

Title Page

**The Elite Delusion: Reflexivity, Identity and Positionality in Qualitative
Research**

The Elite Delusion: Reflexivity, Identity and Positionality in Qualitative

Research

Abstract

This article examines how perceptions of interviewing elites influence the decisions made at every stage of the qualitative research process. It also reflects on issues of positionality and power which relate not only to the relationship between researcher and respondent but also to the subject matter of the research itself. As such I suggest that it is important to critically assess assumptions made about elites and to reflect on how the position of the researcher might impact upon the exchange and resultant findings. In essence what is found is that in discussing the construction of policy, a delicate balance is struck between positionality and research topic and that the policy narrative is a joint construction which is very much shaped by the identity and positionality of everyone involved.

Key Words:

Elite interviewing, positionality, reflexivity, roles, identity, qualitative research

Introduction

On a dark winters morning in 2006 I made my way to a remote bus stop outside of Edinburgh in Scotland. I had arranged a meeting with a respondent for my

research on hate crime policy and was excited that he had spared me the time in his busy schedule. He had a packed diary and so could only carry out the interview in his car whilst driving to a conference in a remote hotel in a Scottish village. As he pulled up in the car, I got in and proceeded to ask him questions while he drove to his destination. The interview finished with him dropping me off and me battling some 3 hours to get back to my hotel negotiating the various bus routes across rural Scotland. The interview was useful and led to many further insights and contacts. At the time I did not reflect much upon the risky situation I had put myself in. I had been overawed by what I might call the 'elite delusion' – the perception that elites are difficult to access and the researcher must be flexible and indeed grateful for any of their valuable time that is available. I had not thought about the dangers of asking questions whilst driving on the winter roads nor about getting into a car with a virtual stranger who I trusted on the basis of his position. In other interviews I found myself being asked for my opinion on how hate crime policy might be expanded and if I had any suggestions for people that they should contact to develop legislation further. I found this surprising as I had thought that as elite policymakers they would be the ones imparting their knowledge to me. As such I had overlooked the dynamic nature of interviewing and the shifting of identities and positions which might occur.

My perception of the potential difficulties of elite interviewing had been significantly shaped by research texts which focus on the strategies needed to manage this somewhat elusive set of respondents. Access is seen as difficult because elites might not want to be interviewed or might use 'strategies to avoid answering through delivering a general consensual view' (Blix and Wettergren, 2015: 693). Some researchers have noted the importance of presenting a professional and knowledgeable persona (Mikecz, 2013) or about the need to disrupt power imbalances by taking control of the interview itself (Ostrander, 1993). When researchers have found the actual experience of interviewing to be somewhat different, this is presented as something of a surprise. In her study of political elites, Karen Ross (2001: 164) notes that her 'initial anxieties were misplaced' when some of her respondents did not attempt to control the interview and she found that many were enthusiastic interviewees. While methodological literature can be helpful in terms of preparing for elite interviewing, it does foster preconceptions in the researcher in terms of how they should interact. It is the impact of the 'elite delusion' that this paper seeks to explore.

Despite the extant advice available on interviewing elites, few scholars have engaged with the usefulness of reflexivity as a tool to assist in illuminating the

dynamic nature of identity in the elite interview. Reflexivity can be defined as exercising an 'immediate, continuing, dynamic and subjective self-awareness' (Finlay, 2002: 533). Smith (2006) challenges that reflexivity should mean that researchers question assumptions about power relations in relation to interviewing elites. Taking this further, Kezar notes that influencing such perceptions will be the positionality of the researcher, meaning the "multiple overlapping identities" that we possess (Kezar, 2002: 96). She urges that researchers should see the elites as subjects rather than objects of research. Taking up this challenge, this paper moves away from static notions of the elite and instead shows that positionality is a transitory and dynamic situation. I suggest that sometimes researchers can get caught up in concerns about access and power so that they might miss what actually happens during the exchange. In contrast with other studies on interviewing elites I encourage researchers to think about how the elite delusion impacts upon their research and to use critical reflexivity as a tool to challenge perceptions of positionality.

The Elusive Elite

There is a significant body of literature which looks at elites, much of which has sought to define them or identify how they operate. John Scott (2008) advises

that caution is necessary when using the elite label without adequately conceptualising its limits. C Wright Mills' (1959) seminal study on the power elite suggested that political decision-making was controlled by a group of actors who utilised co-ordinated informal and formal networks. More recent work by Wedel (2017) provides a contemporary definition which posits the notion of 'influence elites' who transcend traditional hierarchies and instead inhabit a more flexible status where they are unconnected to particular institutions. Such an approach is demonstrated by Harvey (2010) who advises against focusing on a particular position within a company or organisation. He notes that this is changeable and can give the illusion of elite status as something merely attached to a title. Instead, a more useful focus is on the 'ability to exert influence' through their 'social networks, social capital and strategic positions within social structures' (Harvey, 2011: 433). This can mean that elites straddle many different spheres of life including business, politics, policy and other key institutions. This leads to a more post-structuralist approach whereby power is exercised rather than possessed and can pass through the hands of the powerful. This is potentially useful when thinking about policy whereby the elites being interviewed might have changed role and no longer have influence on the policy under discussion. Power and position could therefore be more dynamic and elite status relies more on knowledge than power at a given time.

Literature on positionality and power in qualitative research seeks to assess how different characteristics of the researcher and research subject might influence the research process (Finlay, 2002; Merriam et al., 2001). Berger (2015: 220) suggests that positionality can have a number of impacts including the ability to gain access and the information that a respondent is able, or willing, to share. Additionally, the worldview of the researcher will affect the language used, questions asked and how the results are analysed and written up. It is for this reason that researchers are encouraged to be reflexive and to have an 'internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome' (Berger, 2015: 220). Also related closely to issues of positionality is the consideration of insider/outsider status. More generally, researchers have often argued that having an insider status might glean many advantages including access, rapport and impact (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015: 92). While others have noted that outsiders might make different observations, and explore topics in more depth that an insider might overlook. Whatever the benefits or limitations, there has certainly been an increasing emphasis within the social sciences about being reflexive on the insider/outsider status throughout the research process including how this might in fact be quite fluid (Savvides et al., 2014: 413).

Symbolic interactionist approaches have been useful here in emphasising the “precarious theatricality” of qualitative methods and the ways in which the actions of the researcher affect those of the participants (Scott et al., 2012: 716). As researchers we might inhabit a variety of roles that we are juggling throughout the research process. For elite interviewing, the literature has emphasised the need to overcome the reticence of the respondent to either take part in the project or their reluctance to disclose the information required (Adler and Adler, 2003). In this regard the insider/outsider status is dynamic as identities are ‘situational’ and participants might vary in their degree of reluctance or openness depending upon the role that the researcher takes on.

From a review of the literature, themes from post-structuralist and interactionist perspectives both emerge as useful in order to critique assumptions about elites and the importance of critical reflexivity in the research process. While literature on elites has often focused on definitions and the need to decrease the ‘status imbalance’, this study emphasises the fluidity of positions which move away from the elite/non-elite dichotomy. Instead, the following discussion demonstrates the need to be reflexive throughout the research process and to think about the preconceptions attached to respondents vis-à-vis their perceived elite status. Using interactionist themes I demonstrate the variety of

roles and positions that we both inhabit, including in relation to the research subject. The key contribution of this paper is to suggest that focusing overly on defining power and elites can lead to overlooking the subtle dynamics of the research encounters.

The Research Study

My research was a qualitative study, focusing on the development of hate crime provisions in Britain which were brought about after the election of New Labour in 1997. Taking a constructionist approach, I sought to examine how the problem of hate crime had been developed by a variety of claims-makers who had been involved with designing and implementing hate crime policy on some level. I carried out forty-five semi-structured interviews with fifty people who met a definition of the elite in having had power and influence over the policymaking process at that time. In 1997 the Home Office had published a consultation paper on proposals to outlaw racially aggravated crime and this eventually became the Crime and Disorder Act. One hundred and forty-one written submissions were made from organisations and individuals and this seemed to be a good starting point for my research because these were respondents who had actually attempted to contribute to the development of the first hate crime

law. Many names were immediately recognisable as high profile politicians, criminal justice professionals and heads of large NGO's. Interviews were generally carried out at the office of the respondent and usually lasted between 60-90 minutes. All were recorded and transcribed directly afterwards.

Of those interviewed 32% were women and 14% were from BME backgrounds. In terms of their role at that time, they ranged from Professors/academic experts (8%), senior criminal justice professionals (32%) and NGOs/campaigners (60%). These are general groupings and relate to their specific role at the time of the interview. I deliberately resist further categorising them as particular types of elite because as Smith (2006) asserts, it is important not to make assumptions about elitism based purely on a job title but to rather consider individuals' wider social and political connections. This was certainly the case for my research where some respondents might have once held a key position in terms of defining and implementing hate crime policy but had moved onto a different role. Some of those currently working in NGO's had a criminal justice background or vice versa. Those currently engaged with hate crime policy I found to be the more responsive as they were interested to discuss their role and opinions of the policy under consideration. This again underpins the usefulness of understanding roles from an interactionist perspective as elite

identities are situational in this regard (Adler and Adler, 2003). However, it was not easy for me to anticipate this and so my approach was the same in attempting access. I cast them all in the role of 'reluctant' respondent with their elite status representing a barrier that I would need to break through.

Negotiating Access

An initial batch of around thirty formal letters was dispatched and had a very poor response. Admittedly these letters had been quite deferential in nature, emphasising their expertise and importance. I had included a line detailing that they were 'understandably very busy' and so if they could not meet in person, I would be happy to discuss over the telephone or via email. One senior policymaker replied 'I have said my piece on hate crime and have nothing more to add'. The majority did not respond at all. I realised that a new technique was needed and it was at this point that I began to reflect upon what my approach was revealing about myself and my respondents and the roles we were performing. I had previously carried out undergraduate research on how the police handled rape cases. I had great difficulty gaining access to officers and when I did interview them, had found them to be quite evasive and restrictive in their discussions. This was due to a combination of factors including my

youthful age at the time, my gender and also general difficulties in researching the police (Pini, 2002). Aside from my reading around elite interviewing, I was also bringing this baggage to my attempts at access which made me perhaps unnecessarily deferential in my approach. By telling them that they were busy I was also offering an easy way out and had not done a lot to emphasise the importance of my research. By attempting to juggle the roles of competent professional and deferential student I had inadvertently cast myself as a reluctant researcher (Scott et al., 2012: 717).

I also reflected on how it was not just the manner of approach, but also a lack of clarity about the nature of the research itself might help to determine the response that a researcher receives. As Berger (2015: 9) notes, I had fallen into the trap of not 'conceptualising a research question that is relevant to participants' experience'. Instead, I needed to relate my work more specifically to them and point out why they were important to the study and certainly to be more pushy. A good example of this would be the category of disability which at the time of the research was not commonly connected to hate crime policy. Some experts in the area of disability violence did not see themselves as having sufficient knowledge about hate crime and so were reluctant to take part. However, often a telephone conversation helped them to appreciate their

relevance to the study and to get them to commit their time to a project which then seemed connected to policy. A number of interviews were arranged with people who would then lead me to those more directly involved. Petkov and Kaoullas (2016) point towards the benefits of using an intermediary as a way of building trust and ensuring smoother access to elite respondents. I did not use a formal intermediary but was able to snowball respondents as interviews progressed. I certainly found at this stage that access was a delicate balancing act. For some participants, they needed reassurance that their knowledge was relevant and important – a theme that continued up to and during the interviews. For others, they were clearly keen and enthusiastic to contribute, perceiving themselves as having the expertise required. There was very little in between. I found myself straddling a number of roles – as enthusiastic rookie who needed them or as a knowledgeable yet unthreatening student undertaking important research. This duality of roles and positions was a key theme running throughout the interviews themselves.

For many researchers there is a compromise reached over timing and location of interviews. Few people would want to appear tricky or inflexible, especially when a useful interview is at stake. For me this was particularly the case because I had probably overemphasised the importance of some respondents –

or they had represented themselves in this way to me. As I stated previously, some interviewees were very involved and had a key role in the formation of hate crime policy. They were central to my study. Often in an email exchange they might respond by noting 'I was actually a key member on the working group and involved with drafting that policy and driving it forwards'.

Such statements served to underline their elite status and how much I needed them and so in some ways my elite delusion was not so delusional after all. This led me to accept interviews in noisy cafes at awkward times so as not to lose the respondent. All interviews were recorded and I also took extensive notes followed by fieldnotes when I returned home. In this way my perception about my position affected my interviews in that I might struggle to hear all of what was said but I felt the need to agree. I was often given a particular time slot and advised that they could 'only spare 30 minutes' because of various meetings. This meant that I went into the interviews with a degree of anxiety as I only had a short space of time in which to get the information that I wanted. It meant that I was more focused on exactly what I wanted to get out of the interview. It also led to the story at the opening of this article where I accepted the opportunity to interview a man – a virtual stranger – in his car driving in a remote part of Scotland. These agreements certainly reinforced the power differential between us and in my mind underlined their importance. This setting

up of the interviews clearly found us playing very specific roles which fit with the perception of elite respondents. I had positioned myself as a grateful researcher and I had positioned them (and they, themselves) as powerful and sometimes difficult. Both sides had prepared as if for a performance, with the formal stage set with 'powerful indicators of a person's relative position' (Scott, 2015: 92). Furthermore, Randall Collins' work on ritual interaction assists in understanding how both sides were displaying different status positions which served to generate a particular mood in the following encounter (Collins, 2005). However, as I will now discuss, these positions shifted sharply during the research encounter itself.

The Interviews

Managing Multiple Roles

By allowing interviewees control of various aspects of the interview situation I found them very willing to talk about their role as an 'expert'. As Ross (2001) observed in her study of the political elite, sometimes 'if you have an interesting study which centres on and privileges their own views and you are willing to come to them, elite subjects such as politicians are often quite enthusiastic

interviewees' (Ross, 2001: 160). Part of the process in allowing respondents to feel at ease in their response was in the construction of my topic guide. I had carefully constructed my interview questions so that they were structured primarily around their particular role and expertise before moving on to more specific questions about my research. I found that this built up a gentle rapport that saw me sometimes inadvertently presenting myself in the position of an unthreatening interviewer. Apart from my careful preparation in terms of background to the policy under discussion I had thought about how I would want to present myself. Robert Mikecz's (2013) study of elites in Estonia emphasised the importance of attempting to neutralise the status imbalance between researcher and researched by being knowledgeable about the background of the interviewee. Thorough research and preparation is seen as key to this and Harvey notes that respondents with an elite status might seek to test the interviewer by asking questions so as to ascertain their knowledge (Harvey, 2011: 434). My perception was that I would want to present myself as knowledgeable yet unthreatening and to convey that my research was important enough to warrant their time but not enough that I was a danger to their position. Some of this was beyond my control in that my age and appearance conveyed my youth and gender quite clearly and this was the first impression that they received. I certainly made the effort to appear smart and well

presented but I did not wear a formal suit. It was a delicate balance to be struck between appearing organised and confident and being overly formal so that the respondent might shut down. Furthermore the formal and deferential approach had not proven successful in gaining access initially. When carrying out the interviews, I would arrive to be greeted by their female secretary who would then lead me to their office. I would then be advised as to whether the interview would be carried out there, or if they wanted to move to the café. As a young woman I was inadvertently displaying my inexperience and so my knowledge on the subject matter and professional persona helped to counterbalance this. In her study of city elites McDowell (1998) refers to this need for adaptability in the presentation of self when women are interviewing elite men and that researchers might have to switch between naïve laywoman and whizz kid as necessary..

Proceeding with Caution

While I had been reflexive about both my status and position in my approach to interviewing elites, I had not exercised a similar level of introspection into how my respondents might be feeling about the encounter. Due to their status, giving interviews was commonplace and therefore I did not envisage that it

might benefit them particularly. During the early interviews it became clear that the respondents did not always have the answers and that they had partly agreed to be interviewed because they were interested in my thoughts and what other elites might have said. Many interviews began in a similar vein with me asking general questions about the development of hate crime policy. Looking back on my transcripts it is clear that interviewees often talked at great length about their particular knowledge and I politely listened. It was interesting that I took such an approach because I was well aware of the time constraints that I was under. In most cases I had been given a time slot by a secretary or assistant, after which time I could expect to be politely asked to leave. However, I took the view that this was partly about allowing them some control over the interview. As Aberbach and Rockman (2002: 674) suggest 'elites especially – but other highly educated people as well – do not like being put in the strait-jacket of close-ended questions. They prefer to articulate their views explaining why they think what they think'. What often happened was that I was allowing them to assert their knowledge and expertise and I could then steer the conversation towards the specific questions that I had in mind. This had been the stance that I took during the planning and access phase where respondents with more peripheral knowledge would be persuaded as to their importance with some flattery or reassurance. Douglas highlights such techniques in his work

on creative interviewing whereby interviewers might strategically display deference and humility in order that respondents open up (Douglas, 1985). However, I would caution here to note that on reflection I often used this strategy in a subconscious way. It was not an inauthentic and deliberate move on my part, but one that I found myself doing as I took on the role of grateful researcher. This means that deferential negotiations during access had the effect of me continuing that role into the interview.

I had thought a lot about the issue of power relations and the elite but the actual experience of interviewing raised some different issues. A relatively successful strategy for recruitment had been to demonstrate my own knowledge of the area but that did not always prove useful during interviews. For example, one interview with a senior police officer moved to a discussion about gender hate crime. He asked me my view on whether gender should be a hate crime and what it might include. I proceeded to discuss the relative pros and cons. He said:

Well you clearly know a lot about this! I don't think I can add very much as honestly we haven't done much work in this area.

While this demonstrates my own inexperience at interviewing it also serves to highlight a common exchange. Often during the interviews, respondents would begin by saying 'I am not an expert'. For example, one interviewee said:

Having come up here from being a practitioner and knowing nothing about policy writing or working, it has been a learning curve for me.

Another senior practitioner stated:

now I'm going to begin by saying that I'm really not an expert in this area but I'll tell you what I know.

Such statements were intriguing because often the respondent had enthusiastically emphasised their experience beforehand, only to show caution during the interview. They would then go on to discuss how quite clearly they did know a lot and were very experienced indeed. This goes against what was often described in literature on elite interviewing whereby respondents would be confident about their knowledge. It is possible that a few things were going on. First, respondents were actually seeking to mitigate against any perception that they were not elite. To downplay their knowledge at the beginning of the

interview actually meant that I then had a very positive perception because they had lowered my expectations. Second, what was often happening was that they were constructing their knowledge of policy during the interview. Many respondents had worked on specific parts of hate crime policy and were now being asked to present an historical account of what happened. For them, it was perhaps a somewhat rare opportunity for them to really reflect on the development of hate crime policy as a whole. This process of reflexive progression had allowed them to 'put the experience in some kind of order that was previously unclear, even to the interviewee' (Hiller and Diluzio, 2004: 17). As such my interview transcripts demonstrate a process whereby the beginning of the interviews were more formal, beginning with a discussion of the respondents role and expertise before progressing towards a more informal conversation about how hate crime policy might be extended in the future. They would often then go back and reflect on an earlier answer, or finish by providing an overview with what had been achieved. This most often happened without me asking, but as a more organic result of them having reflected about hate crime policy as a whole.

Self Scrutiny and Troubling Roles

A critically reflexive approach to interviewing also encourages not only self-awareness, but what Hellowell (2006: 483) describes as 'deliberate self-scrutiny'. The aforementioned discussion of gender hate crime is one such encounter which prompted me to really scrutinise the influence I was having over my respondents. The category of gender is currently not included in hate crime provisions and so discussions necessarily focused on why that was the case and the relative merits of its inclusion. Respondents would ask for my view and as my research progressed I was certainly more informed about these arguments. Similarly, disability hate crime was a very new concept at this stage and so heads of NGO's and criminal justice professionals alike were tentatively trying to interrogate how policy might be best applied. Simply put, sometimes I knew more than my respondents and they were attempting to gain my views and knowledge. This put me in a very uneasy position which could be described as role conflict or strain (Scott, 2015: 104). On the one hand, what I was learning about disability hate crime meant that I was becoming increasingly frustrated on behalf of victims and wanted to convey this to policy officials. However I did not feel it was my place to take the role of advocate as this was not the approach that I had taken to the research subject. Where disability hate crime was concerned I was very aware of the political nature of activism and the 'nothing about us without us' mantra. As a non-disabled person speaking with

another powerful non-disabled person about how to help disabled people, I was troubled. Engaging in reflexivity at this stage meant that I decided to take a middle ground approach whereby I might not directly challenge the accounts of my participants, but instead to share the viewpoints of victim groups when relevant. For example:

Interviewee: I think that disabled people experience something else. It's more to do with vulnerability and being an easy target. Don't you think?

Interviewer: Do you think that there is a connection between that and hostility or prejudice?

By gently guiding the interviews I was able to take on a more challenging role. As my interviews progressed I also began to scrutinise the role that gender was playing in the research encounters. In McDowell's study of city elites she discusses the difficult decision in how to present oneself to respondents – as an expert or an ignoramus (McDowell, 1998: 2138). I had taken the view in attempting to access respondents that showing expertise was key but during the interviews I surprised myself with how I stepped more towards the second role. Upon reviewing my transcripts I found that often an interviewee might ask if I had heard of a particular proposal and I politely said that I had not.

When discussing the category of gender hate crime, respondents would often explain to me that it was not included in provisions because violence against women was dealt with under domestic violence and rape policy. At the time I felt uneasy with what was a simplistic notion of how women experienced violence and also the fact that I left this unchallenged. Here I was straddling a number of different positions. The first was of the researcher, seeking to find out how and why policy was devised and implemented. The fact that gender violence was being narrowly defined was an answer to that research question. However, as a feminist I wanted to challenge the views of people who had the ability to shape policy but I did not do so directly. As McDowell (1998: 2138) describes, with an older male I sometimes fell 'into the classic male-female pattern, for example with an older charming but rather patriarchal figure I found myself to some extent 'playing dumb'. Some of this was subconscious on my part, probably due partly to my past interviewing experience whereby assertiveness had led my respondents to be quite closed and guarded. However, also my interviews had been framed in that way. An older male expert was offering me his time and knowledge. Often they would offer to buy me lunch and ask how I was getting home. What was happening here was a paternalistic and fatherly exchange. Many of them took on the role of respected and knowledgeable elder which had been in part what I was asking from them because of how I set up the interview.

As such, the aforementioned 'I am not an expert' claims might be to prevent my disappointment from the exchange. While I did not seek to challenge their viewpoints directly, I did negotiate a middle way which was to propose the category of gender and its potential connections with hate crime policy, so as to get respondents to reflect on this and offer their own explanations. Overall I found that my position as a woman was balanced around the roles of young female researcher seeking information and feminist wanting to challenge perceptions of violence against women. It is a tension that is also symptomatic of the time when the research was carried out. My approach to research today and my feminist approach are more developed and I have a more questioning eye about policy and practice. These methodological reflections demonstrate some aspects of youth and inexperience but also again underline the elite delusion and that I was seeing my respondents as objects, rather than subjects of my research.

Beyond the category of gender, I also had felt troubled by discussions about identity characteristics to which I viewed myself as an outsider. Although my research was examining the development of hate crime policy it necessarily involved a discussion of the various victim groups and why they might be included in legislation. During the time of my research, policy was being

developed and indeed changed throughout the four years of my PhD. So sometimes respondents were trying to work out what they thought about the next steps. For example:

Interviewee: I have gone to conferences where there have been representatives of disability groups and I find it very difficult to know where they are at. What they were about? Why are they here? We are dealing with racial violence and religious violence, what's their problem? Perhaps I don't know enough.

Such reflections were open and honest partly because of my identity as a non-disabled person. The respondent in this case felt safe that I was not a member of the group under discussion. As such I shifted from being an outsider seeking information, to an insider as a member of a more privileged group not in need of hate crime policy protection. This happened on numerous occasions where the respondents would ask me the rhetorical question 'we can't really understand how tough it is for victims'. Victim groups were described as 'they' or 'them' – a response I doubt I would have gotten if I had been a member of a minority group. In this sense I was in the somewhat uncomfortable position of being an insider and it made me question whether I was to an extent, a member of the

elite? I was having access to senior figures responsible for devising policy and they would often ask me about my viewpoint in relation to the topic. Another question I was asked was about my own interest in hate crime. I realised that I had often set this up by honestly reflecting on my own identity as not from a minority, thus underlining their position of safety. Such questions highlight the fluidity of position in the research exchange. Respondents would ask me questions to test my viewpoint, see me as an insider as I might have contacts or information that they had not considered but also use the opportunity to formulate their own account of hate crime policy. I found myself withholding my own knowledge and sometimes sharing information while trying to appear knowledgeable yet unthreatening. On occasion it felt like the role of interviewer/interviewee were changeable as the respondents asked for my perspective. It is not a surprise that in my field notes it is clear that I found the exchanges to be exhausting! In this sense my emotional reactions were shaped by the interviews and the shifting of power and status imbalances (Collins, 2005).

Reflexive Progression and the importance of topic

Earlier I discussed the issue of reflexive progression and that many respondents confessed that they had not thought about the development of hate crime policy in a linear fashion (Hiller and Diluzio, 2004: 16). During the interview their position might shift as they talked and reflected upon what happened. Here, the sometimes transitory nature of power was evident because while they had seniority and a role in devising policy their knowledge might be somewhat patchy. The nature of policy making is that people are heavily involved and then move on to a new or different area. So in this sense it was quite a reflective exchange where they were voicing their views as well as their role and thinking about groups which had not yet been added. What was often happening was a joint construction whereby I was assisting them in piecing together a narrative on how hate crime policy had developed. As Ozga (2011: 222) notes, sometimes, 'the receptive audience has enabled a policy maker to think through again and re-present key moments and developments in their working lives, while yet others have revealed very complex interactions of power and knowledge'. What I observed in many interviews was that respondents were very willing to follow my topic guide but as the interview progressed might refer back to an earlier point that the later discussion had made them reflect upon. For example:

Interviewee: I was thinking through your earlier question, because I guess the question within the question was about how we react to emotive words. We respond more to love than hate and most people want to shy away from things that hate them or they want to physically attack the thing that hates them.

Another respondent thanked me for my time and reminded me that the topic was of great importance and that they were going to use our interview to look more closely at their policy approach and 'refine our arguments and take account of some concerns that you've made me think about'. Other respondents reflected upon the interview and advised that they were going to take some points forward to committee meetings. Again such experiences relate to the relationship between respondent, researcher and subject matter. If the latter is of ongoing political significance then an elite respondent might take it more seriously and reflect on future developments. This meant that the end result was much more of a collaborative effort, with both of us constructing a narrative version of policy through the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). This was something that only became clear to me once I had moved on from the assumption that elites would be imparting their knowledge to me.

Concluding Thoughts

This article presents methodological reflections on the decisions that I made during the research process which were influenced by my preconceptions about my respondents. As I was interviewing policymakers and criminal justice practitioners I had framed them as the 'elite' because of their perceived power and influence over hate crime legislation. I had taken a simplistic and linear approach to the topic and a static view of elite status. This led me to take quite a formal and deferential approach to accessing my respondents which certainly emphasised their expertise and meant that I set up interviews in inconvenient locations against time constraints set by them. I positioned myself firmly as the rookie researcher who was unthreatening yet competent on the subject matter. However, upon embarking on the interviews themselves I found that the positionality of the respondents and myself was much more fluid. I suggest that this is at least in part because I had not fully considered the role of the third part of the triangle – the subject matter itself. For me, their elite status and institutional membership was not what I was interested in. Instead, it was their role in a specific policy which was often fundamentally positive. While they might not have achieved what they set out to in terms of policy implementation or inclusion of specific victim groups, I was not there to challenge this but rather

to hear about their perception on how hate crime policy had been developed. This was not something that they perhaps fully realised until the interview began. So my topic and question focus, combined with my positionality put them at ease. The interviews ran over time, the mobile phones remained unanswered and exchanges often ended pleasantly with a reflection on what had been achieved. However, while the encounter might have been revealing for the insights that I was able to glean about hate crime policy, it would be naïve to suggest that I had really been privy to how so-called elite policymakers operate. There is a significant amount of backstage activity, negotiations, trade offs and social networking that go on. However I was able to disrupt the situational positions we inhabited during the interviews, this did not extend to the organisational practices through which policy emerges.

Despite the fact that I had achieved my research aims and answered my research questions, being reflexive throughout meant that I found the process to be challenging. This was not just because I had to straddle a number of roles during the research interviews but because I became aware of my own identity in relation to the research subject. While I had considered myself to be an outsider to hate crime policy, I found that in interviewing the elites I was giving them the power of telling their story. This was their construction of the social

problem of hate crime and their viewpoint. I noticed this most sharply in interviews where both the respondent and interviewer were white, non-disabled people discussing the experience of disabled victims of hate crime.

Respondents often recognised (or assumed) that I shared a position of privilege with them in relation to hate crime victims. Victim groups were referred to as 'they' and I was sometimes asked rhetorical questions such as 'we can't imagine what it's like to experience that kind of harassment can we?' While interviewing elites can present difficulties in relation to access and power, my research suggests that sometimes there can be an unexpected perception of the position of the researcher on behalf of the interviewee which is closely connected to the research subject.

So to conclude I would say that when interviewing elites, researchers should be cautious about any delusions or myths that might frame their experience. This often inaccurately leads to research being framed as an insider/outsider powerless/powerful encounter which might mean that the respondent misses the opportunity to ask questions. Positionality and status in the elite interview should be viewed as more porous and dynamic than much literature suggests. Similarly, researchers should resist making the elite an object from which information is there to be extracted rather than a subject of the research. Once I

realised this, I was able to involve them in the joint construction of a narrative which explained hate crime policy. Through getting them to reflect on their role and how this fitted within a broader story of policy development, it enabled them to be reflective and to critically assess what had happened.

References

Aberbach J and Rockman B (2002) Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews.

Political Science & Politics 35(4): 673-676.

Adler PA and Adler P (2003) The Reluctant Respondent. In: Holstein JA and

Gubrium JF (eds) *Inside Interviewing: New lenses, New Concerns*. London:

Sage: 153-174.

Belur J (2014) Status, Gender and Geography: power negotiations in police

research. *Qualitative Research* 14(2): 184-200.

Berger R (2015) Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in

qualitative research. *Qualitative Research* 15(2): 219-234.

Blix S and Wettergren A (2015) The emotional labour of gaining and

maintaining access to the field. *Qualitative Research* 15(6): 688-704.

Douglas JD (1985) *Creative Interviewing*. London: Sage.

Finlay L (2002) 'Outing' the researcher: the provenance, process, and practice

of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research* 12(4): 531-545.

- Harvey W (2011) Strategies for conducting elite interviews. *Qualitative Research* 11(4): 431-441.
- Harvey W (2010) Methodological Approaches for Interviewing Elites. *Geography Compass* 4(3): 193-205.
- Hayfield N and Huxley C (2015) Insider and Outsider Perspectives: Reflections on Researcher Identities in Researcher with Lesbian and Bisexual Women. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 12(2):91-106.
- Hellawell D (2006) Inside-Out: analysis of the insider-outsider concept as a heuristic device to develop reflexivity in students doing qualitative research. *Teaching in Higher Education* 11(4): 483-494.
- Hiller H and Diluzio L (2004) The Interviewee and the Research Interview: Analysing a Neglected Dimension in Research. *Canadian Review of Sociology* 41(1): 1–26.
- Holstein JA and Gubrium JF (1995) *The Active Interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kezar A (2003) Transformational Elites Interviews: Principles and Problems. *Qualitative Inquiry* 9(3): 395-415.
- Kezar A (2002) Reconstructing static images of leadership: An application of positionality theory. *Journal of Leadership Studies* 8(3): 94-109.

- McDowell L (1998) Elites in the city of London: Methodological Considerations. *Environment and Planning* 30(12): 2133-2146.
- Merriam SB, Johnson-Bailey J, Lee M, Kee Y, Ntseane G and Muhamed M (2001) Power and positionality: Negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 20(5): 405-416.
- Mikecz R (2013) Interviewing Elites: Addressing Methodological Issues. *Qualitative Inquiry* 18(6): 482-493.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The Power Elite*. London: Oxford U.P.
- Ostrander SA (1993) 'Surely You're Not in this just to be helpful': Access, rapport and interviews in three studies of elites. In: Hertz R and Imber JB (eds) *Studying Elites Using Qualitative Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 133-150.
- Ozga J (2011) Researching the Powerful: Seeking Knowledge about Policy. *European Educational Research Journal* 10(2): 218-224.
- Petkov, M. and Kaoullas, L. (2016) Overcoming respondent resistance at elite interviews using an intermediary. *Qualitative Research* 16(4): 411-429.
- Pini B (2005) Interviewing men Gender and the collection and interpretation of qualitative data. *Journal of Sociology* 41(2): 201-216.
- Ross K (2001) Political elites and the pragmatic paradigm: notes from a feminist researcher – in the field and out to lunch. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 4(2): 155-166.

- Savvides N, Al-Youssef J, Colin M and Garrido C (2014) Journeys into Inner/Outer space Reflections on the Methodological Challenges of Negotiating Insider-Outsider Status in International Educational Research. *Research in Comparative and International Education* 9(4): 412-425.
- Schwalbe ML and Wolkomir M (2001) The Masculine Self As Problem and Resource in Interview Studies of Men. *Men and Masculinities* 4(1): 90-103.
- Scott, J. (2008). Modes of Power and the Re-conceptualization of Elites. *The Sociological Review*, 56, 25-43.
- Scott S (2015) *Negotiating Identity: Symbolic Interactionist Approaches to Social Identity*. London: Polity.
- Scott S, Hinton-Smith T, Harma V and Broome K (2012) The Reluctant Researcher: Shyness in the Field. *Qualitative Research* 12(6): 715-734.
- Smith K (2006) Problematizing power relations in 'elite' interviews. *Geoforum*, 37(4): 643-653.
- Wedel, J. (2017) From Power Elites to Influence Elites: Resetting Elite Studies for the 21st Century. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 34(5-6): 153-178.