively navigate them.

For example, in 2014, I sought an interview with an official affiliated with ASEAN. She had a graduate education, years of professional experience, and an imposing professional title. Moreover, she likely had extensive and privy knowledge I wanted to explore. She was an elite. I was eager and nervous to speak with her, but my emails went unanswered. Lessons from common wisdom suggested why: she was too busy to volunteer time to me as a then–graduate student. When I was finally able to secure an interview, it was through her colleague with whom I had developed a good working relationship. To my surprise, the official attended our interview with her colleague. She apologized, noting that she found it more comfortable to meet alongside her friend and colleague. This may have been for personal reasons, preferring not to meet alone with an unknown man over coffee, or it may have stemmed from concerns about conversing in English, in which her colleague was more proficient. It may have been for professional reasons, as she occasionally would ask her colleague to answer a question first or defer entirely to her. All are plausible explanations. Regardless, it was clear that her elite status indicated by her title, and my perception of that status vis-à-vis me as a graduate student, did not translocate as expected. The interaction did not unfold as common wisdom would suggest. Rather, salient aspects of positionality—in this case, most starkly gender and language—influenced our interaction in unexpected ways. In response, I adopted a conversational disposition and, far from a one-way exercise of power, our interaction unfolded as a dynamic and informal conversation among three differently situated individuals.

From an actively reflexive posture, I should never have taken such dynamics as given. Rather, an actively reflexive approach asks us to assume that power dynamics will affect our interactions and also to interrogate *how*—examining how relational power dynamics operate within specific research interactions.[4] From this foundation, we can build mutually respectful, honest, ethical, and fruitful relationships with all research participants.

CONCLUSIONS

This article demonstrates that the often-assumed dichotomy between elite and non-elite research contexts and participants is problematic in both logical and practical terms. By reflexively conceptualizing power and positionality, it is clear that interviews with individuals in positions of power are not shaped by static conceptions of power and position. Rather, they are relational interactions between complex human beings. To make access possible, to develop working relationships, and to generate knowledge, we must interrogate the role and effect of power and positionality across contexts and interactions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Jessica Soedirgo, Dvora Yanow, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, Nicholas Rush Smith, Eleanor Knott, and Lauren M. MacLean for their comments on previous versions of this article, and the late Lee Ann Fujii for her mentorship and engagement. I also thank the editors of *PS* and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. ■

NOTES

1. Of course, not all interviews present this potential—as a result of the subject, relational dynamics, or context. I intend this only as illustration of possible variation in motivations for access.
2. I thank an anonymous reviewer for underscoring this point.
3. Harvey (2011, 438) notes that answering disruptive calls should be encouraged "as it provides an opportunity to catch up on one's notes and gather a clearer picture of the respondent." These types of interruptions may afford moments of surprise and insight, even "revelatory moments" (Trigger, Forsey, and Meurk 2012). For example, while I was conducting an interview with an AU official in 2014, a secretary called the official away to discuss a time-sensitive and important issue. On the official's return, I was asked to remain patient while the official made two phone calls to an official from a donor state seeking support. This allowed unique insight into how such a request unfolded and informed our subsequent discussion (Glas 2018, 1136).
4. I thank an anonymous reviewer for adding clarity to this point.

REFERENCES

Aberbach, Joel D., and Bert A. Rockman. 2002. "Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35 (4): 673–76.

Armitage, Janet S. 2008. "Persona Non Grata: Dilemmas of Being an Outsider Researching Immigration Reform Activism." *Qualitative Research* 8 (2): 155–77.

Ball, Stephen J. 1994. "Political Interviews and the Politics of Interviewing." In *Researching the Powerful in Education*, ed. Geoffrey Walford, 96–115. London: UCL Press.

Batteson, Charles, and Stephen J. Ball. 1995. "Autobiographies and Interviews as Means of Access to Elite Policy Making in Education." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 43 (2): 201–16.

Beckmann, Matthew N., and Richard L. Hall. 2013. "Elite Interviewing in Washington, DC." In *Interview Research in Political Science*, ed. Lana Mosley, 196–208. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Berger, Roni. 2015. "Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 15 (2): 219–34.

Berry, Jeffrey M. 2002. "Validity and Reliability Issues in Elite Interviewing." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35 (4): 679–82.

Burnham, Peter, Karin Gilland, Wyn Grant, and Zig Layton-Henry. 2004. *Research Methods in Politics*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Carbado, Devon W. 2013. "Colorblind Intersectionality." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38 (4): 811–45.

Conti, Joseph A., and Moira O'Neil. 2007. "Studying Power: Qualitative Methods and the Global Elite." *Qualitative Research* 7 (1): 63–82.

D'Arcangelis, Carol Lynne. 2018. "Revelations of a White Settler Woman Scholar–Activist: The Fraught Promise of Self-Reflexivity." *Cultural Studies↔Critical Methodologies* 18 (5): 339–53.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2017. *Relational Interviewing: An Interpretive Approach to Social Science Research.* New York: Routledge.

Glas, Aarie. 2017. "Habits of Peace: Long-Term Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia." *European Journal of International Relations* 23 (4): 833–56.

Glas, Aarie. 2018. "African Union Security Culture in Practice: African Problems and African Solutions." *International Affairs* 94 (5): 1121–38.

Glas, Aarie, and Emmanuel Balogun. 2020. "Norms in Practice: People-Centric Governance in ASEAN and ECOWAS." *International Affairs* 96 (4): 1015–32.

Glas, Aarie, and Jessica Soedirgo. 2018. "A Posture of Active Reflexivity: Learning from Lee Ann Fujii's Approach to Research." *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* 16 (1): 53–55.

Goldstein, Kenneth. 2002. "Getting in the Door: Sampling and Completing Elite Interviews." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35 (4): 669–72.

Harvey, William S. 2010. "Methodological Approaches for Interviewing Elites." *Geography Compass* 4 (3): 193–205.

Harvey, William S. 2011. "Strategies for Conducting Elite Interviews." *Qualitative Research* 11 (4): 431–41.

Henry, Marsha, Paul Higate, and Gurchathen Sanghera. 2009. "Positionality and Power: The Politics of Peacekeeping Research." *International Peacekeeping* 16 (4): 467–82.

Herod, Andrew. 1999. "Reflections on Interviewing Foreign Elites: Praxis, Positionality, Validity, and the Cult of the Insider." *Geoforum* 30:313–27.

Leech, Beth. 2002. "Asking Questions: Techniques for Semi-Structured Interviews." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35 (4): 665–68.

Marshall, Catherine. 1984. "Elites, Bureaucrats, Ostriches, and Pussycats: Managing Research in Policy Settings." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 15 (3): 235–51.

Mason-Bish, Hannah. 2019. "The Elite Delusion: Reflexivity, Identity, and Positionality in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 19 (3): 263–76.

Mikecz, Robert. 2012. "Interviewing Elites: Addressing Methodological Issues." *Qualitative Inquiry* 18 (6): 482–93.

Morris, Zoë Slote. 2009. "The Truth about Interviewing Elites." *Politics* 29 (3): 209–17.

Morse, Yonatan L. 2019. "Elite Interviews in the Developing World: Finding Anchors in Weak Institutional Environments." *Qualitative Research* 19 (3): 277–91.

Odendahl, Teresa, and Aileen M. Shaw. 2002. "Interviewing Elites." In *Handbook of Interview Research: Context & Method*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, 299–316. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Ostrander, Susan A. 1995. "'Surely You're Not in This to Be Helpful?' Access, Rapport, and Interviews in Three Studies of Elites." In *Studying Elites Using Qualitative Methods*, ed. Rosanna Hertz and Jonathan B. Imber, 133–50. London: SAGE Publications.

Peabody, Robert L., Susan Webb Hammond, Jean Torcom, Lynne P. Brown, Carolyn Thompson, and Robin Kolodny. 1990. "Interviewing Political Elites." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 23 (3): 451–55.

Smith, Katherine E. 2006. "Problematizing Power Relations in 'Elite' Interviews." *Geoforum* 37 (4): 643–53.

Soedirgo, Jessica, and Aarie Glas. 2020. "Toward Active Reflexivity: Positionality and Practice in the Production of Knowledge." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53 (3): 527–31.

Taylor, Yvette. 2004. "Hidden in the Small Ads: Researching Working-Class Lesbians." *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 1 (2): 253–77.

Townsend-Bell, Erica. 2009. "Being True and Being You: Race, Gender, Class, and the Fieldwork Experience." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42 (2): 311–14.

Trigger, David, Martin Forsey, and Carla Meurk. 2012. "Revelatory Moments in Fieldwork." *Qualitative Research* 12 (5): 513–27.

Weldes, Jutta. 2006. "High Politics and Low Data: Globalization Discourses and Popular Culture." In *Interpretation and Method Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, ed. Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shae, 176–86. New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Wu, Irene S., and Bojan Savić. 2010. "How to Persuade Government Officials to Grant Interviews and Share Information for Your Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 43 (4): 721–23.

Yanow, Dvora, and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (eds.). 2006. *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Zuckerman, Harriet. 1972. "Interviewing an Ultra-Elite." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (2): 159–75.