Reflections on interviewing foreign elites: praxis, positionality, validity, and the cult of the insider

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Abstract

Using open-ended interviews to conduct research on foreign elites raises methodological questions which conducting research on non-foreign elites does not. In this paper I first reflect upon some of the practical issues I have encountered when conducting interviews with members of foreign elites. I then examine the issue of positionality to suggest that the dualism of "insider" knowledge and status versus "outsider" knowledge and status is not as stable as it is often assumed to be, and that it should not be presumed that an "insider" will necessarily produce "better" knowledge than will an "outsider" simply by dint of their positionality. Indeed, given that the interview process is about constructing social meaning—a process that involves both the researcher and the source—in many ways such a dualism is meaningless. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

There has been much written in recent years within the geographical literature about the use of "open-ended" interviews—what Schoenberger (1991) has called the "corporate interview"—as a research methodology (cf. Schoenberger, 1992; McDowell, 1992; Herod, 1993; Nast, 1994; Katz, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; England, 1994; Gilbert, 1994; Staeheli and Lawson, 1994). In this paper I want to reflect upon the issue of conducting open-ended interviews with members of foreign elites, by which I mean foreign nationals who hold positions of power within organizations such as corporations, governments, or, in the case of my own research, trade unions. Specifically, I want to suggest that conducting interviews with members of foreign elites is a process which is, in many ways, qualitatively different from that of conducting interviews with either elite members of one's own nationality or with non-elite foreign nationals, and thus that different issues must be problematized within the research process. For example, when conducting research involving foreign elites the researcher may face particular issues of transcultural communication and understanding that s/he does not have to face when conducting research involving non-foreign elites. Likewise, when conducting research involving foreign elites the researcher often has access to well-defined organizational structures, lines of institutional contact (telephone numbers or addresses of key individuals), and information (annual reports, memoranda, press releases, etc.) which are not available when interviewing foreign non-elites. At the same time, however, information about such organizational structures may be more difficult to locate for foreign organizations than for domestic ones.

Problematising the issue of conducting research involving foreign elites is useful, I think, because there are two changes—one epistemological, the other political-economic—which mean that the practice of geographers interviewing elites of nationalities different from their own is likely to become more common as time passes. The first of these changes relates to the growth of what might generally be referred to as post-positivist ways of doing research. As the quantitative approach has lost its dominant position within geography and as approaches which draw upon political economy and non-positivist methodologies have come to prominence (Barnes, 1995), geographers have increasingly turned to interviewing as
a rigorous means of data gathering. It is only natural that as interviewing itself as a research methodology grows in frequency of use, the number of foreign-born nationals whom geographers interview is likely to increase.

The second change relates to material transformations that are occurring within the global political economy. We have witnessed in recent years a tremendous process of globalization as capital investment, information, lines of power and control, and people have all flowed in ever larger quantities across national boundaries (though see Hirst and Thompson (1996) who argue that the process of "globalization" has not been anywhere near as great as the discourses of neoliberalism would have us believe). Increasingly, geographers interested in understanding contemporary economic and political processes and events — both global and local, abroad and "at home" — are going to have to deal with foreign elites, whether that is in the form of the researcher her/himself going abroad to conduct research or whether the researcher stays "at home" and interviews the foreign-born officials of, say, a local transplant facility. This is an important point, for we should not suppose that the issue of interviewing foreign elites is something that only affects those who physically go abroad to conduct research. There seems to be a concern among some (e.g., Lonsdale, 1986) that US geographers (and perhaps those in other countries too) actually became more insular during the 1980s and that there has been a decline in overseas research, at least as measured by the regional focus of doctoral dissertations awarded by US geography departments — a concern which, incidentally, Turner and Varlyguin (1995) find not to be supported by the evidence. Nonetheless, the issue of interviewing members of a foreign elite will undoubtedly become more important even for those geographers who conduct their field work "in their own backyard" and never in fact leave their "home communities".

There are myriad issues that are important to consider when conducting interviews as part of an information gathering exercise. Many of these have been well examined elsewhere and I do not wish to rehash them here. However, there is one issue which seems particularly problematic when interviewing foreign elites, and that is the issue of the cultural positionalinity of the researcher and thus the presumed validity and meaningfulness of the knowledge they produce. Put more simply, it is often assumed that a researcher who conducts interviews with members of different nationalities is automatically at a disadvantage because they can never hope to understand the cultural complexities of that which they are not. In other words, the validity of one's research is seen to be a reflection of one's positionalinity. Arguing such a position has two significant consequences. First, in its extreme articulation it may lead us down the path of reserved knowledge for particular people, of the sort which suggests that, for instance, only those who grew up in, say, Britain can ever hope to say anything meaningful about why the British do things in certain ways (and writing as someone who did in fact grow up in Britain I can say that the experience does not necessarily give one the inside-track on understanding all things British!). Second, it assumes a positivist notion of knowledge in which the "insider" interviewer is seen to have a closer, more direct, and hence in some way "truer" access to knowledge, knowledge which is seen to pre-exist the research process and which is simply awaiting to be discovered by those with the appropriate cultural resources and skills. It assumes that the "insider" naturally will produce an interpretation which is more "correct" in some absolute way than will the "outsider" because the "outsider" must strip away greater quantities of cultural baggage to gain access to the true and correct knowledge about particular events and processes held by the interviewee. What this notion fails to recognize, however, is that the research process is a social one in which both interviewer and interviewee participate in knowledge creation and, consequently, although the "outsider" and the "insider" may shape this process in different ways, it makes little sense to assume that one version of this knowledge is necessarily "truer" in some absolute and "objective" sense.

In this paper, then, I wish to reflect upon my own experience in conducting interviews with members of foreign elites and to problematize the issue of being an "outsider". In the first part of the paper I consider some of the practical issues I have encountered in actually conducting fieldwork. In the second part of the paper I consider the issue of my own positionalinity as an "outsider" in the research process.

2. Issues in the practice of interviewing foreign elites

My own research involves trying to understand the spatiality of trade unionism and how trade unions and their members negotiate, and make their lives within, the geographies of the contemporary global political economy. This work has involved research which has sought, among other things, to investigate how unions may seek to address geographical differences in wage rates and
conditions, the impact on workers and unions of the transition from a centrally-planned to a market economy in Eastern Europe, and what the growing integration of national economies means for workers’ efforts to develop structures of union solidarity across transnational space (see Herod, 1995, 1998a, b, c). It has required conducting interviews with high-level trade union officials in Germany, Switzerland, Cuba, Britain, and Guyana (all in English), in the Czech and Slovak Republics (both in English directly and in English via local interpreters), and in Honduras (in Spanish). It has also involved conducting interviews in the United States with local and national trade union officials which, given my status as a British-born permanent resident of the US (where I hold the curious geographical and legal status of “resident alien” with all of its implications of being part of, yet separate from, US culture, traditions, and ways of thinking/doing), has also put me in the position of interviewing “foreign” elites even when I do not leave the country which is now my residence. Based on these experiences, then, I want to offer some thoughts on the process and practice of interviewing members of “foreign elites”.

2.1. Gaining access

Clearly, there are a number of issues to consider when conducting interviews with members of foreign elites, particularly those who are located abroad. Some of these are relatively banal and arguably are characteristic at a certain level of most interview research — although I would add that the fact one is doing such interviews abroad heightens the complexity of the situation. Thus, perhaps one of the principal of these issues is when first beginning research abroad into trade unions or any other entities is that of simply gaining access to foreign institutions and individuals, a process that can be extremely difficult and frustrating when one is perhaps less familiar with foreign organizations than with domestic ones. With regard to my own research on trade unionism, I have found that a good initial source of information on contact addresses and telephone numbers are reference works such as Encyclopedia of Associations: International Organizations, Trade Unions of the World, and, for those interested in research on US unions, the Directory of US Labor Organizations.

Whereas many standard texts on interviewing seem to assume that gaining access to institutions is relatively straightforward and thus they focus on the dynamics of the interview itself, in practice simply arranging an interview can itself be an extremely challenging ordeal, even when one is armed with such basic knowledge as contact addresses (cf. Ward and Jones in this volume, who suggest that, for example, the timing of contacting organizations can greatly influence whether one is granted access). Hence, for instance, my own efforts to contact officials of the Central de Trabajadores de Cuba prior to visiting the island a few years ago to arrange an interview were greatly complicated by the poor state of the telephone system in Cuba and the fact that one of the US operators from whom I was trying to get telephone numbers either would not or could not give them to me, which was itself perhaps a reflection of the state of political relations between Cuba and the US. Even after I had established contacts and set up interviews I had to request from the US Treasury Department permission to travel to Cuba and had to carry cash to pay for everything since credit cards issued on US banks cannot be used on the island.

One of the main differences between conducting interviews with foreign elites as opposed to non-elites is that elites, by their very nature, tend to be members of institutions with organizational structures which are often clearly identifiable, they tend to have greater access to institutional resources (e.g. they can often readily provide copious quantities of documents that their own institutions have produced which may be used as part of a “triangulation strategy” (Merriam, 1998) to verify what is said in an interview, an option which is less likely to be available when interviewing non-elites), and they tend to be much more interconnected via organizational structures and modern telecommunications systems than do non-elites. Researchers doing work involving elites, then, frequently have a more ready means of making initial contact with groups they are interested in studying than do researchers studying non-elites, which usually have fewer resources, are often not members of clearly identifiable organizations, and to whom, consequently, it may be more difficult to gain access.

In the case of my own research, all of the elites with whom I have conducted interviews have held positions in organizations whose basic structures it has been relatively easy to identify ahead of time from published sources available in most good libraries and which frequently have formal contacts, informal working relationships, or direct institutional affiliations with other organizations with whom I have wished to make contact for the purpose of conducting research. For example, for a recent research project in the Czech Republic in

1 I certainly found this to be the case when conducting some research recently on the geography of the 1998 United Auto Workers’ strike of General Motors. Officials from GM were very helpful in providing information on which plants were affected by the strike during its course but were, I found, less forthcoming after the strike ended. My interpretation of this is that during the course of the strike corporate officials were keen to get their side of the story out but that after the strike had concluded, they had less to gain by spending time helping me with my research.

2 Merriam (1998, p. 204) explains “triangulation” as a strategy in which the researcher employs “multiple sources of data or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings”.

volving the metalworkers union there I was able to use my contacts in the British Iron and Steel Trades Confederation union to provide me with the name of the official from the International Metalworkers' Federation based in Geneva who was responsible for coordinating the Federation's activities in Eastern Europe and, in turn, this official was able to provide me with the name and contact information, together with a letter of introduction, of the national president of the Czech Metalworkers Federation (Odborovy Saz Kovo) in Prague. Later, this man helped me in developing links with the Slovak Metalworkers Federation (Odborovy Zvaz Kovo) when I went to Bratislava. Of course, making use of such organizational structures as part of a research design may, however, be a double-edged sword. Whilst the fact that such elites are usually members of clearly identifiable organizations may help a researcher identify persons whom s/he may readily contact to gain information, at the same time a researcher working through the structure of organizations to which such elites belong may find herself a prisoner of these very organizations' own structures and networks of interaction. This may prove particularly problematic when investigating situations in which various organizations are rivals — as, for example, in Eastern Europe where there is great rivalry between non-Communist and formerly-Communist elements in the region's labor movements (more on which below) — and so requires the researcher to develop multiple points of entry into the research "field" that result in the creation of networks of research contacts which may be mutually exclusive.

On some occasions, then, my access to trade union officials has been eased through already having contacts in particular institutions who have been able to direct me to those in the same or other organizations whom I wished to interview. In essence, such contacts have served as "gate-keepers", and I have often found that being able to use someone's name or having a letter of introduction and/or their business card has given me access to high-level officials in other organizations who might otherwise have ignored my requests for help. This is all a way of saying that networking is important, since it can help establish a degree of credibility in the eyes of potential interviewees and provides a ready answer to the question "how did you get my name?", and that a good place to start may sometimes be with a domestic organization which can put a researcher in contact with their foreign equivalent. Thus, whereas Dicken and Thrift (1992, pp. 285—286, emphasis in original) argue, with regard to analyzing corporations, that "a particularly fruitful way of conceptualizing the organization of production chains and production systems is as a complex set of networks of inter-relationships between firms which have differing degrees of power and influence", unions and the links between them may also, perhaps, fruitfully be thought of in such terms (for a review of using "actor network theory" to understand corporate organization, see Murdoch, 1995). For instance, upon telephoning one trade union official in Guyana who was close friends with, and whose name had been given to me by, a contact of mine in the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the Guyanese official responded that "Well, any friend of [X] is a friend of mine". The key to successful networking, though, is having done the basic research to figure out which organizations are connected to each other — in this case knowing that the Guyanese unions were affiliated to a regional trade union organization to which the AFL-CIO was also affiliated. In turn, I have found that this process has been helped immensely by the simple act of developing a flow chart of who in one organization has told me to contact whom in another. Because international trade union organizations very often recruit their staffers and have elected officials who have served in their countries' own national organizations, developing such a chart has helped me to outline some of the informal links between particular individuals in organizations which are not themselves necessarily formally linked together.

2.2. Cross-cultural understanding

Even after contact has been made with members of the foreign elite, of course, the researcher faces many issues which researchers of "domestic" elites do not necessarily face. The principal of these, I think, involves the matter of cross-cultural comprehension and expectations. Some of these issues have been made most apparent to me in my own work on the impact of the transition in Eastern Europe on the unions. Perhaps the thing that I have found most interesting with regard to traveling to Eastern Europe to conduct interviews with trade union officials has been the seriousness with which such officials take such meetings with academics. In the United States I have conducted many interviews with union officials but have often felt at the back of my mind that I was really imposing upon interviewees' time and that I had more to gain from the encounter than did the officials whose time I was taking. This is not to say that many of the unionists I have interviewed have not been very gracious and helpful. Rather, it is just that I have often wondered whether they took my research as seriously as I did, and have pondered whether this was perhaps the result of a historical antipathy and broader anti-intellectualism which has often (though not always)

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7 The International Metalworkers' Federation is an international trade union organization with which are affiliated metal unions from around the world, including those in Britain and the Czech Republic (see Windmüller, 1980).
characterized the relationship between unions and academics in the United States (cf. Hofstadter, 1963; Fink, 1997; Dubofsky, 1987). In itself this has probably affected the way I have interacted with the US union officials with whom I have met, as I have found myself on several occasions deliberately trying not to talk "academic-ese" when asking questions or explaining what I am actually researching.

In contrast, when conducting research in the Czech and Slovak Republics I have found that the unionists there have seemed to see "my" research as much more of a collaborative endeavor, something out of which they, too, could gain. This has been quite a surprise to me. Hence, upon my first meeting with the national president of the Czech Metalworkers' Federation, the president was very quick to say (through an interpreter—more about which below) that his union took such "collaborations" with "Western colleagues" "very seriously" and that he saw the encounter as "something from which we can both gain". Whilst this may simply have been opening pleasantries upon first meeting, I was struck by this statement because I had never had any US trade unionist say anything that even remotely matched it. Likewise, in the Slovak Republic the national president of the Slovak Metalworkers' Federation spent some eight hours with me one day, talking at length about aspects of Slovak trade unionism about which I had questions. Furthermore, both had laid on interpreters and drink and a buffet-style food service for my visit, again something which perhaps reflects the seriousness with which they took things and something which I have not experienced elsewhere.

Although it would have been hard to prove definitively, I have always felt that the simple fact that I was a foreign academic afforded me a warmer reception than had I been a local researcher—that is to say, my positionality as an "outsider" was important in conducting the research (cf. the paper by Sabot in this volume). I can think of three reasons for this. First, the very fact that I had traveled several thousand miles to talk with them may have led the Czech and Slovak trade unionists to take me more seriously because I myself had obviously put in a great deal of effort to get there (this is also something which Hughes in this volume found to be the case). Thus, the great distance I had traveled was remarked upon by several, which in itself led to small talk concerning problems with jet lag, customs officers, etc., that helped break the ice upon my first meeting with them. Ultimately, I made a total of three trips, each a year apart, to interview the same officials about the process of political and economic transition in the Czech and Slovak Republics. This continued contact, too, helped build up a sense of collaboration and, indeed, friendship, such that I now receive Christmas cards from the Czech union president, something which I still find a little discomfiting since it rests uneasily with much of the mainstream writing on the practice of doing "science" which stresses that "observers" should remain "detached" from their "subjects".

Second, of all the research I have done this was probably the most two-way. Officials were keen to meet with a "knowledgeable Western colleague" (their words, not mine!) and to learn as much as they could from me about labor relations in the US as I was trying to learn from them about unions under the transition in Eastern Europe. This was particularly so, I suspect, because the US model of decentralized organization was one which the Czech unions adopted immediately after the fall of Communism, although some in the national leadership are now interested in pursuing a more centralized model that is more akin to that operating in Germany (Herod, 1998c; Falbr, 1996; for more on the "German model" see Thelen, 1991). In this sense I myself was very much caught up in the broader political economy of the transition and found myself to be in that most fortunate of places, namely the right one at the right time—although at the same time this did nothing to alleviate the fact that I still felt a bit like a fraud since my Czech and Slovak colleagues obviously believed that I had more to offer them than I knew I did. Third, in the transition in Eastern Europe "intellectuals" have played a much more significant role in leadership and setting union agendas than is the case in comparable unions in Western market economies and, particularly, in the US (cf. Ost, 1996; Herod, 1998c). Several Eastern European unions' elected officials and staffers with whom I have met have doctorates or other professional degrees, have traveled extensively, and are multi-lingual. This may have meant that they were very comfortable talking with another academic (me) and were more sympathetic to academic endeavors, research, and pursuits.

My initial decision to conduct research in Eastern Europe had been driven by an interest to understand how the trade unions were faring and restructuring their geographical organization in the shift from central-planning to the market economy. Unfortunately for me, although the conceptual questions I wanted to ask were, I believe, interesting and timely, my research strategy was hampered by the small impediment that I spoke no Czech or Slovak (nor Russian or German) beyond a few standard salutations. Not to be put off, I decided to pursue my research through using interpreters in those interviews in which it was necessary (which was about half the time). However, I quickly found that using interpreters raised many questions relating to whether respondents conceptualized questions and categorized experiences in the same ways as myself (probably not).
and what this meant for the research process, how good was the translation, and how concepts translated across languages. Furthermore, since much of the subtlety of language can be lost when using an interpreter, silences and emphases that were undoubtedly being used by my sources to stress a particular point or to highlight a particular issue were probably lost in the process of language translation. In the end, I suspect that this may be more of a problem when conducting interviews to produce oral histories — and, thus, more of an issue with research involving non-elites where often the primary purpose of the interview is to ascertain a sense of an individual’s "life story" and everyday living — than it is with interviews that are designed more to elicit information about "facts" and policy concerning such things as union membership levels, organizational structure, etc. — which, in my experience, have more often been the subject of conversation with elites. (This is not to say that it is not an issue when interviewing elites about such "factual" things as production quotas or wage levels, merely that it is perhaps less of one.) Hence, one interviewee with whom I spoke in English, for example, commented that a different official with whom I had previously talked through the intermediary of the interpreter used a very formal style of Czech, rather than a more colloquial style — something which, obviously, I would not have known unless it had been pointed out to me. Whilst in this instance having to work through an interpreter probably did not affect that much the type of information I received in terms of, say, data on union membership strengths or policies, it does nevertheless say something about the character of the official and may have added to my broader understanding of his persona and attitudes towards various issues.

Of course, when conducting research with members of foreign elites (whether through interpreters or not) the issue of meaning becomes very significant and often very confused. Thus, concepts which I initially took for granted from a North American or West European point of view (such as terms like "collective bargaining", "labor relations", "welfare policy", etc.) can mean quite different things to Eastern European trade unionists than they do to me. This is especially so given that the transition in Eastern Europe appears to be generating a distinctly Eastern European type of capitalism and market economy in which organizations such as trade unions are not simply taking on the characteristics of their North American or West European confederates but are developing their own unique structures and ways of doing things (Stark, 1996; Herod, 1998c). For example, rivalries between "old" and "new" unions (a determination often made on the basis of whether or not officials had been associated with the old Communist regimes) to gain members and to exert political influence with the government over the process of privatization and restructuring of state-run enterprises is often of greater concern to union leaderships than is collective bargaining and negotiating contracts with employers so that members’ wages and working conditions might be improved (cf. Kirichenko and Koudyukin, 1993). Likewise, Pore (1992, p. 172, emphasis in original) has argued that the term “market economy” has different connotations in Eastern Europe than it does in North America, suggesting that in Eastern Europe the term refers to the “dispersion of political power, the breakup of the state monopoly over economic resources and the destruction of its capacity for central control through a totalitarian state which those resources confer” whereas in the West “the market is a much more narrowly defined economic institution ... for coordinating and directing economic activity in which resources are controlled by private individuals who interact freely with each other in a competitive marketplace”. Using terminology with which I was familiar in the context of North American trade unionism, then, often did not seem to make much sense in the context of Eastern Europe. (Significantly, this has also been a problem for some of the Western trade union organizations now operating in Eastern Europe. For example, the International Metalworkers' Federation has been conducting education programs in the region but has sometimes run up against the problem of finding “appropriate” terminology which is understandable across cultures, a situation complicated by the fact that its own officials and staffs come from countries with quite different traditions and structures (Olsen, 1995; Herod, 1998a).)

Equally, I have found, the researcher may not understand things taken for granted by the interviewee. Thus, in my first meeting with the national president of the Czech Metalworkers’ Federation he proceeded to go on a tirade about “Vaclav”. This I found very strange, since I assumed he was referring to Vaclav Havel, the liberal humanist president of the Czech Republic. It was even stranger to me since there was a photograph of Havel hanging on the wall of the office in which I was conducting the interview. It was only after I questioned why the union president had a picture of Havel on his wall if he appeared to dislike the man and his policies so intensely that it became clear that the official was in fact referring to Vaclav Klaus, the (now ex-) Prime Minister of the Czech Republic who was pushing neo-liberal policies designed to weaken the trade unions, and not Vaclav Havel. Only then did things become clearer. As it turned out, my confusion was the source of some amusement to the union president and after a good

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7 This rivalry has been so intense in some countries that Western trade union organizations which are running labor education programs in Eastern Europe — such as the International Metalworkers' Federation — have run separate courses for officials belonging to different unions operating in the same industrial sectors (Olsen, 1995; Herod, 1998a).
laugh the atmosphere of the interview became much more relaxed. Likewise, during an interview with a Honduran trade union official (this time conducted in Spanish) about union policies designed to help rural workers, he started talking about “manzanas” (one of the translations of which in English is “apples”). My first thought was that he was talking about apple workers until I remembered that the term is also used to refer to blocks of houses and that he was talking about rural housing programs. Again, these were simple mistakes on my part, but they do illustrate the complexities of conducting interviews in foreign languages and/or in situations where the interviewer is decidedly a cultural “outsider”.

Finally, simply from a practical point of view, I have found that conducting interviews either through an interpreter or in a language which is not my first language is simply a very tiring ordeal. This was particularly so in one situation in which I interviewed two Czech officials simultaneously, one of whom spoke fluent English and one of whom spoke no English, such that there was a simultaneous conversation going on between myself (with my words being translated into Czech), one of the officials (whose words were translated into English), the other official (who was speaking in English for my benefit and whose words were being translated into Czech for the benefit of the other official), and the translator. On another occasion I conducted an interview with five shopfloor workers and a local union official who had been members of the strike committee that had taken over the CKD engineering plant in Prague in 1989. The interpreter who came with me was the same woman from the national union’s International Department who had translated for me on previous visits to the union’s headquarters. The purpose of my visit to the plant was to get more insight into how the transition was affecting local shopfloor trade union politics. At one point someone must have said something about the relationship between the national and the local union because all seven individuals (the national union representative doing the translating, the local union representative, and the five shopfloor union members) began to get into a heated argument which went on for some five minutes until at one point the national union representative – and I have no idea if she was winning or losing the argument – turned to me and said in all seriousness “you need to step in if you want to have your questions answered”. All of this is not to say that I think not knowing the language is a fatal impediment to doing research, but it does raise a series of issues that are often ignored or brushed aside but clearly need to be thought through. Specifically, based on my own experience, I would suggest that whilst conducting group interviews through an interpreter may provide insights which one-on-one interviews do not because it allows people to play off others’ comments (cf. Morgan 1988), it is also something which requires extremely careful planning if it is to be productive.

Even when conducting interviews with US unionists in English, my position as a foreigner in this country has meant that terms used by either myself or my sources can have quite different implications and resonances than they do in Britain. (When doing interviews with US unionists I am often reminded of the quip by Oscar Wilde in The Canterville Ghost who suggested that the British “have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language.”) This may be reflective of different cultures of unionism in the two countries, with unionism in the US tending to be seen in more narrowly defined terms as principally relating to the workplace whereas in Western Europe it is usually seen as a more broadly social phenomenon (cf. Katzenelson, 1981). Thus, I have only had one US trade unionist ever use the term “working class” in an interview, something which has always struck me as odd because growing up in Britain one was always painfully conscious of class. Indeed, I am myself rather self-conscious when I use the term in an interview with a US unionist, for I am always left wondering exactly how they are assessing me for doing so – does it mark me as a “red” or a “leftist”? If so, how does that affect our interaction? Does the term even mean anything to them? Likewise, when interviewing managers I tend to use the term “employee”, which fits in more with the discourse of personnel and “human resources” (a term I hate!) management, rather than “worker”, which may raise questions about my own politics and thus limit the types of information to which I am given access because I am, perhaps, seen as less sympathetic to managers’ goals.

Furthermore, it has been my experience that even when used, terms such as “class” have different connotations in the United States than they do in Britain (e.g. see the discussion on various ways of defining class in Sheppard and Barnes, 1990, pp. 202–209). Having grown up in Britain but having lived more than a decade in the US, in my experience there are two significant things which are quite different with regard to the use of the term “class” on either side of the Atlantic. First, the dominant (and clearly ludicrous) ideology in the US is that there is no class system and so to speak in such terms is often perceived as strange, whereas in Britain (and despite John Major’s attempts to talk about a “classless society”) the ideology of class is

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8 For example, one way of avoiding a verbal brawl in which people are talking over each other is to use a handheld microphone to tape interviews. This not only gives interviewees a sense that they are in control but it also makes them less likely to interrupt each other if they feel their words will not be picked up on the tape recording.
constantly reinforced. Second, in the US the determination of one’s “class” (when it is recognized) seems to be based more on levels of personal consumption – thus many manual workers such as steelworkers can often earn sufficient to have two cars and a swimming pool and are often referred to as “middle class” here – whilst in Britain, I think it is fair to say, one’s “class” has historically more often been thought of as being determined by the type of job one does, with “middle class” often referring to someone working in a “profession”.

In summary, then, what I have tried to do in this part of the paper is, drawing on my own experience, to outline some of the practical issues which arise when conducting interviews with members of foreign elites – ranging from problems of understanding and terminology to those of “managing” interviews using translators (e.g., does one direct questions to the translator or the interviewee?). In the remainder of the paper I want to reflect upon the issue of positionality as it pertains to interviewing members of foreign elites. Specifically, I want to suggest that the dualism of “insider”/”outsider” which is often used to describe the positionality of the researcher, and the assumption that a cultural “insider” will automatically produce better knowledge than an “outsider”, are highly problematic.

3. Problematizing positionality

Much of the work written on the process of conducting research on elites and others has tended to assume that there exists a simple and clearly discernible dichotomy concerning the researcher’s positionality – either the researcher is an “outsider” or she is an “insider” – whilst, furthermore, it assumes (sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly) that being an “insider” or, at least, being perceived as an “insider”, is the most advantageous position in which to be since this gives the researcher a privileged position from which to understand processes, histories, and events as they unfold. As I reflect upon my experiences interviewing foreign elites I have come to think, however, that the issue of validity and one’s positionality – that is to say whether one is (perceived as) an “outsider” or an “insider” – is more complex than this dualism would initially suggest. Before I had conducted many interviews with such elites, I had simply assumed that my own positionality was fairly unproblematic since I was clearly an “outsider” in that I was not a member of any of the elites with whom I was conducting interviews. Yet, as I have conducted more interviews over the course of several years with high-ranking trade union officials in a variety of countries and contexts, I have come to realize that what I had initially taken to be a simple and unproblematic dichotomy – “insider” or “outsider” – with regard to positionality was not quite so analytically simple, but that the issue of positionality was, in fact, quite messy on the ground. Specifically, it is apparent that the positionality of the researcher can shift depending upon a number of considerations, in the process disrupting the supposedly stable dualism of “insider”/”outsider” and the privileged positionality of the “insider” that much literature on interview methodologies has assumed exists.

Before proceeding further, however, I do want to make a few comments upon the notion of “positionality” itself and the fact that when academics have attempted to problematize the research process, positionality has often largely been taken to refer to the personal physical or social characteristics of the interviewer (class, race, gender, nationality, age, etc.). There are two issues I want to address here. The first of these is the fact that such physical or social categories are not unproblematic or necessarily obvious for either the researcher or the interviewee, and to assume that they are is to adopt essentialist notions of such categories. Racial categories, for instance, are socially constructed in different ways in different places and at different times, so that what it means to be “white” or “black” can vary tremendously and racial identities can be different at different times, even for the same person – by way of example, French tennis star Yannick Noah, whose father is a “black” man from Cameroon and whose mother is a “white” woman from France, has commented that “in Africa I am white, and in France I am black” (Newsweek, 1995, p. 68). This may have more significance when conducting research with foreign elites than with non-foreign interviewees since racial categories constructed in one country’s historical context may make little sense or have different meanings in another’s (for more on how racial categories have been constructed differently in the US, Britain, South Africa,

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8 I am reminded of a line from Mike Leigh’s movie *Hope and Glory* in which a Tory gentry from an old council house says that what made Britain great was “a place for everyone, and everyone in his place”.

9 Rhetorical uses of the term “class”, of course, may be quite mutable and may bear little relation to “objective” definitions of class, at least in any Marxist sense. Thus a recent Republican tax cut plan to “help the middle class” used a definition of “middle class” based on income that was so broad that one critic indicated that by such a definition approximately 90% of the US population was “middle class”.

10 I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

11 In related vein, one of my graduate students who is himself of European descent but who speaks fluent Mandarin has been told by several of his fellow graduate students who are Chinese that they consider him an “honorary Chinese person”. Another colleague of mine, who is “black” and from Ghana but who did research in South Africa during the 1980s, was told by several “white” South Africans at the time that they considered her an “honorary white person”.

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and Brazil, see Spickard, 1992). Likewise, an older researcher may be perceived as more important and thus worthy of spending time with in cultures which revere the old, whereas in different situations the researcher’s age may serve to mark them as an “old fuddy-duddy” who is “out of touch” with younger informants. (Related to this, one of the Czech unionists whom I interviewed commented on my own age, saying that before meeting me she had expected a much older person since in her experience when she was a university student under the Communists only very senior academics had had the opportunity to travel outside the country.)

The second point relates to the question of researchers’ positionalities within academic fields and sets of academic power relations, and how these may shape the research process. Thus, are researchers from a big “important” university or a small regional one? Does this make a difference? Will they be perceived as being “very important academics” though perhaps “elitist” if they hail from a big “important” university, yet more “down to earth” but perhaps not “leading scholars” in their fields if they are from smaller, regional universities? Does being an “Oxbridge-type” (whatever that in itself may be) or from Harvard or Yale or a small community college matter? Does it matter differently in different contexts? In the case of the US, regional rivalries and prejudices mean that academics from a “northern” university may be viewed by Southerners as “pesky Yankees” not worthy of spending time with, whereas academics from a “southern” university may be perceived by Northerners as coming from the “sticks” and a “backward” part of the country (even though in practice the researcher her/himself may not be from the region in which they currently work).

Equally, are potential respondents more or less likely to talk to “geographers” than to “historians” or “economists” or “political scientists” or “sociologists” because of the ways in which these disciplines are perceived as academic fields? For example, in the United States geography has a fairly low status of as an academic discipline compared to other social sciences – the result, at least according to Smith (1989), of a history until recently of being disengaged from broader political and social debates – and holds a place in the popular imagination which sees it as concerned with little more than knowing where places are. Consequently, when trying to set up interviews concerning trade union activities I have often been greeted by questions such as “well, how is that geography?” or “why would a geographer be interested in that, don’t you do things with maps?” As it turns out, the fact that what geographers do is often less clear to the general public in the US than is the case for other disciplines such as history or economics, or perhaps other countries where geography is more established as a “legitimate” academic subject, has sometimes been advantageous. It has allowed me to explain what it is I am interested in learning about in ways in which I feel I can play a greater role in controlling the discursive terrain over which the conversation will flow than would be the case if respondents knew more about what geographers actually do. Hence, in the US at least, when seeking an interview I usually telephone first to give myself such an opportunity to explain what it is I want to know, rather than writing a letter which may run a greater risk of going directly into the trash can because geographers are not seen as being as important (and thus worthy of time) as, say, historians or professors from business schools.

Having said all this, there are three issues which I want to address with regard to positionalities in the remainder of the paper, these being: the ability to consciously manipulate one’s own positionalities; the fact that how others view one’s positionalities may be different from how one views one’s own positionalities; and that a researcher’s positionalities may change over time.

3.1. Self-positioning the self

One issue that rises to the fore with regard to problematizing positionalities is that the researcher can often shift her/his positionalities in a self-conscious way, on some occasions playing up social distances between researcher and interviewee, on others playing down such distances – i.e. they can manipulate what Moss (1995) has called “the gap”. This is to say, the researcher’s positionalities are not necessarily fixed in some absolute sense – 100% “outsider” or 100% “insider” – but it may translocate through categories and identities, such that at some times and places the researcher may emphasize certain positionalities and identities and not others. In my own case I have found that it has been advantageous to present myself in different ways in different situations and this has undoubtedly affected how I have perceived myself as a situated researcher. In turn, such self-presentation and my perceptions about my own positionalities have no doubt affected my practice of researching elites. For example, given what I have learned about the seemingly much closer relationship between academics and labor movements in Eastern Europe than in the US, I invariably use the formal title “Dr.” when corresponding and trying to set up interviews with trade union officials there. In the United States, on the other hand, I am more conscious of not appearing to be a disconnected academic in my ivory tower who has come down to “collect my data” (although this may in fact be precisely what I am doing). Thus, here I never use my title but, instead, simply explain that I am a teacher of geography interested in whatever it happens to be and then sign my name without using a title.

Likewise, when setting up interviews in Eastern Europe interviewees have, naturally enough, always initially assumed that I am an American because I hail
from a US university and use US-style spelling in correspondence. On some occasions after meeting face-to-face I have informed them that this was not the case, and on other occasions I have chosen not to do so. (Only twice have people actually said to me upon first meeting “Oh, you are actually British”.) I have usually made this decision on the basis of my desire to distance or connect myself with particular positions, events, or things. Thus, one German trade union official with whom I talked and who was something of an Anglophile had spent a year at a British university lecturing on German labor law and constitutional issues, and so we spent some time talking about things British which, I felt, made the meeting more relaxed and fruitful, since my source clearly felt a degree of familiarity with me even though we had only met a few hours previously.

On the other hand, conducting interviews with union officials here in the United States I have found that the fact I have a British accent has often been the source of some interest and/or amusement, frequently leading to a discussion about differences in ways of life between the US and Britain, how long I have lived in the US, where I have been in the US, etc., which has served as something of an “ice-breaker” at the beginning of an interview situation. Although it would be hard to prove conclusively, in these situations “playing up” my Britishness – i.e. consciously emphasizing my status as a foreigner and “outsider” – may also give some advantages in that interviewees perhaps perceive me precisely as something of a novelty, a harmless “foreign” academic rather than, say, a threatening “domestic” investigator, and thus they may be more open and candid about particular issues (cf. the paper by Sabot in this issue). Finally, the fact that my own identity is somewhat ambiguous in these situations – a foreigner living in the US – has also provided opportunities to “play dumb” in interviews, that is to say it has given me the space to ask what I know are potentially threatening and challenging questions in a disarming way that can be mistaken for ignorance (cf. the comments by Mullings in this volume, who found herself in a similar situation when interviewing Jamaican company managers).

Whereas being perceived as an “outsider” has often been thought of as undesirable in the research process, I have felt that, in fact, my position precisely as an “outsider” has sometimes positively helped in the research process because it has allowed me, then, to appear as a “neutral” or “impartial” observer of events. This has been most useful when it has come to interviewing officials who are openly hostile and antagonistic towards one another, a situation which has been an issue in conducting research in Eastern Europe. Hence, one of the most difficult sets of interviews with regard to the issue of my own positionality which I have conducted concerned the changing geo-politics of trade unionism in Eastern Europe after the collapse of Communism. This project has involved interviewing officials not only of the unions which were captured by anti-Communist forces in 1989 and which have now restructured, “democratized”, and affiliated with Western international trade union organizations – the AFL-CIO, for example, has established several field offices in the region and is working with some segments of labor there (see Herod, 1998b for more details) – but also of the old Soviet-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), an international organization whose headquarters is in Prague and to which all national union centers in Soviet bloc Eastern Europe belonged between the late 1940s and the fall of Communism in the late 1980s. Throughout the Cold War, the WFTU and its Western-oriented counterpart – the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) – had engaged in intense rivalry in the sphere of international trade union politics (see Windmuller, 1980 for more on the WFTU and ICFTU). With the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, the WFTU has lost many affiliates in the region which have now joined the ICFTU and its associated bodies such as the International Metalworkers’ Federation.

As part of my research I was keen to learn more about how the WFTU was responding to the changes in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and arranged a research trip in which I would interview both the Federation’s General Secretary and, on different days, members of the newly restructured Czech metalworkers’ union (now an affiliate of the International Metalworkers’ Federation) and the Czech-Moravian Chamber of Trade Unions (Ceskomoravská Komora Odborových Svazů (CMKOS)) which had become the dominant confederation in the Czech Republic after displacing the old Communist Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (Revoluční Odborové Hnutí (ROH)) and which is now an affiliate of the ICFTU.13 In this situation I felt that my ability to conduct the research on the emerging political situation with regard to trade unionism and labor geopolitics would have been greatly compromised if either side had known that I was talking with the “other side”, because this may have threatened the position I was trying to present, namely that I was a “detached”, “neutral”, “outsider”. Keeping quiet about meeting people from the other side, I thought (whether rightly or wrongly), would be more helpful in maintaining my access to those with whom I

13 Technically, the old ROH had been replaced by the Czechoslovakian Chamber of Trade Unions (CSKOS) in 1990. When Czechoslovakia divided itself into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic in 1992, the trade union confederation did likewise, forming the Czech-Moravian Chamber of Trade Unions (CMKOS) and the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic (Konfederácia Odborových Zväzov Slovenskej Republiky).
wished to speak than would have been the case had my sources believed I had close relationships with their rivals to whom I might provide information or to whom I might be comparing them.

Furthermore, I felt that interviewees would be more receptive to spending time with me if they felt that I had traveled such a long distance with the sole purpose of interviewing them alone, as opposed to their being simply one person out of a large number of interviewees—i.e., that they were somehow "special" people from whom an interested "outsider" wished to learn. In practice, though, this raised several sets of issues, including whether it was ethical to not reveal to the officials whom I was interviewing the fact that I would also be talking with their rivals—in the end I did not see this as a problem since I do not believe that a researcher ever can or should be completely "transparent" and that revealing too much of one's own agenda may preclude any type of critical research—and simply the logistics of trying to organize meetings with individuals at times which were convenient to all without having to say "Well, I'm sorry I can't meet at that time because I'm meeting with Y of Y union or federation". Nevertheless, and despite such difficulties and issues, in the end my ability to emphasize my position precisely as an "outsider" was, I felt, more beneficial for conducting the research than had I been a local Czech and thus a cultural "insider" who would probably have been expected by both sides to have strong feelings about the transition, either one way or the other.

3.2. In the view of others

Whereas, then, researchers may seek to manipulate

their own positionalties depending upon the situation—sometimes attempting to "fit in" by emphasizing commonalities, sometimes deliberately playing up their "outsiderness" as a way of distancing themselves—it is often the case that how they view their own positionality may be quite different from how the members of the elites whom they are interviewing view them. This, too, also complicates efforts to sustain methodologically a simple dichotomy of "insider/outsider". Furthermore, this is also where the notion of the "insider" as someone in a privileged research position gets undermined, since an "insider" (in the sense of someone belonging to the elite being studied) may still be perceived as an "outsider" or at least now as someone worthy of suspicion simply because they are engaging in research on the practices of the elite in question, whereas an "outsider" may be perceived as someone to whom information can more readily be given (e.g. because doing so would not threaten loss of information to someone in the industry) who may end up one day working for a rival organization, because the "outsider" is perceived as non-threatening, because the interviewee has a particular gripe about something and wants to tell an "outsider", etc.

For example, I have found in some situations that whereas I am objectively an "outsider" and perceive myself as such (i.e. I am clearly not a member of the specific elite I am studying), I have not always been so clearly perceived as a complete "outsider" by others, a situation which has made the issue of defining positionality much more complex than the "insider/outsider" dichotomy would at first suggest. This became very clear to me when conducting interviews for a research project in Guyana concerning a number of trade union-run housing cooperatives built in Georgetown during the 1960s and 1970s as part of a collaborative project with the US AFL-CIO's regional organization for Latin America and the Caribbean. I had gone to

Guyana "pre-cleared" by an AFL-CIO official in Washington, DC who had actually contacted the president of the Guyanese commercial and clerical workers' union on my behalf to help set up an interview. The fact that the AFL-CIO official had effectively given his blessing to me and my research meant, I felt, that I was viewed not as a clear "outsider" but, instead, as a "pseudo-insider". Hence, the Guyanese trade union official with whom I met picked me up from my hotel and took me to his house (itself located in the cooperative development) where we talked and drank some beer. The "interview process" as such more resembled a conversation between old drinking buddies—which in itself undoubtedly reflected the fact we were both male (cf. Herod, 1993)—than it did the more formal and detached interaction of the sort I had read about in the standard literature on interviewing methodologies as being the "ideal" for which researchers should aim. Later in the day, there was an informal party at the local union hall in which I had the opportunity to meet several other officials and talk in a very informal situation about everyday life in the cooperative. Although this provided me with an entrée to gain much insight into the project, paradoxically in itself this was also something of an unsettling experience because whereas I was treated almost as "one of the family", at the back of my mind I kept feeling that I needed to keep my "researcher" hat on and not become too familiar with my "subjects". Indeed, in some ways the research process seemed to have been made more difficult than had I been able to retain a more formal "outsider" relationship with the group.

Equally, upon conducting an interview later on with the General Secretary of the Guyanese Trade Union Congress, I was most surprised to be asked by the General Secretary himself, as well as by several other officials, whether I had any "pull" at the AFL-CIO which I could use to help get more such housing cooperatives built for workers affiliated with the unions with which I was working. On another occasion, one of the officials asked whether I could help with regard to getting the AFL-CIO
to help finance a local official's impending surgery. Several months previously this man had been involved in a very serious automobile accident and had broken a number of bones in his legs. Although he had partially recovered, he still needed an operation to remove some metal pins and the union wanted to fly him to Miami for the operation, yet did not have the funds to do so. This was a strange position to be in. Whereas I thought of myself simply as an academic who had come to conduct some interviews about a research project in which I was interested, they clearly (wrongly) believed that I was a powerful “mover and shaker” and that I would be able to help them in these regards due to what they assumed were my “insider” contacts. Perhaps this perception had come about because I had developed contacts via an official with the AFL-CIO who had been instrumental in starting the housing projects in the early 1960s, or perhaps it was simply the fact that I had come down from the US and it was thus assumed that I had contacts with those officials who could help out. Either way, my perception of my own positionality was clearly quite different from the perceptions of the people with whom I was meeting who, I believed, viewed me as less of an “outsider” than in fact did I myself. Furthermore, whilst I appeared to have been taken in to the confidence of these local officials, at the same time I still nevertheless found myself attempting deliberately to fashion my positionality in such a way as to “fit in” and so as not to appear to those whom I was interviewing as the “outsider” I knew I was.

3.3. Changing positionality over time

The final issue that relates to the “insider”/“outsider” dichotomy and positionality of the researcher is that, clearly, one’s positionality may change over time. Thus, whereas a researcher may initially be perceived very much as an “outsider”, over time her/his positionality may change. This situation, obviously, is most likely to arise when a researcher is conducting follow-up interviews with sources with whom she has already developed a working relationship. In my own work, I have conducted three follow-up interviews each a year apart with several of the same trade union officials in the Czech Republic, and have corresponded by letter/fax or spoken with them on the telephone numerous times in the interim. As a result of such continued contact I have found that each time I meet with my sources my relationship with them has changed a little, each time becoming more friendly and less distant.

The fact that one’s positionality may change over time as contact with sources increases itself raises issues about which it is important to think long and hard. On the one hand, building such a relationship with sources means that I am no longer treated as a complete “outsider” but as someone who has gained a degree of access to high-level officials both on a professional/research basis but also on a personal basis. Indeed, it is this personal basis which has facilitated much of the research process. Thus, the issue of the stability of the dualism of positionality (the researcher as either “insider” or “outsider”) is again questioned. However, at the same time, having such a personal relationship also raises questions about conducting analyses which may be critical of particular institutions and/or individuals. In many ways there is an ethical paradox at work here. In order to gain access to information which helps the researcher to analyze critically particular events or processes, it is often most necessary to develop (if possible) a close working relationship with particular sources. Yet, critical perspectives which rely upon access to such sources are, by definition, sometimes likely to portray a particular source in a less than flattering light. Certainly, sources’ identities can often be hidden so that they themselves are not identifiable and thus open to various unpleasant consequences of helping with the research (from embarrassment to firing to even worse). However, on other occasions it is necessary for the sake of the validity of the research to “name names” and to give authorial possession to particular comments or pieces of information. (This is perhaps more the case when interviewing elites than when interviewing non-elites, where attributing a name may be less important.)

Although I have tried to maintain a critical perspective and not to let personal feelings cloud my analyses of certain institutions, processes, and events, often this is not so easy to do in practice. Ultimately, I do not see any ready resolution to this issue except to say that it is something which is difficult to negotiate in the research process and that I have found that the decision to generate critical commentary about certain individuals or institutions is often one guided by politics — that is to say, it is often easier to maintain a critical distance in situations where one is less sympathetic to the politics of the interviewee.

4. Concluding comments

In this paper I have tried to reflect upon some issues which have arisen in my own research on foreign elites. Whereas most of the standard work on interviewing as a methodology tends to emphasize the desirability and authoritative position of “insider” status, I would argue that there are, in fact, some advantages to being perceived as an “outsider” in the research process. Some of these are relatively banal and include the fact, for example, if a researcher is conducting interviews with the President of the United States or the Prime Minister of a particular country (to take an extreme example) it often will make little sense to refer to them simply as “Unknown President/Prime Minister”, whereas when conducting interviews with production line workers or rank-and-file union members it is usually easier to shield identities if needs be.
instance, that being an "outsider" (particularly a foreign "outsider") may provide the opportunity for small talk at the beginning of an interview which can operate as an ice-breaker, or it may mean that people feel less threatened than if they were dealing with a local researcher and they may therefore be more forthcoming with sensitive information and the like. It also sometimes allows the researcher to manipulate her/his "outsider" status to her/his own advantage, allowing the opportunity to create a "critical distance" between researcher and the elites whom s/he is interviewing which may be of use at particular times. Perhaps one of the greatest advantages, however, is that as an "outsider" I think one is constantly questioning and taking things less for granted, often precisely because one does not understand certain things in the way that an "insider" does. On many occasions I have had to ask interviewees to explain, in what was for them no doubt excruciating detail, certain concepts and categories which they would often take for granted meant something to me. At the same time, this has also forced me to examine some of my own taken-for-granted terms and concepts as I try to relate things my sources have told me to things about which I am more familiar. In other words, conducting interviews with members of such foreign elites has often thrown into sharp relief things which I may have not questioned about my own culture/positionality.

There are also issues that are different when studying elites than when studying non-elites. Clearly, on the one hand studying elites means that the researcher often has access to a particular organizational structure which can be used in many ways to facilitate the research process. Thus, such elites’ organizations frequently produce large quantities of documents – some public, some private which may be given a researcher by someone within the organization – which can be useful both for providing more information before one actually meets with anyone from the organization for the purpose of conducting an interview (thereby allowing more insightful research questions to be devised ahead of time) and for verifying some of the statements made during interviews. Research involving non-elites, on the other hand, may suffer from the lack of such materials and organizational structures and so may rely much more on developing contacts more informally “on the ground” in a particular “field site”. At the same time, however, it is perhaps more likely that researchers working with non-elites will share a greater degree of life experiences and empathy with them than is the case when working with elites (since few of us are likely to have come from similar social backgrounds or done work similar to that done by elites – e.g. headed up a large corporation – whereas many of us are, I suspect, more likely to have done things with which non-elite sources can more readily identify – e.g. working various casual jobs – which may more readily facilitate interaction, understanding, and empathy).

From an epistemological point of view, however, what I have tried to suggest here also is that the presumed privileged position of the “insider” (especially that “insiders” are more likely to produce more valid accounts of processes and information simply because they are “insiders”) does not necessarily hold. In fact, in terms of gaining access to accurate and authoritative information, “outsiders” may sometimes do better than “insiders” for some of the reasons mentioned above (e.g. in a highly competitive business environment high-level executives may be more willing to provide information to “harmless” academics than to people within their own field who could potentially pass on such information to competitors). Moreover, as several authors have argued, interviews are about producing social texts which, by definition, will have multiple meanings. Mishler (1986), Miles and Crush (1993), and Pile (1991), among others, have argued that interviews are “joint productions” in which both the interviewer and the interviewee interact and construct accounts of particular events or processes. Certainly, this is not to say that all accounts are equally valid, for some provide more factually accurate accounts of events and processes than do others. But it is to say that interviews conducted by “insiders” and by “outsiders” are likely to produce different texts – particularly with regard to how interviewees feel and think about certain things – and we should not just assume that the “insider’s” account is necessarily better or more valid simply because of their positionality.

Finally, if both the researcher and the interviewee are co-partners in the production of knowledge about particular events and processes, there remains the question as to whether it even really makes sense or is useful to talk about a dichotomy of “insiders” or “outsiders”, particularly given that the positionality of both may change through and across such categories over time or depending upon what attributes of each one’s identities are stressed. Thus, an “outsider” (in the sense of someone who does not belong to a particular elite) may come, over time, to be considered by their sources as at least a “pseudo-insider”, whereas an “insider” (in the sense of someone who does belong to a particular elite) may instantly be considered an “outsider” the moment they begin to write about a particular elite because they are opening up an organization to outside scrutiny and may be breaking an organization’s secrecy – as in the case when books or commentaries are written about particular industries or institutions by former high ranking officials within them.15 Whereas some authors have suggested that there exists a space of “betweeness” in

15 When conducting oral histories with members of my own family, for example, I have noticed that I get into “interviewer-mode” and that the positionality of myself and family members shifts discernibly into those of “researcher” and “source”.

which one is certainly not an “insider” but not wholly an “outsider” either, and that this space can be negotiated during the interview process, this notion still implies that it is possible in the abstract to delimit who is an “insider” or “outsider” and to work within the space between these two extremes. Furthermore, such a view still tends towards a positivist notion of the interview process in which the interviewee is seen to be the knower of all knowledge that is to be transmitted to the researcher and, consequently, the less socially distant the researcher is from the source the less cultural “interference” there will be in the information transfer process, and thus the more accurate will be the research. I have increasingly come to think, however, that it might be more appropriate to consider instead the notion of “degrees of outsideness” in which there is a continuum of “outsideness” along which researchers operate. Such a perspective would enable us to recognize that even an erstwhile “insider” becomes, in a sense, at least a partial “outsider” the moment they put on their researcher’s hat — in that they no longer hold the same positionality they did before, having created a space of critical distance between themselves and the elite to which they may belong objectively but with which they now have a different relationship — whereas an “outsider” may change her/his positionality to become closer or more distant from their sources depending upon the situation. Rather than thinking in terms of a dualism, then, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider the relationship between the researcher and the elite she is researching as one involving a sliding scale of intimacy.

Acknowledgements

A previous version of this paper was presented at the meeting of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers held in Glasgow, Scotland, 3-6 January, 1996. My travel to this conference was funded by a “Young Research Worker” grant from the Economic Geography Study Group of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers and by a grant from the Research Foundation of the University of Georgia, and I would like to thank both organizations for financial support. I would also like to thank Livia Cormode and Alex Hughes for organizing the session in which the paper was presented, and an anonymous reviewer who provided very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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