INTERVIEWING ELITES IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: A BALANCING ACT FOR THE RESEARCHER

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Abstract.

Most researchers in international business are likely to interact with elite interviewees at some stage of their research projects. The power of an elite interviewee stems from organizational hierarchy, corporate values and history, personal assets and degree of international exposure. However, handbooks on qualitative methodology do not address the 'double trouble' that most of us face: namely, the task of conducting an in-depth interview, while simultaneously balancing the power of an influential elite. In this paper, we therefore examine the specific challenges and rewards associated with elite interviewing before, during and after the interview. The conceptual framework bridges two streams of literature, handbooks on qualitative interviewing and prior research on elites. Based on data from four qualitative research projects in international business, the following major findings emerged. First, identifying elites is far more complex than what the formal organizational hierarchy or interviewees' expert knowledge would suggest. Second, our analysis showed that the researcher must be aware of differences in professional values, seniority, gender and culture when interacting with elites. Third, these gaps offer an opportunity to enhance communication and information exchange with elite interviewees. Fourth, it was observed that some procedures are more effective than others in balancing the power of elite interviewees and responding to the requirements of academic integrity.

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INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have commented on the methodological challenges involved in conducting international business (IB) research [eg. Wright et al. 1988; Yeung 1995]. Yet only rarely have these challenges been examined in an explicit and systematic way. An unhelpful, even disheartening, message results: IB researchers are warned that cross-border studies are exceptionally difficult, but are left on their own to cope with this complexity. As a consequence the discipline has suffered. Silence on methodology constrains theoretical development, the level of which has been frequently criticised by prominent IB scholars [for a summary, see Sullivan 1998]. Encouraging debate on methodological problems and strategies specific to IB is important not only to improve the validity and reliability of research in the field, but also to enrich its theoretical foundations.

The limited interest in methodological techniques for international business research has largely been confined to quantitative methods such as standardised mail surveys [see for example Harzing 1997]. A recent review of cross-cultural research focuses its discussion on methodological problems

faced in the design, implementation and analysis of quantitative data: selecting cultures to sample, ensuring equivalence of instrumentation, employing local researchers to administer questionnaires, improving response rates and using multivariate techniques of analysis [Cavusgil & Das 1997]. The assumption made by the authors is that although the complexity of conducting cross-cultural research has led to a proliferation of conceptual and qualitative studies, "there is hope that this situation may be remedied by the development of more sophisticated scaling and multivariate techniques" [Cavusgil & Das 1997:87]. In contrast to this endorsement of quantitative rigour, a growing number of researchers have recommended qualitative studies, mainly case studies based on data collected from in-depth interviews. Their strength is in the ability to examine dynamic, context-dependent and interactive phenomena which are the subject of international business research [eg. Parkhe 1993; Boyacigiller & Adler 1991]. A contrast is often made between the quantitative tradition dominant in the US and the qualitative, case-study approach more commonly found in European international business scholarship, particularly in the Nordic countries [Bjorkman & Forsgren 1997].

Yet despite growing recognition of the benefits associated with qualitative methods, there has been little examination of the specific issues regarding their application to international business research [for exceptions, see Wright 1996]. Much of the existing work centres on the practical challenges of such research, particularly time and cost, or on the possibilities for cultural misunderstandings [eg. Yeung 1995]. These are important issues, but only few of the many hurdles an IB researcher typically faces. Researchers undertaking IB projects have had little alternative but to follow guides to qualitative methods which were developed for other fields of study, notably sociology.

However, these texts do not address the particular environment and interview subjects typically faced by international business researchers: ‘elite interviewees’ from diverse cultural backgrounds in geographically distant organizational settings. Based on four qualitative research projects, we argue that interviewing in international business studies is likely to differ from the assumptions made by many of these ‘classic’ methodological texts in significant ways [Miles & Huberman 1994; Patton 1990; Yin 1994]. First of all, a typical respondent in international business research is a powerful elite person representing, for example, corporate headquarters, subsidiary management or an interest group; whereas handbooks on qualitative methodology usually assume that the researcher is interviewing people from ‘non-elite’ social groups. Secondly, international business topics often require cross-cultural research; an issue usually absent in guides to qualitative methods. Thirdly, international business research is frequently conducted in formal organizations such as multinational corporations, which may involve a different set of issues than sociological investigations into specific classes of

individuals (such as new mothers or delinquent teenagers), sub-cultures or families. Fourthly, as many research questions in international business studies address organizational change processes, the inherent dynamism of business organizations poses particular challenges. All four areas are of significance to international business scholars because they affect the validity and reliability of data collection and analysis.

Because most IB researchers are likely to interact with elite interviewees at some stage of their research projects, it is important to be aware of the specific challenges associated with in-depth elite interviews. Researchers conducting interviews with elites are faced with the 'double trouble' of mastering the interview situation and balancing the power of the elite interviewee. Since handbooks on qualitative interviewing do not address the issue of elites, our aim is to bridge this stream of literature with that of elite research. Rather than reviewing a variety of qualitative methods our discussion confines itself to issues surrounding in-depth interviewing, since this is a useful way of gaining access to business elites and their mind-sets in an international context. Going beyond the general qualitative versus quantitative debate, we hope to promote discussion about the use of in-depth interviews in qualitative IB research. We examine typical situations faced by the IB researcher when undertaking interviews with elites across cultural gaps. In this context, we adopt the position that the researcher is involved in a challenging act of balancing academic integrity with the power exercised by elite interviewees. In doing so, we do not provide ready made solutions but rather increase researchers' understanding about a fundamental, but hitherto hidden, issue in IB research.

The remainder of the paper is organized in four sections. First, we report on the methodology of the paper, as literature on elite interviewing transcends several disciplines. We also briefly review the four research projects on which the methodological insights are based. Second, we critically discuss the concept of elites and examine the challenges that elites pose for the interviewer. Here we analyze access to elites, their power and degrees of openness in the interview situation, and the provision of feedback to elites in IB research. The third section details our findings in the context of IB research. The final section is a discussion of key issues emerging from the analysis.

METHODOLOGY

The framework, which we have used to analyse the methodological challenges of elite interviewing in IB, draws on many social science disciplines such as political science, sociology, geography and education. Although introductory texts on qualitative methods and business disciplines are generally silent on issues surrounding the interviewing of elites, these challenges have been analysed by researchers in sociology and economic geography who conduct

projects on business matters [eg. Useem 1995; Yeager & Kram 1995]. We compared research from these disciplines and identified the following common themes: access to elites, their power and openness in interview situations, and the challenges associated with providing feedback to elites. The above themes were then used as a framework to explore methodological experiences from four IB projects.

Table 1. Comparison of four research projects in international business.

Dimension	*Sugar Project*	*SME Project*	*Expatriate Project*	*Elevator Project*
Focus area	business networks	dynamics of internationalization	expatriate performance mgt	less-hierarchical organizations and inter-unit communication
Industry	sugar	high-tech and high-design	telecommunications	elevator
Type of focal organization	commodity exporter	SMEs	MNC	MNC
Number of elite interviewees	17	19	14	44
Share in relation to total number of interviewees	49%	90%	17%	36%
Average age of elites	60 yrs	50 yrs	45 yrs	50 yrs
Gender of elites	1 female	all males	all males	2 females
Distribution of elites by nationality	Australian, British, Mauritian	all Finnish	Australian, Finnish, Swedish	Austrian, Australian, British, Finnish, German, Itali Mexican, Spanish
Type of elites	business and government	business and government	business	business

As Table 1 shows, the four projects offer solid ground for comparison. They each used elite interviews as a method for data collection. However, it is worth noting that none of the projects relied solely on elite interviews. Except for the SME project, non-elites formed the core of the interview data. Elites interviewed for the four projects shared a similar profile in terms of age and gender, with only three elite females being interviewed. The projects varied in

terms of their organizational and cultural contexts. Each project studied a different industry and research question. One was a case study of a commodity exporter, the second dealt with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), and the remaining two focused on large and geographically dispersed multinational corporations (MNCs). The first two projects involved operation modes in early stages of internationalization, while the latter two centered on subsidiary operations of MNCs. Another contrast was the nationality of elites which ranged from solely domestic to a diverse range of nationalities within the international firm. Our data included two types of elites: business and government. These broad data sets allowed us to distinguish the particular methodological issues surrounding business elites. The analysis of the four projects confirmed the salience of issues identified by the literature review, but also revealed some additional concerns which are faced in IB research. These are discussed in the findings section of this article.

ELITE INTERVIEWING

Before examining more in detail the process of elite interviewing, the term ‘elite’ deserves some attention. As mentioned previously, qualitative research techniques have been refined and popularised by sociologists [see, for example Flick 1998; Mason 1996], taking the lead from pathbreaking work by the ‘Chicago School’ who were committed to voicing the experiences and struggles of socially marginalized groups [Taylor & Bogdan 1998]. However, in their writings they seldom refer to elites. For example, Yin’s [1994] handbook on case study research, which is one of the most commonly cited references on qualitative methods, does not explicitly deal with elites. Thus, much remains to be done in this context.

At a general level, elites are defined as a "group in society considered to be superior because of the power, talent, privileges etc of its members" [Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English 1983: 280]. Based on this broad definition, several elite groups such as community and political elites can be identified [see, for example Herz and Imber 1995; Giddens 1972]. In traditional business organizations, the elite group can be seen to comprise of the top echelons of the firm [Giddens 1972].

Table 2. Criteria for identifying elite interviewees across four projects in international business.

Criterion	*Sugar Project*	*SME Project*	*Expatriate Project*	*Elevator Project*
(1) Organizational hierarchy				
• Seniority level	senior/middle	senior/middle	senior/middle	senior/middle
• Unit	company division	CHQ, DS	CHQ, RHQ, FS	CHQ, RHQ, FS
(2) Corporate values and history				
• Functional status	export mkting	R&D, mkting,	mkting, sales	finance, manufacturing
(3) Personal assets				
• Tenure with company	long	varied	varied	long
• Industry experience	long	long	long	long
• Personal networks	broad internal and external	broad internal and external	broad internal and external	broad internal
(4) International exposure	high	high	high	high

Abbreviations
CHQ = corporate headquarters
RHQ = regional headquarters
DS = domestic subsidiary
FS = foreign subsidiary

Table 2 presents the criteria for identifying elites across the four projects. We found that identifying elites was far more complex than the formal organizational hierarchy or interviewees' expert knowledge would suggest. Based on our research in respective companies, we categorize elites according to the organizational hierarchy and corporate values and history of their firms, their personal assets and degree of international exposure. An elite interviewee is a respondent (usually male) who occupies a senior or middle management position; has functional responsibility in an area which enjoys high status in accordance with corporate values; has considerable industry experience and frequently also long tenure with the company; possesses a broad network of relationships; and has considerable international exposure. We recognize that this definition is necessarily relative, given the diversity and context specificity of international business research. For example, in the MNC context a subsidiary manager will not have the same elite status as an interviewee at corporate or regional headquarters or an SME owner. As the table shows, corporate values and history had an impact on the functional status of elites. In the elevator project the financial managers and factory managers were given a special status, while in the sugar project the export managers were perceived as the 'crème de la crème'. Variation can also be seen in the personal assets of elites. In the SME and expatriate projects, elite

interviewees often had an extensive career path outside the focal companies, contributing to the broadness of their personal networks. This personal network can also extend to an active involvement in public affairs. International exposure also varied according to the organizational context. In the two projects on MNCs, several elites had gained their elite status through expatriate postings, while in the two other projects staff involved in exporting obtained experience through international negotiations.

Elite status is also affected by the company's standing in relation to other firms in the industry and more broadly by its public image. In the SME and expatriate projects, the focal companies enjoyed high status and recognition both nationally and internationally, and thus one might call them 'elite companies'. The focal companies differed, however, in terms of their size and influence on the industry. From a career path perspective, employment with an elite company can be seen to enhance the personal assets of elites.

Obviously, using the term 'elite' automatically divides organizational respondents into two groups: those who are part of an 'elite group', and others who belong to 'non-elites'. Such terminology may contain a value judgement, even a negative connotation. One can speculate whether there is an implicit assumption of elite – rather than non-elite – interviewing being somehow better for research purposes. In discussing the use of interviews in management research, Macdonald and Hellgren [1998] point out that interviewing top managers is often seen to add credibility to scientific inquiry. Following this, they argue that some researchers conduct interviews with elites simply because they are more interested in acquiring authority for their findings than in acquiring information [Macdonald and Hellgren 1998]. Another motive for interviewing elites has its origin in the assumption that senior management will provide the ultimate truth of the issue under study. Compared with junior colleagues, senior managers are regarded as a more reliable source of information, because they are seen to have an overview of the company as a whole and are involved in strategy formulation [Macdonald and Hellgren 1998, for a discussion on interviews with board directors see Yeung 1995]. In contrast, as Table 1 shows, we did not follow this commonly held assumption in management research that 'the higher the interviewee's status the better' when selecting key informants for the four projects.

Regardless of their true motives for interacting with elites, researchers from a wide range of fields agree that interviewing them is indeed different. Our literature review has revealed common concerns when interviewing elites. The four themes which dominate this literature are: (1) getting access to elites, (2) dealing with their power in an interview situation, (3) assessing their openness, and (4) providing feedback to elites. These will be reviewed first and thereafter we shall discuss the challenges of interviewing corporate elites

in international business studies based on the experiences from four research projects.

Access to Elites

Negotiating access is a crucial issue for qualitative researchers because it is likely to influence the research process and outcomes [Cochrane 1998, Yeager and Kram 1995; Hirsch 1995]. Compared to non-elites, access to elites is regarded as particularly difficult because they, by their nature, "establish barriers that set their members apart from the rest of society" [Hertz & Imber 1993: 3]. Because access to elites is often restricted, researchers commonly find they need to approach interview subjects well in advance and in a formal way, deal with problems of incomplete and possibly unrepresentative samples, and gain approval from multiple gatekeepers prior to gaining direct contact with potential interviewees. The process can therefore be far more complicated than making contact with non-elites, as one researcher reports: "In one case, it took me nearly two years of phone calls, screening meetings with executive assistants, and networking to interview two executives in a major manufacturing company" [Thomas 1993: 83]. As Thomas' comment shows, elite interviews tend to generate costs in terms of wasted time and resources [see also Macdonald and Hellgren 1998].

Gaining access to elite settings and individuals poses different challenges compared to those encountered when studying non-elites. Where access issues differ is in the process of gaining the consent of informants. The two groups have different needs and respond to different cues. As Hertz and Imber [1993: 3] observe, gaining the confidence of non-elite subjects "requires… a sympathetic understanding." This means putting interview subjects at ease, showing empathy, and affirming the validity of their opinions. Researchers are advised to avoid using complicated terminology, refrain from patronising informants, and make reassuring statements [Taylor & Bogdan 1998]. The challenge for researchers in elite settings is somewhat different. There, the issue is rather a matter of proving one's professional credentials and standing. Researchers must demonstrate they are worthy of the time and support of busy and often powerful individuals. Studies on elite interviewing advise researchers to draw attention to their institutional affiliation, use personal connections where possible, and seek to obtain an influential 'sponsor' whose endorsement of the project will ensure the cooperation of the rest of the group. Essentially, says one veteran of elite interviewing, "[y]ou get in and get useful data from them [ie. elites] if you know others that they know and respect." [Ostrander 1993: 12] Care must also be taken to 'package' one's research project so that it appears relevant and non-threatening in the eyes of company executives [Yeager & Kram 1995]. Such tactics may, however, entail certain costs, and bias in sampling may be unavoidable [Macdonald and Hellgren 1998]. One researcher who used personal connections to gain entry into an

elite group recognised that "it is impossible to know whether some people refused to speak to me because of antipathy or competition, perhaps, between them and my sponsors." [McDowell 1998: 2136] Perhaps a more fundamental concern is that attempts to market the study to a corporate audience may result in the research question being amended or sanitised. Yeager & Kram [1995] report that, in response to expert advice, they decided to redesign their interview guide in order to align it with the immediate concerns of managers and downplay their actual research question. Such behaviour may raise ethical matters involved in conducting valid qualitative research.

Although discussion on access centres on the difficulties associated with entering an organization, there is some recognition that the process contributes to the researcher's understanding. As some researchers comment, the process actually forms an important part of the data collection [Morrill 1999: 53]. Yeager and Kram [1995: 55] report that "in managing access we learned much about the organization… .". This has been confirmed by Morrill et al. [1999: 52], who argue that identifying and securing the cooperation of gatekeepers allows researchers to gain understanding of the "vocabularies of structure" in an organization. Their experiences in seeking access led them to develop a better understanding of the decision-making routines and authority structures of the organizations which they were studying. Thus negotiating access is a process of induction into company values and history.

Power of Elite Interviewees

Successful qualitative research depends on the development of a working relationship with interviewees. Many commentators on qualitative methods address the problem of a power imbalance between the researcher and interview subject [eg. Kvale 1996]. However, it is usually assumed that in this relationship the researcher is the one with the higher status and sense of self-worth, whereas the informant is "one of society's underdogs" [Taylor & Bogdan 1998: 111] – or at the very least, a person who is unaccustomed to engaging in complex conceptual debates. This expectation arose because the Chicago School, the group of sociologists who popularised the use of qualitative research, focused on researching and voicing the experiences of socially disadvantaged groups. By contrast, studies on elite interviewing are unanimous that the power balance is likely to favour the informant over the researcher.

The problem of power imbalance for the researcher begins when seeking to gain access. The process may be so elaborate, and the desired interview subjects so remote, that the distance separating them from the researcher is emphasised. Even the physical setting is likely to prove daunting, since interviews are usually conducted in the informant's own 'territory', which is often marked by tangible displays of prestige [Fitz & Halpin 1995]. As a

result, the researcher is put into the position of a ‘supplicant’, so humbly grateful to obtain an interview that he or she is unwilling to ask critical or demanding questions [Cochrane 1998; Thomas 1993].

Elite subjects may easily dominate the interview because they are ‘professional communicators’ [Fitz & Halpin 1995: 68] used to addressing a wide range of audiences and developing elaborate and persuasive arguments; they are used to taking command and being deferred to; and they are confident that their opinions are deserving of attention and respect [Ostrander 1993]. In this situation, it is the researcher who is at risk of being patronised. In fact, political scientists remark that members of the American Congress will readily launch into a "high school civics lecture" [Sinclair & Brady 1987]; similarly, business leaders can easily fall into a set speech they use for journalists or shareholders. The risk of domination may be exacerbated if a gender difference encourages the powerful male to speak down to a female researcher [MacDowell 1998].

Set against this background, the danger of imposing one’s own mind-set as a researcher on the interviewee representing business elites seems limited. Rather, Yeung [1995: 322] observes that because of the sheer power structure of interviews with elites, "there is always a tendency for the interviewee to impose his/her meta-communicative norms on the interviewer." In fact, researchers may suspend their judgment in the face of an elite’s dominating performance and display of power. Researchers risk "overestimating the importance of what elites have to say, assuming, for example, that they necessarily know more and better what is going on in an organization" [Ostrander 1993: 19; see also Macdonald and Hellgren 1998 and Useem 1995]. Macdonald and Hellgren [1998: 7] take this idea even further by describing a ‘hostage syndrome’ where the researcher begins to identify with the organization under study. A related problem encountered in one study was what might be termed "heroic rationalisation": the tendency for powerful individuals to attribute successful strategies and change to their own actions [Fitz & Halpin 1995]. A researcher may respond by attributing causality where none in fact existed. Despite these obvious challenges stemming from the powerful position of elite interviewees, most guides on qualitative research techniques do not explore them [see, for example Flick 1998; Mason 1996; Yin 1994].

Openness of Elite Interviewees

One area of debate in the literature concerns the degree of openness which researchers can expect from elites. Obviously, the research topic and its perceived sensitivity among elites is critical here. Even if the researcher succeeds in conducting an interview with an elite individual, what are the chances of gaining useful data? The concern often expressed is that since

elites so often are responsible for representing and maintaining particular organizational policies and objectives, they may be guarded and trite in their responses. Senior managers are well experienced in dealing with a wide range of people and adjusting their style to fit many different audiences. Instead of answering questions honestly, they may retreat into quoting policy documents and mission statements. Thomas [1993: 85] argues this is particularly the case with senior executives, who "are often expected to speak in behalf of a formal organization – even to speak as if they were the organization." The researcher then faces the disappointment of gaining nothing more from the interview than could have been gleaned from press statements or annual reports. There is a wide gulf between being offered a personal assessment and being quoted 'the party line'.

However, some researchers report having been surprised by the degree of frankness they encountered from some elite informants. In one study, researchers found there was significant variation depending on the seniority and position of the elite members being interviewed. They observed that candour in interviews was directly related to the interviewee's seniority: junior staff were the most guarded in their comments, while elite individuals were the most open [Sinclair & Brady 1987]. In many cases, therefore, the more senior the individual, the more prepared they may be to assert their own opinions, even if these differ from stated organizational policies and goals [Fitz & Halpin 1995]. Studies in this field also suggest that despite the temptation on the part of researchers to refrain from criticising a prominent and persuasive figure, elite interviewees are more than capable of dealing with demanding and abstract questions [Czudnowski 1987] – and may even welcome the opportunity of responding directly to any public criticisms that have been made of their performance [Ostrander 1993].

Feedback to Elite Interviewees

Post-interview cooperation with elite subjects can be very beneficial to the research project. Thomas [1993] suggests that follow-up correspondence with elite informants can provide additional information, especially as elites are comfortable with written correspondence and they may be willing to engage directly in the process of factual verification of the findings. Other researchers have undertaken even more ambitious feedback procedures, with one researcher presenting his preliminary findings to an audience of company managers [Useem 1995], while another research team submitted a report recommending practical reforms, some of which were then implemented by one of the companies under study [Yeager & Kram 1995].

By contrast, mainstream qualitative texts usually adopt a more cautious position towards sending written reports of the research findings to non-elite subjects, since this is likely to cause confusion and alienation [eg. Mason 1996]. When dealing with powerful elite informants, researchers are often concerned with strategies to 'protect' their findings from the interference and censorship of elites [eg. Ostrander 1993]. Misunderstandings may arise from the very different perceptions which managers bring to research findings. Because managers are 'doers' not theorists, "the theoretical categories driving our research are largely irrelevant to their interests" [Hirsch 1995: 77]. Hirsch therefore suggests that the feedback provided to elites must be different in form, style and even, sometimes, substance, than the findings which are presented to academic peers. One may, of course, speculate whether such changes involve interference with the data and thus are ethically difficult to justify.

FINDINGS

In this section we extend the literature review with findings from our four research projects in international settings. The literature review shows that the assumptions of elite interviewing in management research are often simplistic. Previous work in this area tends to understate the problems associated with such interviews and do not consider how they may affect the data collection. In contrast, literature on elite interviewing outside management research appears to focus on the difficulties rather than the rewards involved. Our findings suggest that both streams of literature require modification. We did find that issues of access, power, openness and feedback are significant challenges for international business research, just as they are in other elite settings. If anything, they are accentuated by the cultural and geographical boundaries separating the researcher from elite interviewees in different locations. However, our projects show that elite interviewing represents as much an opportunity as a challenge.

Our fieldwork experience suggests that when establishing and maintaining a working relationship with elite interviewees, a researcher must be sensitive to the possibility of differences in professional values, seniority, gender and culture. At the same time, these gaps offer an opportunity to enhance communication and information exchange. Bridging these gaps involves a balancing act on the part of the researcher, who must reconcile the roles of insider and outsider, subordinate and sounding board, sympathiser and critic, therapist and spy, academic and consultant. Figure 1 depicts our key findings.

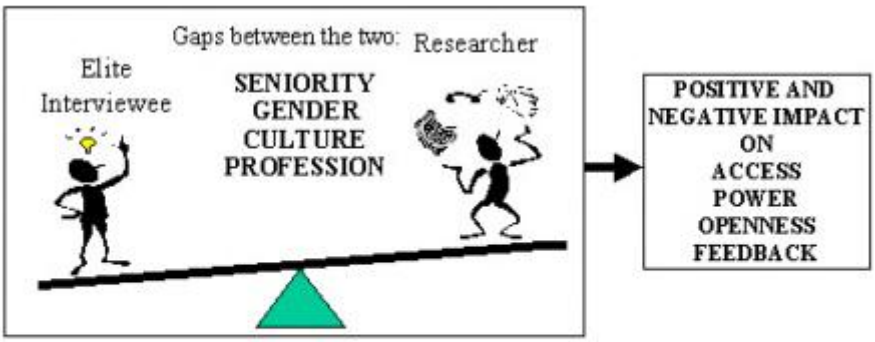

Figure 1. Balancing act by the researcher in an elite interview.

Access

As we have noted, problems in gaining access feature prominently in discussions on elite interviewing. Figure 1 shows that researchers who present themselves in their academic role may encounter a professional gap: a difference in professional values between the academic community they represent and the commercial culture with whom they are attempting to communicate. The reception of an academic outsider depends on the elite individual's esteem for, and perception of, the academic profession. Particularly in the Nordic countries, relationships between the business community and the academic world have been very close and corporate elites have been willing to cooperate with researchers [Bjorkman & Forsgren 1997]. In other countries, academics are often seen as irrelevant to the fast-moving, cut-throat world of business; or they may be regarded as untrustworthy reporters who are likely to distort and sensationalise events for their own gain.

To a certain extent, a business-like approach may reduce the professional gap between the researcher and high-level executives [see for example Yeung 1995]. This involves projecting the image of being an insider, for example by knowing the abbreviations of different subsidiary units. The researcher is likely to be asked to present the pay-off of the project in very concrete terms, in other words, what managers gain in return after having spent some of their valuable time in lengthy interviews. Comparisons between the four projects suggest that SME managers are particularly prone to demand that the project show immediate relevance.

Yet projecting an insider image can be taken too far, particularly in cases where the researcher has gained access by emphasising the academic nature of the study. Talking like a company manager is unlikely to remove the professional gap. Instead, assuming the role of an outsider who is willing to listen may be considerably more effective and less threatening to the organization. In two of the three projects involving large organizations,

researchers did find that access was facilitated by stressing the theoretical, non-commercial aims of the study.

Access to interviewees in international organizations presents additional complexities, if the researcher wishes to gain permission to interview employees in cross-border locations [see for example Yeung 1995]. In many such corporations the company language is English which forces non-native researchers to frame and sell their projects in a foreign language. A researcher must therefore be fluent both in English and in 'company speak'. An internal sponsor for the research project may be of utmost importance in view of the geographically dispersed activities of an international firm. For example, in one of the projects, such a sponsor was the former CEO and a current board member at the time of the study. After the initial contact, access to interviewees followed a 'cascading process': with a letter signed by a top manager each subsidiary was approached for identifying relevant interviewees. Similarly, Yeung [1995] reports he was able to obtain several privileged contacts through some generous top executives in parent companies which proved exceptionally useful in gaining both access to and trust from some otherwise unreachable local executives. Sometimes decisions on access may only be made at an elite level. In one of the four projects, elite endorsement was critical in gaining access to relevant company documentation. When gatekeepers lower in the company hierarchy were unwilling to grant access to the material, arguing that they had no authority to make or precedent on which to base the decision, a director intervened on behalf of the researcher to obtain for her access to relevant company data.

However, a powerful manager in the role of a contact person may compromise the critical process of identifying key informants in the organization. The 'cascading', or top-down, approach may confine the researcher to a particular viewpoint sanctioned by the sponsor. Part of the research process therefore involves using other sampling techniques to go beyond the personal networks, coalitions and recommendations of the elite sponsor. The four projects demonstrate that after gaining initial access to the organization, snowballing proved to be an effective way of locating additional interviewees. In two of the projects, snowball sampling also involved obtaining expert opinions external to the organizations being studied, including heads of industry associations, consultants, and the company's suppliers and customers.

In the project on expatriate performance management, cascading and snowballing were both successfully used as sampling strategies to identify and obtain the consent of relevant informants. The case company appointed a contact person, the human resources (HR) director responsible for international transfers, to liaise with the researcher. In cooperation with the researcher, the director drew up a list of headquarter staff who met the researcher's criteria for involvement in the project. The director also gave the

researcher the names of subsidiary managers and HR managers. These managers were contacted and asked to assist in interviewee selection and scheduling of interviews. As well as this ‘cascading technique’, however, the researcher also asked interviewees to volunteer the names of additional personnel who would serve as good interviewees. Having just completed the interview, interviewees were able to suggest colleagues they thought would have experiences relevant to the project; for instance, one interviewee recommended someone with the comment that "he has been with the company for over ten years and has been on several assignments in different countries; he’d have a lot to tell you."

Sampling interviewees in both SMEs and MNCs was found to involve distinct challenges. While access to elite interviewees in SMEs tends to be a more informal procedure compared to MNCs, involving fewer gatekeepers, the next step of ‘cascading’ may in fact be more difficult. The project on SMEs shows that company owners and CEOs tend to consider themselves at the centre point of the entire organization. Including interviewees below this elite level can be interpreted as the researcher’s lack of confidence in the key informant; as if the researcher was checking the reliability of this interviewee’s statements. Such a perceived insult can obviously have a negative influence on the working relationship with the elite interviewee. In the case of MNCs, the mobility of elites was a particular challenge. International staff transfers, increasing rates of staff turnover and organizational restructuring make it more difficult for researchers to stay in contact with key informants during and after the study.

Power of Corporate Elites

Like Yeung [1995], who reports critical comments from some executives who noticed inconsistencies in his questions, we encountered elite interviewees who attempted to dominate the interview and challenge the researcher’s statements and views. On occasions this extended to directing and commenting on data collection and the analytical and theoretical dimensions of the project. One researcher was told the following:

> "I would like you to dig at [this issue] when you are talking to the relevant people in these very small subsidiaries."

Another researcher was often given very detailed advice on how to interpret the data being collected and what conclusions to draw:

> "I think you might have to change the focus of your thesis a bit because I don’t think the links between [Company X] and [Company Y] were as strong as perhaps you’d imagined."

> "…you have to make a judgement: was [Company X] right or wrong? Were there any other alternatives?"

Elite interviewees are possibly more likely to intervene if their company is involved in direct funding of the study. In the elevator project, the contact person was very concerned about ensuring concrete and immediate results, and this led to attempts to control the data collection process.

As Figure 1 illustrates, in many cases elite interviewees were exploiting the existence of a seniority gap between themselves and the researcher. We found that there were three other ways in which elite individuals responded to the seniority gap. The first was to adopt a paternal attitude of instructing the less experienced researcher. At one point in the research, an interviewee articulated this role by exclaiming: "I feel like your father!" The second response was to react in a dismissive way, expressing some impatience at having to waste time answering what were deemed to be obvious or irrelevant questions. This was exacerbated, in the case of the SME project, by the perceived gap between academic values and the entrepreneurial values of company owners and managers. The third reaction was to seek to reduce the gap by affirming the importance of the research topic, engaging with the researcher's point of view, and making supportive comments such as "That's a very good question…", or "As you know…" The impact of the seniority gap may therefore be an ambivalent one: on the one hand, researchers may be patronised and their comments overridden; on the other hand, elite individuals may take the time to inform and 'enlighten' their junior interlocutor. The seniority gap may also be exacerbated if a gender gap (see Figure 1) is involved. A young female researcher may be seen as even more junior in status than a young male.

All four research projects confirmed that there are differences between interviewing elites and non-elites. Non-elite interview subjects were more likely to adhere closely to the interview guide and to seek guidance from the interviewer, soliciting reassurance by asking questions such as: "What haven't we covered yet?", "Is this the sort of information you are looking for?" Elite interviewees were more likely to use the interview guide as an initial orientation to select and order their responses, but would not consult the list of questions during the interview. They were much more confident in making a judgement on which issues were most relevant to the researcher's project. For example, when sent the list of questions beforehand, elite interviewees would often prepare their main points in advance, making a series of notes against each question. They would then open the interview by proposing, "I think it would be best to start by…", or "It occurred to me that it might be useful to you if I explain….". In this way, they often talked about what they regarded as important, rather than what they were asked. On the other hand, this process could also open up new interpretations and perspectives for the researcher.

Previous literature on elite interviewing recommends that researchers redress the power imbalance by using the same insider tactic as when gaining and maintaining access: displaying a professional attitude and demonstrating a command of the topics under discussion [Peabody et al 1990; Richards 1991]. However, such behaviour runs the risk of assuming that researchers can reassert themselves by adopting the insider image of a corporate executive. This may backfire, as elite interviewees do not necessarily demand academic interviewers act like corporate colleagues, nor do they expect the academic to show a high level of insider knowledge. The challenge in an interview situation is rather to create a space for intellectual discussion and reflection which is clearly separate from the manager's day-to-day routine of meetings, deadlines and administration. Elites like to use the interviewer, who is up-to-date in the academic literature which they themselves often have little time to read, as a facilitator of their own thinking and a sounding board for ideas.

Openness of Corporate Elites

The method employed to gain access to the organization is likely to influence the openness and frankness of corporate elites. Particularly if the researcher has a sponsor at the very top of the parent company, subsidiary managers may perceive the researcher as a headquarter spy. Corporate elites in subsidiaries may provide seemingly frank answers, but in fact act in a highly calculative manner, attempting to use the interview situation for channelling their views up to corporate headquarters or to elicit intelligence about headquarter opinions, as interviews for one of the projects reveal:

> "What is the opinion of top management in Finland about the possible progress that we [in Mexico] are making? I would like to know it."
>
> "Another suggestion that I would give to [headquarters] is to try to have, let's say, more non-Finnish or non-Scandinavian in the top positions of the corporation."

In one of the projects, an elite interviewee was eager to use the interview situation to influence external parties: "I really hope that you push these ideas [discussed in the interview] forward to the Ministry [of Trade and Industry] and other government organizations."

Elites may also answer questions in a guarded fashion because of fears that their comments may be used against them. Concerns about anonymity may be very real in some cases. Particularly in SMEs or small units of large MNCs, an informant can easily be recognized based on his or her comments in the interview. As a result, some responses may be embellished, other questions left unanswered.

Elites do often offer tantalising insights into secret deals and inner circles of power. An informant for one of the research projects saw the interview as an opportunity to set the record straight and answer public criticisms of his performance. His account revealed a wide difference between the public reporting of events – the incident in which he was involved made newspaper headlines and TV news bulletins – and the elite reality of secret alliances and informal understandings. However, such revelations are often accompanied by the request to 'keep this off the record'. Some elite comments are so frank they are unusable: such as a politician's condemnation of industry representatives as "national socialists", and an expatriate's description of a regional centre as a "piece of shit". In another project, interviews of entrepreneurs sometimes resembled therapy sessions, with respondents clearly appreciating the presence of an attentive and neutral listener. Elites tend to provide very easily rich data, but a high degree of openness does not necessarily equate to a high level of usefulness.

We found that the existence of a gender gap could encourage the elite interviewee to be more open with the researcher [cf. McDowell 1998]. Particularly in the case of interviews conducted with elites in countries with strong 'macho' values (such as Italy, Spain and Mexico), the informant would often respond to the 'flattery' of an attentive female audience. Like the seniority gap, the gender gap is a double-edged sword: it may encourage the elite interviewee to exercise power over the female researcher, but it may also make them more willing to devote time to an interview.

Our experiences of a cultural gap (see Figure 1) confirm the common perception that IB fieldwork is made more difficult due to the threat of cultural misunderstanding [eg. Cavusgil & Das 1997]. However, being a foreigner and thus an outsider can also bestow some advantages. The experience of one of the research projects suggests that interviewees are more willing to be of assistance if the researcher has travelled long distances to interview them. Asides made by interviewees also revealed that they were willing to comment more freely on issues to a foreigner rather than to someone with local contacts and allegiances. As McCracken [1988: 22] argues:

> Scholars working in another culture have a very great advantage over those who work in their own. Virtually everything before them is, to some degree, mysterious. Those who work in their own culture do not have this critical distance from what they study. They carry with them a large number of assumptions that can create a treacherous sense of familiarity.

By stepping outside one's national borders, researchers also gain a critical perspective on their home environment. In the case of one project, the researcher gained different, and usually more critical, view of her domestic

industry. Foreign commentators are more likely to question successes which are claimed by the industry, and to take a different view of the industry's strategic options at particular points in time.

From the elite manager's perspective, his international experience and facility to communicate with people from different cultures may also reduce the cultural gap. This was the experience in one of the projects, in which the Finnish researcher found that conducting interviews with Asian subsidiary staff was facilitated by the fact that these interviewees belonged to the Finnish parent company and had therefore become familiar with the Finnish style of communication. Moreover, subsidiary managers gathered at monthly meetings which facilitated information exchanges across cultural boundaries. In another project, the interviewee discovered that a transnational English-speaking elite had existed in the industry under study, thus nurturing a similar set of behaviours and beliefs regardless of national background. Elite managers came to know each other at international conferences and negotiations, and learned to regard each other, in the words of one manager, 'as similar sorts of people'. The existence of such an elite transnational culture is perhaps nurtured not only by frequent contacts, but also by MBA education programs and internal management training courses which are fairly standardised world-wide and which cultivate a similar jargon and outlook.

Yet the possibility of a cultural gap must be anticipated by the IB researcher, despite the rise of English as the international language of business and despite the emergence of a transnational elite. For example, in one project, the multinational corporation had used English as the common company language since early 1970s. However, elites more than 20 years later in Spain and Mexico spoke poor English. Had the researcher not spoken Spanish, the access to key informants and quality of data would have been negatively affected. Although translators may be used as a last resort, the risk of misunderstanding is increased and interviewees may not be as open as in an interview which is being monitored by a third party.

Feedback to Corporate Elites

Providing feedback and interacting with corporate elites both during and after the study can be both rewarding and challenging. Interestingly, when trying to seek access to elites, they portray themselves as highly busy people, while in a later stage of the study they eagerly engage in checking minor details of research findings. Post-interview cooperation may be positive in a sense that through close communication it is possible to gain more information, verify some findings and stay up-to-date in terms of most recent changes within the organization. In particular, maintaining a dialogue with interviewees via email was found to be a useful way of deepening the researcher's understanding. However, feedback was restricted in cases where a language barrier existed.

In two of the projects the interview transcripts were translated into English regardless of the original interview language, a consequence being that the interviewee lost control over the contents if he had poor English skills.

However, researchers need to be careful in approaching the feedback process. Experience from the current projects suggests that some forms of feedback were more useful than others. Perhaps the least reliable feedback process was that of returning interview transcripts to interviewees for factual verification. The majority of transcripts were not returned, which presented the interviewer with the dilemma of whether to interpret silence as consent. In the case of transcripts which were returned, the comments were usually confined to stylistic and grammar corrections, although occasionally the interviewee would include additional material. In one case, the receipt of the transcript provoked a hostile reaction from a manager who questioned the usefulness of the procedure. Internal seminar presentations provided no useful feedback in the MNE environment, but proved valuable in the case of SMEs. In contrast to abstract reports in English, these seminars offered an arena for providing concrete and immediate feedback to SME managers, who could easily be gathered around the same table. In the expatriate project, the subsidiary president reacted to the summary report of interviews by requesting the researcher to circulate it and other summary reports to all key people in the company to ensure that the recommendations the researcher would be making at the conclusion of the study would be taken into account and acted upon. On the other hand, in the elevator project another subsidiary president became very defensive having received his summary report. Perhaps because of fears of intervention from headquarters, this subsidiary manager wanted to set the issues straight. In a letter to the researcher, he suggested that instead of referring to ‘barriers’ or ‘problems’ in inter-subsidiary communication, the researcher should describe it in a more positive and neutral fashion.

In all four projects, the most useful feedback was in the form of sending a draft of the final report to key informants of the study for factual verification. Our experiences show that at this stage key informants feel personally more associated with and responsible for the project both within the firm and outside it than in earlier stages of the study. This is the final moment before publication to thoroughly verify the contents and make sure the report does not contain anything confidential or counter to company policy. Some key informants become very meticulous and defensive when providing their comments on the end product of a long and often time-consuming research project. Here the researcher should balance the key informant’s role between verifying the facts and reinterpreting or even rewriting the conclusions. The researcher needs to make it clear that the interpretations and conclusions of the study are not subject to modification by elites.

On the other hand, once the researcher has provided feedback to elites its use may be beyond his or her control. Given the power of elites, individual feedback may be used for different purposes than intended, circulated intentionally or unintentionally to several persons within the organization. For example, in one project an executive summary, which contained mainly preliminary findings from the subsidiaries in the Far East, provoked a very negative reaction from regional management. As a result, the study became part of political power struggles between various interest groups within the firm. On another occasion in the Far East, a top subsidiary manager, after receiving his interview transcript, wanted to see the transcript of his subordinate and use it to support other internal activities. Such events raise ethical considerations of the researcher's obligations towards elite interviewees of a complex, multicultural organization.

When providing feedback to business elites, the role of the researcher may change from an outside observer to a consultant or participant. In SMEs, where the interaction between the researcher and the elite informant is overall more informal, these roles are often confused. Elite interviewees in SMEs tend to welcome the researcher as a consultant and expert. Suddenly, the researcher is involved in action research, and moves from being expert observer to direct participant.

Table 3. Summary of effective procedures used in elite interviews across the four research projects.

Stage	*Sugar Project*	*SME Project*	*Expatriate Project*	*Elevator Project*
(1) Access to elites	professionalism, external and internal cascading and snowballing, non-commercial aims of the study	professionalism, cascading, external snowballing, pay-off in very concrete terms	professionalism, 'insider' strategy cascading, snowballing, non-commercial aims of the study, English and 'company speak' in communication	professionalism, 'insider' strategy, cascading, snowballing, English and 'company speak' in communication
(2) Power of elites	professionalism, encouraging intellectual dialogue, capitalizing on gaps	professionalism, 'insider' strategy, capitalizing on gaps	professionalism, 'insider' strategy, encouraging intellectual dialogue, capitalizing on gaps	professionalism, 'insider strategy, capitalizing on gaps
(3) Openness of elites	capitalizing on gaps	capitalizing on gaps	capitalizing on gaps, avoiding the use of translators	capitalizing on gaps, avoiding the use of translators
(4) Feedback to elites	final draft	internal seminar, final draft	executive summaries, final draft	final draft, choosing the appropriate language

Table 3 summarizes the procedures, which we found effective in interacting with elites during the four research projects.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have explored the challenges and rewards associated with elite interviewing in international organizations. Surprisingly, this issue has received very limited scholarly attention, although most researchers in international business are likely to interact with elite interviewees at some stage of their research projects. By asserting that elite interviewing requires special study, we are not seeking to endorse the 'higher the better' fallacy in selecting interviewees. Rather, we adopt the position that elites should be interviewed when the research question suggests so. The value of non-elites as key informants should also be recognized. If the truism that we live in an age of globalisation is correct, we may in fact see greater numbers of employees below senior levels in corporations engage in cross-border activities. Nevertheless, an understanding of elites is important when seeking to improve our knowledge of the data collection process in international business settings.

Our literature review shows that handbooks on qualitative methodology do not address the 'double trouble' of mastering an in-depth interview, while simultaneously balancing the power of an influential elite. Prior research on elites is neither very helpful, as it provides a rather simplistic and negative picture of the hurdles that a researcher is likely to face when interacting with elites. From this perspective, both streams of literature require modification. Thus, the field of qualitative research in international business offers an opportunity for making a contribution. Our conceptual framework integrates various issues related to elite interviewing, which we then extend with empirical findings.

Based on data from four qualitative research projects in international business, the following major findings emerged. First, identifying elites is far more complex than what the formal organizational hierarchy or interviewees' expert knowledge would suggest. We argue that the power base of an elite interviewee is determined by organizational hierarchy, corporate values and history, personal assets and degree of international exposure. Hence our analysis demonstrates that identifying elites is highly specific to organizational context and its history. In international business settings, the elite group is much more diverse than is often considered to be the case in other fields.

Second, our comparison of four projects demonstrates that IB researchers seeking to interview elite individuals are often confronted with professional,

seniority, gender and culture gaps. By identifying these gaps, we provide explicit labels to issues, which are fundamental, but have remained hidden, in qualitative international business research. The gaps are unavoidable but they should not necessarily be seen as obstacles. Rather, we stress the need for the researcher to be aware of these gaps and the importance of balancing elite power against the researcher's integrity through various acts. Third, we suggest thus that these gaps may in fact offer an opportunity to enhance communication and information exchange with elite interviewees.

Fourth, we observed that some procedures were more effective than others in balancing the power of the elite interviewees and responding to the requirements of academic integrity. In doing so, we do not provide ready made solutions, but rather share our experiences from the field. Our findings suggest the following procedures for minimizing the adverse effect of elite interviewees on the research project. Researchers can negotiate access problems by stressing their academic neutrality, but at the same time demonstrating their professional and language competence as well as reliability. They can deal with power differences by encouraging elite interviewees to regard the interview as an intellectual discussion very different in nature to company meetings or briefings. They may accept the (usually) good-natured paternalism that seniority and gender gaps often produce. They can encourage openness on the part of informants by steering a course between therapist and spy. Using the position of a foreigner and an outsider, the researcher may maintain a critical stance to the issues under study and in this way benefit from the culture gap. Once the decision is made to include elite interviews in the research design, it is important to be aware in advance of its implications for data collection and the entire research process.

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