Interviewing Elites: Addressing Methodological Issues

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Abstract
This article focuses on the methodological issues arising from interviewing elites, with an emphasis on gaining access, acquiring trust, and establishing rapport. I argue the central importance of preinterview preparation, which is essential to enhance the researcher's knowledgeability. The success of interviewing elites hinges on the researcher's knowledgeability of the interviewee's life history and background. It enhances the researcher's positionality and decreases the status imbalance between researcher and researched. The researcher's positionality is dynamic; it shifts over the course of research. Moreover, positionality is not solely determined externally in the context of an insider/outsider dichotomy but is on a continuum that can be proactively influenced by the researcher. These issues are discussed with reference to recent research on postsocialist transition in Estonia, which involved interviews with political and economic elites. These experiences will be of interest to social scientists working on elites because it focuses on meeting the challenges of interviewing elites from establishing contact through to postinterview follow-up.

Keywords
research practice, positionality, elite interviews, cross-cultural research, Estonia

Introduction
Social scientists “attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view and unfold the meaning of their lived world” (Kvale, 2006, p. 481). The viability of researching elites hinges on the willingness of respondents to talk and to open up. However, interviewing elites represents unique methodological problems when compared with nonelite interviews. Whereas locating elites might seem relatively easy due to their high visibility, getting a foot in the door and obtaining their personal accounts of events can be very challenging (Laurila, 1997; Ostrander, 1995; Sabot, 1999; Thuesen, 2011; Welch et al., 2002; inter alia). Gaining access to elites is hard enough; gaining their trust and building rapport with them is even more difficult. Once rapport is established, another challenge is to keep a critical distance. These challenges are compounded with cross-cultural barriers when conducting interviews in a foreign environment. Cross-cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication, in etiquette, beliefs, norms, and value systems can easily lead to misunderstandings.

This article is the result of my reflection on elite interviews, which I have conducted over 2 years with Estonian economic and political elites. The objective of my research was not the process of interviewing foreign elites itself. I was conducting qualitative research to examine the role of local agency in the formation and implementation of economic policies in the early years of Estonia’s postsocialist transition. My research focused on why Estonian policy makers decided to pursue ultraliberal policies and how they made those decisions. As part of my preparation, I extensively covered the existing literature on elite interviews. Although initially I was having grave concerns regarding the success of my data collection due to the difficulties in interviewing elites, over time I realized the significance of the researcher’s knowledgeability and positionality in eliciting useful and trustworthy information from elite interviewees. Knowledgeability of the interviewees’ backgrounds and preferences, such as their favored means of communication and their willingness to contribute to academic research, helped in gaining access. In-depth knowledge of the research topic and familiarity with the interviewees’ culture and norms of behavior facilitated gaining their trust and establishing rapport, which proved invaluable in obtaining the interviewees’ own perception of events. During the course of data collection, which took place in six cities and four countries over 2 years, my positionality has evolved and has become a key determinant of the research project’s

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The Challenges of Researching Elites

Gaining Access and Trust

Hunter (1995) states that elites are “relatively unstudied” because of their power and ability to protect themselves from intrusion and criticism. Studies using elites—business, political, or social—are quite rare; most research in social sciences involve “ordinary” individuals leading to an asymmetry in the distribution of knowledge, as they provide information about the “masses” to the elites (Ostrander, 1995). Elite-oriented studies aim to lessen this asymmetry by providing a flow of knowledge the other way. Whereas in nonelite studies the researchers have the position of “expert,” in elite studies those who are being studied are “in the know.” Due to the social status of elite research participants, elite studies are also referred to as “studying up” (Hunter, 1995) presenting different methodological and ethical challenges from researching nonelite groups (Cormode, 1999).

For many qualitative investigators, one of the most pressing research concerns lies in gaining access. The researcher’s success in this regards will have a significant effect on the nature and quality of the data collected and, ultimately, on the trustworthiness of the findings. (Shenton & Hayter, 2004, pp. 223-231)

Gaining access to elites has to be carefully negotiated, which can take much longer time and higher costs than nonelite studies. They purposefully erect barriers, which set them apart from the rest of society (Laurila, 1997; Shenton & Hayter, 2004; Welch et al., 2002). They are also in a position to manipulate information and to deny access to it. Elites can command significant resources and exert influence over others. As such, they are hard to reach and are surrounded by numerous gatekeepers. Elites are visible but not necessarily accessible (Laurila, 1997). However, “without gaining access, there can be no research” (Cochrane, 1998, p. 2124).

As elite interviews are very difficult, if not virtually impossible, to repeat, careful planning and getting in touch with the respondents well in advance are essential to make the most of the event. The researcher must identify the respondents as well as find the right media to reach them. As elite interviewees are not willing to travel to the interview and are not likely to adapt to the researcher’s schedule, the researcher must be prepared to be flexible, which costs time and money (Conti & O’Neal, 2007; Stephens, 2007). Numerous studies (Berry, 2002; Harvey, 2011; Thuesen, 2011; Zuckerman, 1972; inter alia) emphasize the importance of thorough preparation. It decreases the status imbalance by highlighting the “seriousness of the interviewer” (Zuckerman, 1972, p. 164) and by projecting a “positive image in order to gain their respect” (Harvey, 2011, p. 434).

The location of the interview can have considerable influence on the interview process. The setting of the front stage, such as the person’s office, reflects the bureaucratic position and the power of elites. Responses obtained in an office can represent the official, public relation version. It is the “back stages” where negotiations take place, issues are discussed in earnest, and decisions are made. Back stages are carefully protected from outsiders and getting an insight can be problematic. Although they are not necessarily constrained to one physical location, most back-stage activities take place in informal environments, such as exclusive clubs. Finding them can be a challenge, as they are only known to insiders. “To know where it is is to belong; not to know is to be an outsider” (Hunter, 1995, p. 152).

Ostrander (1995) suggests that interviews take place at public places. Meeting at neutral locations minimizes distraction and interruptions and enables the researcher to claim some control over the setting. Arriving early and getting familiar with the environment is also helpful. However, meeting them outside of their office can be problematic due to various reasons, such as personal security (Thomas, 1995). If the interview does take place in the interviewee’s office, it is advisable not to behave like a guest, such as getting into “socializing” and commenting on the surroundings. There is the danger of being taken aback and impressed by the interviewee and his or her environment and overestimating the significance of the interviewee’s knowledge (Ostrander, 1995). On one hand, the researcher should not take everything the interviewee says at “face value”; critical judgment is important. On the other hand, the interviewees must be allowed to speak for themselves and their stories have to be taken seriously (Cochrane, 1998).

Once the interview is set, the interviewer needs to be familiar with the interviewees’ norms of behavior and etiquette to gain their trust and create rapport (Conti & O’Neal, 2007; Stephens, 2007). As Thuesen (2011) argues, “Interviewing is a craft involving deliberation, the management of emotions,
and a strategy for context adaptation” (p. 614), which is crucial for obtaining high-quality information.

One of the challenges is to get the respondents’ honest opinions, however subjective or emotional they are. “The mere arrangement of interviews does not mean establishment of successful research contact with the managers” (Laurila, 1997, p. 411). Beginning the interview on the “right note” is important. The researcher must be open and straightforward about his or her personal involvement and must make the goals and conditions for the research clear at the very beginning (Ostrander, 1995). Laurila (1997) stresses the importance of emphasizing why elite interviewees “should reserve the time for the discussion and how they relate to the issues addressed” (p. 410). Healey and Rawlinson (1993) suggest that the researcher start the interview with an open question so that the content does not influence the response. This also provides the interviewer with more time to build up trust and confidence. Summarizing what has been discussed and its interpretation by the researcher helps to avoid misunderstanding of the answers. Ending the interview with an open-ended discussion can be a useful way to check the completeness of the information acquired (Healey & Rawlinson, 1993).

Many elite participants have the ability and the power to protect themselves from exposure to criticism. Elites can influence the interview situation as well as the quality of information in various ways. Establishing rapport is a critical issue; gaining access and trust are not identical. Unlike nonelite studies, in which researchers are advised not to use complicated terminology, elite interviewees are knowledgeable. Elite interviewees can be tempted to dominate the interview and even challenge the researcher’s views. Many have excellent communication skills. On occasions, the researcher may easily find him- or herself in a situation of being patronized (Welch et al., 2002).

As Ezzy (2010) argues, “[g]ood interviews are not dominated by either the voice of the interviewer or the agendas of the interviewee” (p. 164). However, elites are used to being in charge and being asked about their opinion; they have the ability to converse easily, “just talk” and get into monologues instead of answering the hard questions. In addition, many of the elite research participants are trained in how to represent their organization to the outside world. It is not uncommon for researchers to hear the “public relations” version of events instead of their personal account of events. The researcher must be prepared for such situations with strategies to tackle them successfully (Harvey, 2011; Laurila, 1997). Thomas (1995) suggests that presenting the questions in personal terms and showing interest in what they personally think tends to open up elite interviewees. It indicates that the researcher is after their own insight, which they may find flattering. This is supported by Laurila (1997) arguing that “adapting the questions to the informant’s experience . . . arouses(es) personal interest and show(s) the researcher’s engagement with the research topic” (p. 410).

Demonstrating eagerness to learn from them may lead to a role-reversal, whereby the elite interviewee will have the opportunity to teach the researcher. “Managers’ vanity may be exploited by emphasizing the view that they now have a chance to teach the researcher, who is the student in their discipline” (p. 411).

To avoid journalistic answers, it may be necessary to “recalibrate” the interview by rephrasing the question. If this does not work, shifting to a completely different line of questioning is an option (Thomas, 1995). Ostrander (1995) recommends that researchers do not shy away from asking inappropriate questions even if it stretches the bounds of etiquette. This also reduces the perceived gap in status between the researcher and the elite interviewee.

Thuesen (2011) reflects on his interview experience with “reluctant or control-seeking respondents” (pp. 613-614) while examining ethnic discrimination in the Danish labor market. He underlines the importance of knowledge of the interview context and drawing on Aristotle argues the useful role of phronesis, which “as an intellectual virtue takes a combination of experience, deliberation, intuition, and an adequate choice of means in a given situation.” However, matching an appropriate approach in a given interview situation requires preparation and experience:

> ... exercising control while seeking to (rationally) understand the respondent’s arguments, and paying attention to the subtle emotional dynamics of the interview situation is easier said than done. Such micromanagement takes not only solid preparation for the interview topic but also emotional sensitivity, experience, and self-confidence. (p. 617)

The Central Question of the Researcher’s Positionality

Due to the influential and powerful positions of elite interviewees, the positionality of the researcher is especially important not only in getting access to elite interviewees but also to establish rapport with them. The status inconsistency in elite studies between researched and researcher is perceived to present a problem (Hunter, 1995; Ostrander, 1995; Thomas, 1995; Welch et al., 2002). A common assumption is that the position of elite interviewees is relatively more powerful than that of the researcher. It is also widely believed that the interviewee does a “favor” to the researcher, who gains most from the interview (Herod, 1999).

Due to the power, privileges, and knowledge of elites, self-presentation is crucial (McDowell, 1998). As Okumus, Altinay, and Roper (2007) argue, self-promotion “contribute(s) to gaining formal and personal access and fostering individual rapport” (p. 15). The background characteristics of the researcher and the researched have a significant impact on
the dynamics of the interview. To gain credibility and reduce the status imbalance, it is important for the researcher to emphasize his or her academic and professional credentials and institutional affiliations (Welch et al., 2002). Furthermore, appropriate credentials are also important for gaining access (Zuckerman, 1972).

Welch et al. (2002) consider the position of the “informed outsider,” which describes a neutral outsider with an inside view, effective. Elites may perceive the interview as an opportunity to have an informed discussion. According to Sabot (1999), local elites respond differently to fellow compatriots and to foreign researchers. Her findings show that foreign researchers are trusted more, as they are not perceived to pose any threat to the interviewees’ status and position, especially if the results are published in a different country. This places outsiders at an advantage at obtaining information, as it makes it easier for them to get access and ask blunt questions. Foreign researchers seem to get more leeway in their conduct. At the same time they are not as well placed as local ones to understand and interpret the obtained information, due to their lack of “inside view” (Sabot, 1999). However, according to Welch et al. (2002), foreigners can benefit from the cultural gap by maintaining a critical view.

Methodological Issues Arising From Interviewing Estonian Elites

Defining Estonian Elites

The term elite is not clearly defined; it “can mean many things in different contexts.” Elites are dynamic and heterogeneous, as people can gain and lose elite status over time. “Status and seniority” can “turn up as short-lived elements” (Plesner, 2011, p. 473). What distinguishes elites from non-elites is not job titles and powerful positions but the “ability to exert influence” through “social networks, social capital and strategic position within social structures” (Harvey, 2011, p. 433). Elites are also “clustered in different parts of the societal network”; thus, in any given context “there may be more than one elite” (Woods, 1998, p. 2105).

Smith (2006) disputes the segregation of people into elite and nonelite groups, stating that some marginalized groups can be just as hard to penetrate as those in powerful positions. However, I consider this research an elite study because the people I studied personally made or greatly influenced decisions, which have affected the life and wellbeing of the whole population of Estonia. The nature of the research question has defined this research as an elite study because it investigated the decisions of Estonia’s leaders in the country’s early postsocialist transition. The respondents were those individuals who were either key decision makers and/or had a major influence on policy choices and/or were firsthand witnesses to decision making in the early years of Estonia’s economic transition in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

My research participants do not fall into the category of “ultra elites,” as they are not “the most highly placed members of an elite” (Zuckerman, 1972, p. 160). The definition of elites is “geographically specific” (Harvey, 2011, p. 433); the interviewees in my research project were elites within Estonia. These individuals have been highly visible; they have been occupying powerful positions as senior government officials, chief executive officers, and senior managers in public and private organizations. My list of interviewees included former and current government ministers, prime ministers, and Central Bank executives with considerable influence over policy making.

Through directed but open-ended exchange, my aim was to elicit the interviewees’ own accounts of their experiences and perspectives. The objective was to hear about the interviewees’ beliefs, attitudes, and motives, in other words, the kind of information, which would be very hard, if not impossible, to obtain through surveys. Thus, the main data-collection method in my study was semistructured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews. I have collected the necessary information by talking to the participants individually, with a set of specific questions in hand, and carefully listening to their stories. My intention was to construct a consistent picture by talking to several people, comparing one person’s version with that of others, tackling important issues from different angles, and carefully probing and triangulating with the literature. I wanted to obtain the interviewees’ own perception of events and not the “public relations” version of a story, which they think the interviewer would want to hear. Having a specific set of questions in hand helped me to cover all the necessary topics and left room for the interviewees to express their own thoughts. Also, as gaining access to elites is hard, I intended to use my time efficiently.

How to Gain Access?

The objective of my research was to investigate the extent of local agency in economic policy formation in postsocialist Estonia. One of the reasons for selecting Estonia’s transition for my research is that I moved there just 7 years after the country regained its independence and lived there for 7 years. In addition to becoming interested in the country’s economic development, my Estonian experience has equipped me with the ability not only to identify the required sources of information but also the knowledge of how to reach them. I became thoroughly familiar with the Estonian culture, which proved invaluable when conducting my interviews.

As my aim was to understand the motives of Estonian policy makers behind their policy decisions, this research
topic could be best studied and analyzed by talking to those individuals who were actively shaping the events and/or were close observers. The interviewees can be characterized as political, economic, and corporate elites. Although there have been 11 governments in postsocialist Estonia, the various positions—let it be in government or in opposition—tend to be filled by the same people, as the same individuals kept circulating among the various leadership positions (Adam, Kristan, & Tomšič, 2009). The population under investigation was small, of a size of approximately 25 to 30, some of whom have passed away since. Thus, it was fairly easy to identify my sources of information.

One of the main problems in my research project was gaining access, as a large number of gatekeepers surround these people and control access to them. They have very rigorous time schedules, which makes it hard to meet with them, let alone get the time essential for a meaningful interview. As my interviewees were dispersed across regions and organizations, I had to negotiate access before every interview. Indeed, “(n)etworks, social capital, and trust are often paramount for gaining access to elites . . .” (Thuesen, 2011, p. 620). My Estonian experience was crucial in getting an insight into their viewpoints and ways of thinking. Without gaining access and obtaining their trust, my research would have been impossible. While living in Estonia, I made a lot of acquaintances and friends. I taught as a full-time faculty member at an international university and regularly trained corporate executives. Many of the students were senior managers, corporate executives, and government officials, which helped me to become familiar with the country’s political and socioeconomic landscape. Such insight has also enabled me to identify the key players in the country’s economic arena. I saw their willingness to cooperate and realized that they perceive social research as something to be gained from. They did not shy away from opportunities to voice their views. It was not so much knowing them personally that proved precious but the realization that accessing them and gaining their trust is possible. The knowledge that Estonian elites are willing to participate in academic research interviews proved crucial. I would not have embarked on researching Estonian elites without knowing that I have at least a fair chance of getting their consent for the interview.

However, despite my relatively close links with them, my research could not be characterized as “studying sideways . . . the realization that a research situation could not be interpreted as a matter of studying up or down” (Plesner, 2011, p. 472). Although I felt that I was treated as an equal, there were clear asymmetries between us. Unlike me, these interviewees have significant capacity for the “rapid and routine mobilisation of human, institutional, material, and discursive resources into networks of action” (Woods, 1998, p. 2106). In addition to enjoying high status, they have access to data and information that is inaccessible to the public, which was my very reason for interviewing them.

Inside knowledge has also allowed me to have an insight into the etiquette, norms, and values of the Estonian elite, which subsequently became invaluable in my research. In Estonia, academics enjoy a relatively high status and occupational prestige, which helped me to establish valuable contacts. During our conversations—formal and informal—I was able to gain an inside view to the workings of the Estonian economy. Making the right contacts and using my own circles aided me to get in touch with the participants. Connections, networks, as well as luck could not be excluded. In addition to becoming interested in the country’s economic development, my Estonian experience has equipped me with the ability to identify not only the required sources of information but also the knowledge of how to reach them. Being familiar with the Estonian culture proved immensely helpful when approaching my interviewees. For instance, knowing that stubbornness and perseverance is not considered impolite by Estonians was crucial in obtaining contacts and interview appointments.

As the interviewees can be characterized as economic, political, and corporate elites, participants were selected by purposive sampling using specific criteria from this hard-to-reach, specialized population. Given the very limited number and the influential position of these individuals, random sampling was inappropriate. Finding the respondents’ contact details was relatively easy; in most cases I was able to obtain telephone numbers, emails as well as postal addresses. From my experience, I found that Estonians prefer written to oral communication with strangers. Although literature (Conti & O’Neal, 2007; Stephens, 2007) suggests sending formal letters to be followed up by phone calls, I decided to establish contact through emails. Again, knowing the local culture was essential. Estonian is a high-context culture with a lot of emphasis on nonverbal communication. Estonians do not think aloud. Their tight-lipped characteristic is expressed through their high rate of Internet usage and their preference of written communication. Estonian people are very high-tech oriented; they pride themselves on using the latest technology. According to a survey conducted in 2007, 65% of 6-to-74-year-olds, including almost every 10-to-24-year-olds, are regular users of the Internet with 49% of households having home access (Vihailemm & Kalmus, 2009). The whole country is Wi-Fi covered (Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Contacting them through electronic media proved right; my nonresponse rate was below 20%.

In addition to the relatively high response rate, I usually received replies to my interview requests within a few days. On the few occasions when I had to wait longer, the responses began with an apology. Laurila (1997) argues that
“managers are ‘doers’ who by definition do not value the theoretical concepts and categories of researchers . . . Thus they share little common ground with researchers” (p. 409). This was not the case with the Estonian senior executives I came into contact with. Many stated in their response that they “would be very happy to meet and contribute to the study.” Based on my observations while living in Estonia, my high response rate, and 2 years’ experience of elite interviews, I found that Estonian elites—a large portion of whom are senior managers and executives—hold academic research in high esteem.

Flexibility was the key word when choosing the venue and time for the interviews. I did not contact all the participants at the same time, nor did I start with the most important ones, in order to gain experience and confidence. I contacted the respondents 3 to 4 months in advance. Giving them a choice of dates far in advance proved very helpful, as only two declined due to work commitments. However, both of them recommended a close associate for the interview. Thus they acted as gatekeepers, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

Your request was discussed internally but unfortunately due to scheduling conflicts Mr (X), is unable to meet. However, should the meeting with Mr. (Y), who has a very good knowledge about the postsocialist transition process, suit you, he would be very happy to meet and contribute to the study.

I never scheduled two interviews for the same day to allow room for last-minute changes or in case the interview lasts longer. Although this has increased the time and cost of interviews in the form of additional nights spent in hotels, it proved useful. One interviewee had to postpone our meeting by several hours. On several occasions the interview took much longer than I had expected and I was intent on taking full advantage of the interviewee’s willingness to talk. My shortest interview lasted 55 min, the longest took more than 3 hr. On average, the interviews were about 1 hr and 15 min long.

I conducted 21 interviews in six cities in four countries—I had one interview in Liverpool, London, Brussels, and Riga each, two in Tartu, the rest took place in Tallinn. Although face-to-face interviews are costly and time-consuming due to the travel involved, they have several advantages. It makes it easier to probe for lengthier and more detailed answers. In telephone interviews, it is harder to establish trust but it is easier for the interviewees to finish the interview than in face-to-face interviews (Healey & Rawlinson, 1993). Interviews tend to have a higher response rate compared with surveys; however, this is of questionable comparative value due to the difficulties in gaining access to elite interviewees. Semistructured interviews provide the interviewer with more discretion over the conduct of the interview than unstructured interviews. The goal of interviewing is eliciting accounts of the experiences and values of the participants by seeking to probe ideas, emotions, and views (Newmann, 2000).

Although, according to Stephens (2007), telephone interviewing is “both a productive and valid research option” (p. 203), I wanted to conduct all my interviews in person because I wanted to familiarize myself with the interviewees’ environment to acquire an insight into their surroundings. “Cultural differences are more difficult to identify over the telephone” (Harvey, 2011, p. 435). Face-to-face contact allowed me to pay attention to nonverbal clues, which are particularly important in a high-context culture, such as Estonian. I had to resort to telephone interview with only one participant, as he is currently working in China and neither my time nor my finances afforded such a long trip.

Do Your Homework!

Knowing that Estonians prefer written to oral communication and their “flair” for technology, I approached my interviewees through emails, which I carefully worded. Estonians tend to be very formal, thus using the proper title, such as Dr. or Professor was important. I cannot overemphasize the significance of thorough preparation. Familiarity with their background was essential, as some of them asked me in their reply why I had chosen them. Knowing their life history also helped me to spot minor nuances during the interviews. I read the literature both written about them and by them, which helped me to make efficient use of my time with them by being able to ask very specific and in-depth questions. It also improved their perception of my knowledgability, which decreased the status imbalance between researched and researcher.

My experience supports the existing literature (Hunter, 1995; Zuckerman, 1972) on the importance of thorough preparation. I agree with Laurila’s (1997) findings that demonstrating in-depth knowledge of the research topic helps to establish trust with the interviewees. Preinterview preparation allows the researcher to ask questions, to which the answers are not available in public (Welch et al., 2002). It ascertains that the information obtained is useful in meeting the goals of research, as a well-informed interviewer is in a better position to check the accuracy of information received. Exhibiting knowledgability of the topic can be a good defense against interviewees’ attempts to patronize the researcher (Healey & Rawlinson, 2002). I supplemented the interviews with alternative forms of data collection; different sources and forms of evidence were brought together. Some of the best sources were the local media, such as the daily newspapers Äripäev, Postimees, and Eesti Päevaleht,
which are the leading national newspapers covering political and economic news. Articles of the main newspapers are available in English language through media portals.

Due to the differences between the participants’ background and personality, the respondents’ communication skills, language ability, and the interviewing situation, I formulated my questions differently, depending on the interview situation. The quality of interview design and the way the questions are asked strongly affect the nature of answers received. Extreme care and attention needs to be paid to the interview process both while it takes place and when analyzing the notes and recordings (McDowell, 1998). The manner and wording in which questions are phrased can alter the interpretation of the question, and thus the response (Healey & Rawlinson, 2002). The interviewer–respondent interaction, which is heavily influenced by the attitudes and reactions of interviewees to the questions, can vary greatly across interviews. As my interviews progressed, some of the questions were altered due to new information revealed in previous interviews.

Although Thomas (1995) recommends neutral locations for the interview, in my research this was not the case. One interview took place in a café and two in restaurants. Neutral locations have three major disadvantages—noise, interruptions, and the neutral nature of the location itself. The noise level made it harder to focus and affected the quality of the recording, and thus it took me longer to transcribe these interviews than those recorded in offices. Despite these difficulties, I gained high-quality data and invaluable information from these interviews as well.

Holding the interviews in the interviewees’ own environment proved consequential, as it provided me with additional insight into the participants’ setting. I agree with Creswell (2007) that it is important not to separate what people say from their context and to listen to the participants’ stories in their own environment, to gain a detailed understanding of the problem. Every office that I have been in had not just a desk but also a table with chairs around it, which were used for the interview. I found Estonian offices unobtrusive, practical, and uncluttered; they almost looked austere. The office interiors did not reflect the high-level position of their occupiers. I had the full attention of my interviewees on every occasion and not once were we disrupted. Conducting a face-to-face interview at a neutral location removes the respondent from his or her own environment thus depriving the researcher of a crucial element of context. The interviewee’s own environment provides important clues, which can be particularly significant in high-context cultures. Since Estonians tend not to chat and consider small talk unnecessary, nonverbal communication plays a significant role.

The interviewer’s social skills are an important determinant of a successful elite interview (Healey & Rawlinson, 1993). Dressing in a suitable manner helps the interviewer to “blend in” more, whereas inappropriate clothes may adversely affect the interview. For example, I wore a suit and a necktie at each interview, as this is the norm among Estonian civil servants and business executives.

The literature on recording interviews is divided. Byron (1993) and Aberbach and Rockman (2002) argue that elites are more willing to talk without being recorded. However, Berry (2002) neatly summarizes the disadvantage of not using a recorder: “How can you make a clear-headed decision about your next question when you’re listening, trying to make sense of the answer, and taking notes at the same time?” (p. 682).

In my case, only one interviewee refused to be recorded. Those recorded did not even seem to notice the recorder on the table. This allowed me to reflect not only over the nuances and particularities of each interview but also on my positionality, emotions, understanding of the stories, as well as my reactions to them, which affected my interpretation of events. I paid special attention to the interviewees’ body language. Sometimes, the intonation of the interviewee’s voice, his posture, and facial expression would express more than his words.

In addition, eye contact with the interviewees helped to establish rapport. Recording the interviews had another benefit. As I transcribed the interviews myself I was able to reflect not only on what they said but how they said it—their intonation, pauses, and emotions.

As interviews are highly contextual, knowledgeability of the interviewee’s culture and background is essential. As Young (2011) argues, “different conventions/norms can lead to incorrect perceptions . . .” (p. 50). Although Estonians tend to get to the business at hand, prompting my interviewees was unnecessary. When they were finished with their answer, which could take from a few seconds up to half an hour, they asked for the next question. Berry (2002, p. 681) argues that uncomfortable silences during the interview encourage interviewees to reveal more. However, his suggestion “to say nothing and stare expectantly at the subject” in order to elicit more detailed answers would probably not work when interviewing Estonian elites, as they appear perfectly comfortable with long silences. The “brief, firm answers” of Danish trade union leaders suggested to Thuesen (2011) that “pursuing this line of questioning would prove embarrassing” (pp. 616-618), which eventually led to a premature end to that interview. On another occasion his “persistence and confrontation . . . paid off” but ended in a tense and heated encounter. My Estonian interviewees showed no discomfort when probing highly sensitive issues, such as ethnic discrimination against the local ethnic Russian minority. My stubbornness led to valuable information without having to worry about ethical concerns regarding putting the interviewees in an uncomfortable situation.
situation. The answers were calm and confident, even if somewhat ironic, as illustrated by this response: “The relations with Russia cannot be improved anyway unless we rejoin mother Russia.”

I have never been an avid diary writer but this time I ran a research diary, in which I recorded my impressions about the background and the environment of the interviewees. As Cochrane (1998) advises, notes help to reflect on the relationship between researcher and researched and to ascertain the accuracy of transcriptions. I carried a pocket-size notebook with me. Prior to the meetings, I took notes of the exterior and interior of the buildings and offices in which the interviews took place. After the interviews, I would find a quiet place—for instance a café—write down my impressions and reflect not only on the interview and its contribution to the whole picture but also on my evolving positionality in the research context. Although Young (2011) underlines the centrality of reflexivity in the context of nonelite interviews, her argument extends to elite interviews. “Reflexivity . . . becomes more than simply describing researcher’s investment in their work, rather the interview is understood developing out of a context in which the dynamic relationship between the researched and the researcher co-constrains the unfolding narrative” (p. 48).

Gaining Trust: Reflections on Positionality

I have given a lot of thought to my positionality. In my case, having spent 7 years in Estonia not long after the events under investigation happened helped me to empathize with the interviewees and their stories. I am Hungarian, which benefited my research. Estonians have a strong ethnographic interest in the Finno-Ugric peoples and highly value links with them. Their strong national identity is deeply rooted in their language. Lennart Meri, President of Estonia during 1992-2001, was an anthropologist searching for Estonian “relatives” in Siberia and traces of the ancient Estonian religion in their “shamanistic” practices (Lieven, 1993; Taagepera, 1973, 1993). I have repeatedly come across the enthusiasm of Estonians regarding Finno-Ugric contacts. An example, which ironically underlines their Finno-Ugric affinity, is that some Estonians refer to Hungarians as “Estonians who for some reason call themselves Hungarians.” Upon learning my Hungarian nationality, many Estonians would draw my attention to the few words that sound similar and have the same meaning in both languages. Other researchers should similarly be aware of how their biography might be used to gain access, or make it problematic.

I speak some Estonian but my knowledge is insufficient to carry out in-depth academic conversations. I taught at an international university where Estonians—faculty and students alike—were a minority and the language of instruction was English. Although a common assumption is that because Hungarian and Estonian languages both belong to the Finno-Ugric family these languages are very similar, this is not the case. The grammar and the intonation of the languages are similar but the words are completely different with the exception of a few. In addition, despite living in the country I found that my chances to practice Estonian were quite limited. Whenever I spoke Estonian, my accent gave me away as a foreigner and Estonians regarded these occasions as an excellent opportunity to practice their English.

I worded the questions carefully trying to be unambiguous and clear. Even though my Estonian language skills are limited, knowing some key words, phrases and abbreviations did help; it made the flow of the interviews much smoother and contributed to my knowledgeability. All of the interviewees spoke good English, although it was their second or third language. Interpreters were used on two occasions at the request of the interviewees due to the (self-admitted) lack of confidence in their English language skills. The interpreters were native Estonians, fluent in English. The presence of an interpreter may inhibit some interviewees from giving honest answers (Welch et al., 2002). However, as the interpreters were independent from any commercial or governmental interests, this fear was minimized.

I cannot emphasize enough the significance of in-depth knowledge of the country and familiarity with its language. As initially I was given 1 hr by my interviewees, interviewing them with specific questions in hand increased the opportunity to have an “informed conversation” and improved the efficiency of these meetings, as no time was spent on discussing information that can be obtained from written sources. Second, having read the literature written not only about them but also by them and all relevant documents enhanced my knowledgeability, which decreased the status imbalance between researched and researcher thus positively influencing the researcher’s positionality. My experience supported Zuckerman’s (1972) findings; on numerous occasions, I found myself being observed and evaluated by my interviewee. My knowledgeability helped me to gain their trust, which is critical for the researcher to receive the interviewee’s personal account of events.

It would be impossible to fit my position into the simplistic “insider” versus “outsider” dichotomy. Being an academic at a U.K. university makes me an outsider but also gives me important status, as academics are highly valued in Estonian society. However, being a Hungarian who had firsthand experience of life in socialist-era Hungary, lived in Estonia for a relatively long period of time, and married an Estonian puts me in the light of an insider. Having had Estonian elites as colleagues and students gave me respectability. My Estonian experience and knowledgeability coupled with my Hungarian nationality...
have defined my positionality to a great extent and significantly aided my ability to gain access.

Overall, it was due to my positionality, personal contacts, inside knowledge of Estonian culture and etiquette, and perseverance that I got excellent access and succeeded in conducting lengthy and in-depth face-to-face interviews with Estonian elites. I gained firsthand accounts of the events, circumstances, and decisions that took place in the time period under discussion in Estonia from the key decision makers and advisors themselves. The success of my research was confirmed by a member of staff of the Office of the President of Estonia when upon enquiring about whom I had interviewed, she responded, “Is there anyone you have not interviewed?”

As Plesner (2011) argues, “Being an insider and an outsider are not finite positions but constantly negotiated” (p. 480). Instead of a black-and-white dualism, my positionality has been somewhere in the middle on the “insider–outsider” continuum. Perhaps the term concerned foreign friend would describe my position in this research best. I am not perceived as a local but I am not viewed as an outsider either. As Herod (1995) and Sabot (1999) suggest, being an insider does not necessarily translate to benefits. Estonians are more willing to share potentially sensitive information with outsiders, such as foreigners, because they are perceived to be harmless. Outsiders are also considered neutral and impartial (Herod, 1995). Being a non-Estonian not working in Estonia presented me as nonthreatening to them. This is underlined with the fact that the vast majority of my interviewees agreed to be quoted and their names to be revealed. Altogether three interviewees insisted on remaining anonymous one of whom also refused to be recorded.

It was very interesting to experience the progress of the interviews. Every interview started off on a courteous but “cool” note. I began the interviews enquiring about their background and I only revealed my personal relationship with Estonia during the interview. Some immediately said a few Hungarian words. The following quote by one of the interviewees is a good representation of the resulting rapport between the researcher and the researched:

Interviewee: “You have witnessed the everyday struggle in life, so you have a very deep insight... So you understand what I am talking about.”

Revealing my personal connection with Estonia has helped to gain their trust, as the official, public relations lines were replaced with candid in-depth conversation, as illustrated below:

Interviewee: “This will be my personal comment now.”

Interviewer: “That’s exactly what I want.”

The importance of the researcher’s positionality throughout the research process must not be underestimated. It strongly affects the researcher’s success in establishing contact and gain trust. As the research progresses, the researcher’s “track record” of interviews serves as proof of trustworthiness. Most of my interviewees asked me about who else I had interviewed. Once I revealed the names—excluding the ones who insisted on remaining anonymous—they offered me further contacts, such as personal mobile numbers of other potentially valuable interviewees. Thus they became gatekeepers. Some even shared their personal opinions of those persons with me.

I agree with Ezzy (2010) that “emotions are central to the conduct of interviews” (p. 163). Indeed, “introspective emotional self-awareness” (p. 168) made me become more open to the stories of my respondents. Upon reflection of my interviews with Estonian elites, I realize that my positionality has evolved over time. As I spent years living in Estonia, I was not an unbiased researcher to start with. Having personally experienced the socioeconomic consequences of the country’s ultraliberal policies, I began my investigation of the origins of Estonia’s ultraliberal economic policies with slight antagonism and curiosity. However, over the course of my research I developed empathy, which has gradually turned into sympathy toward my interviewees. Thus, on the “insider–outsider continuum,” my positionality has become more of an “insider.” Similar to Ezzy’s (2010) interview encounters, frequently our conversation would continue for minutes after I switched off the recorder. On numerous occasions, the interviewees showed me mementos. For instance, one respondent brought me an original copy of his father’s degree in engineering, which had been awarded almost a hundred years ago at a Baltic university. Another one proudly showed me a copy of the country’s EU accession document, which he personally signed as Prime Minister of Estonia.

Age and gender did not play a critical role in conducting the interviews. With three exceptions, all of the interviewees were men, like me. There was a seniority gap with the interviewees but I felt like I was treated as an equal.

Data collection and analysis were carried out following ethical research guidelines. This was an overt and independent research project. Interviews were held with the informed consent of the participants. None of the interviewees belonged to any vulnerable groups. The privacy of those interviewees who wanted to remain anonymous has been respected. I made it clear at the outset that my research is an independent project, not sponsored by any commercial or government sources. This eased concerns about information that could be considered sensitive by the interviewee.
Establishing Trustworthiness and Reliability

It is impossible to achieve perfect reliability and validity, although they are very important in social science due to the often-ambiguous nature of social constructions (Newmann, 2000). In qualitative research, the incorporation of rigor as well as subjectivity into the research process raises difficulties in developing validity standards (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Creswell (2007) defines validation as the compilation of “bits and pieces of evidence to formulate a compelling whole” (p. 204). However, evidence is not the equivalent of truth and objectivity because

life as we live it is not static enough to allow for this kind of certainty: It is much more fluid, contextual, and relational . . . Because we cannot separate ourselves from what we know, our subjectivity is an integral part of our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the world around us.

Thus, validation in qualitative research is a “judgment of trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research” (Angen, 2000, pp. 380, 385, 387).

The shift of my positionality toward the insider position has made keeping a critical distance challenging. Therefore, I used triangulation, member checking, and lengthy self-critical reflection to improve trustworthiness and to ascertain a critical evaluation of the findings. Not being a “dispassionate researcher” who keeps a distance from the “people he or she is researching” (Ezzy, 2010, p. 169), reflection on the “emotional framing of the interview” (p. 163) and critical discussion of my own perspective, voice, and taken-for-granted knowledge formed an integral part of the research process.

Biases may also arise in the interviews due to the interviewees’ selective memory or due to self-serving motives, such as post hoc rationalizing of events. I compared and contrasted the interviews with official documents and databases of national and international organizations, such as the Statistical Office of Estonia, the Central Bank of Estonia, the Office of Statistics of the European Union, preaccession reports prepared by the EU, and country evaluations carried out by the IMF, World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Through postinterview communication, I have asked some of my interviewees to comment on my preliminary findings.

Postinterview Follow-Up

At the end of the interview, it is helpful to ask for an opportunity to follow up with questions of clarification after the notes are reviewed. It helps to ask for names of contacts that they think would be able and willing to provide information in the form of an interview (Thomas, 1995). Such snowballing technique helped me to find potentially useful information. On various occasions, I was given contact details of potential interviewees. Many of the interviewees provided me with additional reading material. Following each interview, I sent each a letter thanking them for their cooperation. This gesture not only served as a reminder in case the interviewee offered additional help, such as reports or additional contacts during the interview, but also kept the door open for follow-up interviews. Postinterview cooperation can be helpful, as interviewees can be sent the transcripts to check for accuracy, which can provide additional information and comments to the researcher (Welch et al., 2002). A thank-you letter to the interviewee leaves a positive impression, which makes further research with them possible (Healey & Rawlinson, 1993).

Postinterview communication has revealed an emotional side to the process. Many of the participants responded to my follow-up emails admitting that they enjoyed our conversation, as it brought back memories from Estonia’s post-socialist formative years. As one interviewee commented, “This is an interesting topic; I will be interested to read your work.” Overall, I have been impressed with the cooperation, willingness, and openness of my elite interviewees, for which I am grateful.

Conclusion

Drawing on my experiences of interviewing Estonian elites, in this article I have attempted to offer a critical analysis of the challenges in interviewing elites. The key insight of this article is that the success of elite interviews hinges on the researcher’s knowledgeability of the interviewees. Gaining access, trust, and establishing rapport are instrumental in obtaining the personal interpretation of events of elite interviewees. Conducting elite interviews poses specific difficulties, due to the barriers surrounding them and the demand on their time. Intensive preinterview preparation is essential because it enhances the researcher’s knowledgeability of the interviewees’ background and preferences, such as their favored means of communication and their willingness to contribute to academic research, and helps in gaining access. In-depth knowledgeability of the research topic and inside knowledge of the interviewees’ culture, environment, and norms of behavior facilitate gaining their trust, which proves invaluable in obtaining the interviewees’ own perception of events. It also decreases the status imbalance between researcher and researched benefiting the conduct of a meaningful and informed conversation. Interviews are contextual; face-to-face interviews in the respondents’ own environment allow for the observation of nonverbal communication as well as the
interviewees’ surroundings, which can be integral to the unfolding narrative.

The researcher’s positionality is central to successful elite interviewing. It is not determined on an “insider/outside” dichotomy but is on an “insider–outsider” continuum that can be positively influenced by the researcher through thorough preparation. Positionality is dynamic; it evolves during the course of data collection and becomes a key determinant of the research’s success.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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