Transformational Elite Interviews: Principles and Problems

Adrianna Kezar
University of Maryland

The purpose of this article is to relate feminist and narrative traditions with the elite interviewing method, an important missing link. The author describes the evolution of the elite interviewing tradition and reviews feminist interviewing and narrative inquiry as points of departure for rethinking this methodology. In the last section of the article, the author presents a set of principles for conducting transformational elite interviews and describes a set of problems or issues that researchers using this proposed approach might reflect on.

Keywords: *interviewing; elites; feminist methodology; participatory research*

> If one rejects the model of the passive vessel of answers, the notion of contamination is not so compelling.
>
> —Holstein and Gubrium (1995, p. 50)

I find myself leaving another research site disappointed, wondering why I feel as if the project is incomplete once again. As a critical theorist, I study elites, persons in power. My inquiry paradigm is critical constructivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I use critical theory to explicate and examine issues of power and how those are enacted in leadership and governance situations. Constructivism informs my work in my emphasis on socially constructed organizational realities and the importance of multiple perspectives. As a critical theorist, I believe that I should empower the people I interview to challenge power structures that limit their humanity.[1] As a constructivist, I find myself helping people to reflect on their perspectives, assisting them to develop self-awareness and perhaps examining alternative views of reality. Most of the critical and/or constructivist literature focuses on "enlightening" or empowering disenfranchised individuals or groups to critically examine their circumstances. I had difficulty directly applying this literature to the individuals I was researching because I usually interview individuals who are in positions of power within social or organizational systems. Neither my

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training as a researcher nor my methodological readings prepared me for how I might approach the relationship with elites. Although elite interviews are an important tradition in the social sciences, literature on the epistemological issues involved in such research is scant. This article redresses this situation

As I reflected on this conundrum, I realized that my disappointment at leaving research sites was recognition of a lost opportunity to relate to the people I was interviewing. Elites had unintentionally become objects, not subjects of my research. I was not asking them to challenge their perspective or to become more self-aware or allowing them to challenge my perspective as I had with other interviewees. In conversations with other researchers, few had thought through the issue of transformation among elites. In my examination of the methodological literature, few source articles on elite interviews examined epistemological issues; instead, it focused almost exclusively on issues of access or interview format (Dexter, 1970; Glassner, & Hertz, 1999; Hertz & Imber, 1995; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). There are three areas of literature—elite interviewing or researching up, feminist interviewing, and narrative inquiry—that have not been examined together and that could illuminate the role and relationship of researchers within the critical-constructivist paradigm conducting elite interviews.

The purpose of this article is to relate feminist and narrative traditions with the elite interviewing tradition, an important missing link. There are two reasons that this link is critical for expanding our current practices. First, the project of effecting transformation through research remains incomplete; researchers have not examined the potential of transforming elites' perspectives. This may be a missed opportunity to break down oppressive systems within our society. Second, most researchers who use a feminist perspective have a moral responsibility to relate to their research participants. Part of this relationship is to free the interviewees of their oppressive practices that hurt not only others but themselves. Currently, there is little acknowledgement or training related to the role of researchers in the transformation of elites. Certainly the possibility for transformation assumes, on the one hand, an interviewer willing to engage in a relational interview and who has conducted some self-analysis and on the other, an interviewee willing to commit to a new form of interview. Not all elites need transforming, and many are working to break down power structures and empower others themselves. Therefore, transformational interviews necessitate a particular set of conditions, yet when we are presented with these situations, researchers have virtually no guidance.

To explore these issues, I first review the literature on elite interviewing, and then I review the literature on feminist interviewing and narrative inquiry. Finally, I review a set of principles for conducting transformational elite interviews. Although there is certainly promise in creating transforma-

tional elite interviews, this review will illustrate how the process can be fraught with problems.

ELITE INTERVIEWS

Elite interviews are more prevalent within journalism than within academic research, although certain disciplines such as sociology or political science rely heavily on elite interviews (Phillips, 1998). Within journalism, elites have always been seen as the primary subject of study. Journalists have a tradition of challenging and even exposing the oppressive actions of people in positions of power. Perhaps the most memorable example is Watergate, but there are thousands of similar examples of journalists exposing questionable or inappropriate actions of people in power. In addition to undercover work, journalists challenge elites' interpretations and attempt to make them rethink their perspectives. Yet as several scholars (Ostrander, 1995) have noted, elite interviewing is greatly underrepresented in the literature: "Social scientists rarely 'study up.' For example, the list of names of sociologists who have written about upper-class elites is too short and too easily recalled" (p. 133).

In the academy, the elite interview is a specific type of focused interview and differs from other interview protocols in several ways (Dexter, 1970). Elite interviews are characterized by the following qualities:

1. The interviewee is known to have participated in a certain situation,
2. the researcher reviews necessary information to arrive at a provisional analysis,
3. the production of the interview guide is based on this analysis, and
4. the result of the interview is the interviewee's definition of the situation (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990).

Because the interview format stresses the interviewee's definition of a situation, the interviewee is encouraged to structure the account of the situation and is able to introduce his or her notions of what is most relevant instead of relying on the investigator's notions of relevance (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). The interview aims to elicit subjective perceptions, and retrospection is used to encourage the interviewees to recall immediate reactions rather than to reconsider the situation. Dexter (1970) noted that elite interviews vary in that the focus is on specialized knowledge that the interviewee possesses. These tend to be more open ended than the focused interview so that the interviewee can stress his or her definition of, structure, and relevant data related to a situation (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). Deviations in interpretation are seen as valuable, and generalization across groups or assortment of individuals is uncommon. Also, elite interviews specifically try to understand the micropolitics of personal relationships and to relate them to a wider analysis of power (Phillips, 1998). Interestingly, many of the characteristics of elite inter-

views are advocated by feminist interviewers such as allowing the interviewee to shape and frame the discussion more and the emphasis on a more open-ended format.

Although early interviews mostly reflected positivist/functionalist assumptions, elite interviews were also adopted by researchers working within conflict methodology (critical theory) and ethnography (constructivism).[2] Conflict methodology mirrors the journalistic tradition in that its aim is to expose inappropriate use of power and abuse (Punch, 1986). The techniques used by social scientists in conflict methodology include extensively researching the background of the person interviewed, finding ways to make the elite as comfortable as possible, and obtaining information that is not necessarily public knowledge. The researcher's role is to expose abuses of power by making the interviewee trust the researcher enough to reveal hidden information or confirm conjecture about inequities (Whyte, 1984). The relationship of the researcher and interviewee is a one-way relationship; the researcher takes information, and there is an absence of mutual trust (Punch, 1986). By exposing the inappropriate practice of elites, it is assumed they will change their behavior (Punch, 1986). The result in journalism, as well as with conflict methodology, is that researchers often isolate individuals from communities and destroy relationships.

Researchers within an ethnographic perspective also use elite interviews to develop a fuller picture of multiple realities and to try to develop the most complex picture as possible (Whyte, 1984). It is assumed that people in positions of authority or power might have different perspectives, thus it is important to understand their viewpoints to more fully understand the social world (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Wax, 1971; Whyte, 1984). Also, interviewers within this tradition tend to be more concerned with the implications of the representations of elites. They worry about developing a picture that could be embarrassing or perceived as hostile to elites or gatekeepers (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Whyte, 1984). The key within this tradition of elite interviewing is that researchers need to balance rights (academic freedom) and obligations. If researchers persist with challenging authority, they will impact researchers' access to elites in the future and may develop opposition to social science research writ large (Punch, 1986; Whyte, 1984). In terms of the researcher impacting elites, it is assumed that they will not be listened to, and this is not particularly important. Wax (1971) noted that "the fieldworker is naive if he thinks that most of these important personages will really listen carefully to what he says, much less, believe it" (p. 367).

The ethnographic and conflict elite interviewing traditions have different but remarkably similar notions about the relationship of the researcher and the interviewee. The role of the researcher is to remain separated from the interviewee and mostly neutral. In conflict methodology, a relationship is developed to access information. It is essentially a one-way relationship with a functional goal developed to meet the researcher's interest and generally a

one-time interaction. In the ethnographic tradition, the researcher is to develop a relationship also for access purposes, but the emphasis is on long-term access. In both cases the researcher is not encouraged to develop a two-way relationship with mutual benefits. Some researchers in the anthropological/constructivist approach suggest that there should be reciprocity with interviewees in terms of anonymity and respect (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Whyte, 1984). The ethnographic/constructivist approaches have less of a tendency to objectify the people interviewed than conflict methodology.

Although these traditions offer important insights into elite interviewing, particularly around issues of gaining access to elites and interview strategies (see e.g., Odendahl & Shaw, 2002), they are less helpful in examining the particular issue of transformation or two-way, dialogical relationships (Hertz & Imber, 1995). The researcher aims for transformation in conflict methodology, but it is at the expense of trust and long-term relations. The ethnographic tradition, for the most part, does not strive for transformation or believe that it is an appropriate goal (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Wax, 1971; Whyte, 1984). Recently, scholars within the ethnographic interviewing tradition have experimented with more interactive approaches, for example, emotionalism (Ellis, Keisinger, & Tilmann-Healy, 1997), reflexivity, (Fontana, 2002; Hertz, 1997), and transformation (Herzog, 1995), but these are mostly exceptions and not the norm. These voices provide points of departure for understanding how elite interviews can be sites of transformation. The most recent publications (Hertz & Imber, 1995; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002) on elite interviews continue to focus mostly on gaining access, appropriate interview formats or questions, or developing rapport.

FEMINIST AND NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Feminist and narrative inquiry researchers in particular offer insight into how elite interviewing might be reconceptualized and recommend a more reciprocal relationship within the interview context (Briggs, 2002). Furthermore, these researchers suggest that distinctions of self (researcher) and other (interviewee) promulgated by other research methodologies are dangerous and false distinctions (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Josef, 1996; Wolfe, 1996). Briggs (2002) argued that feminism and narrative inquiry have been the most forceful methodological/theoretical approaches to examining the interview in relationship to the respondent and to exploring "the complex processes that shape the construction of identities in interviews," noting that scholars should look to these traditions to inform the future of interviewing (p. 915). There are many feminisms and schools of narrative inquiry. When referring to feminism, this article is aligned with the work of Reinharz (1992) and Lather (1987), which reflect an emancipatory feminism. This article reflects the perspectives on narrative inquiry of Briggs (1986, 2002), Denzin (1997), Gubrium

and Holstein (1997), Mischler (1983), and Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), who view stories as representing ideology and meaning making, see fieldwork and interviewing as inherently collaborative and relational, identify human experience as constructed through subjective and intersubjective interpretation and stories as a primary way to understand these constructions, deny a universality of experience or reality, believe that multiple narratives exist and can both be in conflict and reflect truth, and place narratives within a sociological context illustrating that stories reflect history as well as create history.[3]

The following concepts are key in reexamining relational issues in the elite interview context and the role of the researcher: (a) commitment and engagement, (b) mutual trust, (c) reflexivity, (d) mutuality, (e) egalitarianism, (f) empathy and ethic of care, and (g) transformation through consciousness raising, advocacy, and demystification.

Although these concepts are separated for discussion purposes, the reader should note that they are highly interdependent. Feminist and narrative inquiry researchers have struggled for years with these concepts. These key concepts are presented not as issues resolved but as ideas that are continuing to evolve.

Commitment and engagement. Feminist interviewing is an inherently relational or dialogical methodology that involves a commitment on the part of the researchers to form a relationship and the interviewees to participate with sincerity (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Behar, 1993; Lather, 1987). The goal of the two-way relationship is to establish openness and engagement. To develop a strong relationship and commitment with interviewees, it is important to have multiple interviews. The stance of the researcher is not objective; as Reinharz (1992) noted, "guiding this new model is a feminist ethic of commitment in contrast with the scientific ethic of detachment and role differentiation between researcher and subject" (p. 27). In traditional interviewing, detachment from the interviewee is seen as essential for reliability of data. Most feminists reject the model of the passive vessel of answers, realizing neutrality is not only impossible but serves no real purpose (Lather, 1987).

Mutual trust. In examining notions about trust, feminist researchers have explored the concept of believing the interviewee as well as how one confronts interviewees that are not believable or whose responses the researcher wishes to challenge (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Reinharz, 1992; Wolfe, 1996). Clearly this is an important issue because interviewees are more likely to disclose to someone who believes them. This is an authentic trust, unlike the conflict methodologist who develops trust only to obtain information and who does not really try to understand the elite's perspective. Reinharz (1992) stated that the feminist researcher has to begin the research project intending to believe the interviewee and should only question the interviewee if she begins not to believe him or her. Mutual trust is facilitated by the many other

conditions discussed such as empathetic listening, egalitarian relations, and multiple interviews.

Reflexivity. Another principle related to trust is the importance of describing one's own perspective—often termed *reflexivity*. The reflexive researcher thinks through his or her own assumptions and how they affect the research project and shares some of these insights with the person interviewed (Hertz, 1997; Lather, 1987; Smith, 1999). This reflection is often achieved through journaling or being interviewed by another member of the research team. Reflexivity is an ideal, not a goal reached; one can never fully know oneself, we can only do the best to be disciplined and to delve deeper. It is important to pace sharing personal information within the project as this can be uncomfortable or feel out of place for some interviewees, which relates to the importance of multiple in-depth interviews already discussed under engagement and commitment (Bloom, 1998; Reinharz, 1992).

Mutuality. Researchers using narrative inquiry critique the lack of joint construction by interviewer and respondents that does not allow the interviewer to challenge the interviewee and vice versa (Bloom, 1998; Briggs, 2002; Mischler, 1983). They recommend frameworks to achieve a shared understanding of the discourse (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). For example, at times, the interviewer may even provide vocabulary to the interviewee about issues that the person is describing but does not have the vocabulary to name. For example, an interviewer may name an action *oppression* even though the interviewee would not have used that term because it is not part of his or her vocabulary. This may help the interviewee to see that this term is appropriate for the activity described (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Mischler (1983) described another aspect of mutuality—the need to shift the interview from the investigators' problems such as technical issues of reliability and validity to the respondent's problems, specifically, "their efforts to construct coherent and reasonable worlds of meaning and to make sense of experiences" (p. 118). This shift leads to a general question of how different types of interviews facilitate or hinder respondents' efforts to make sense of what is happening to them and around them. Mutuality provides the opportunity for both the interviewer and interviewee to construct the focus of the interviews, questions, and direction.

Egalitarianism. Both narrative and feminist traditions critique the asymmetry of power in traditional interviews, putting the interviewee at a disadvantage to question the dialogue (Bloom, 1998; Earnest, 1992; Haraway, 1991; Mischler, 1983; Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 1999). Most of the other relational aspects—mutuality, reflexivity, and trust—are related to issues of power. Power impacts the nature of the interchange, who guides the process, whose values shape the interview context, the ability to interpret and make sense of the responses, and how the data are ultimately used (Lather, 1987; Smith, 1999). Power relations are complex issues that both narrative and feminist

researchers have examined in-depth to try to develop methods for equalizing power. However, it is important to acknowledge that equal power relations are also an ideal, although extremely difficult to achieve.

Empathy and ethic of care. Empathy is another characteristic of feminist interviews that sheds light on the relationship between researcher and researched (Reinharz, 1992; Wolfe, 1996). Being able to listen intently in the research situation and to learn from the person being interviewed helps to develop empathy. Empathetic listening involves trying to move beyond one's own assumptions and experience and placing oneself in the interviewee's position as much as possible (Bloom, 1998). The ethic of care goes a step further than empathy. This approach might be seen as the most controversial because it develops the closest relationship between researcher and researched. In interacting with someone with an ethic of care, the goal is to treat him or her as a family member, as a sister or brother (Reinharz, 1992). This elevates the relationship beyond the professional to one that tightly binds the researcher to act responsibly and out of love for the person. The responsibility for challenging and intervening is often derived from this. If a family member has a dysfunctional belief or habit, the caring action is to confront and challenge him or her. However, many researchers will find this concept problematic, even as an ideal, because it assumes a level of intimacy and connection difficult to accomplish in their family lives, even more so with a person they are interviewing.

Transformation. Feminist interviews articulate several ways that the interview could impact the individuals in the study, including consciousness raising, advocacy, action research, and demystification, all of which are seen as a moral commitment for the researcher. Consciousness raising involves discussion of personal experiences to help think of, relate to, name, and act on a situation (Herzog, 1995; Lather, 1987; Reinharz, 1992). This differs from traditional elite interviewing where challenging the interviewee's interpretation is not even a consideration. If there seems to be conflict between the situations described and the interviewee's perspective, the researcher needs to decide how to handle this conflict or whether it is better not to address the situation.

Feminist participatory, action research, and advocacy move a step further than consciousness raising, arguing that research should always integrate an action or change component (Lather, 1987; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Reinharz, 1992; Wolfe, 1996). Because feminist research exists to create new relationships, better laws, and improved institutions, the learning derived from the studies should be used to intervene and create change. A common component of participatory or action research is demystification, which illuminates an underlying ideology. Kathy Ferguson's (1984) work on the patriarchal nature of bureaucracies helped to expose the contradictions and manipulations of these organizational structures. Demystification remains focused on

relatively powerless people and helping them to understand their situation (Rienharz, 1992).

Researchers using narrative inquiry have examined the power of the interview process for transforming people (Briggs, 2002; Hones, 1997). Researchers who conduct life histories and in-depth interviewing were among the first to realize the potential of interviews for critical awakenings and refashioning identities (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Many of the studies evolved out of the field of psychology. Greenspan (1992) studied holocaust survivors, and Reissman (1993) interviewed women raped by their husbands. Both researchers discovered that the interviews proved to be therapeutic for the individuals in the study and helped them to develop greater self-awareness and at times to reformulate their identities. As Reissman described in detail: "Narrative retelling enables her to transform her consciousness: to name the abuse, to interpret it as oppression, to reexamine her anger, and to make the transition from victim to survivor" (p. 232). One interview helped a woman to decide to divorce her husband.

In conclusion, feminist interviewing and narrative inquiry provide a very different model of interviewing; they suggest a relational, egalitarian, two-way model. Interviewing within these traditions does not negatively impact the quality of the information:

> Although the respective interviewers certainly contributed to alternative forms of storytelling, the stories told were no less authentic, no less reflective of subjects' "actual" experience than they would have been if the respondents had been incited by ostensibly more neutral questions and probes. (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 50)

TRANSFORMATIONAL ELITE INTERVIEWS: PRINCIPLES AND PROBLEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

Researchers within the feminist and narrative traditions offer a critique of existing elite interview methodologies (positivist, critical theory, and constructivist traditions) by suggesting that it is the interviewer's responsibility to be open to transforming the lives of all people they interview, not just those who need empowerment or ones that we identify with as similar to ourselves (Pierce, 1995; Wolfe, 1996). However, it should be acknowledged that not all interview situations may be appropriate for transformation; some people may just want to tell their story, and the researchers should respect this desire.

In addition to philosophical support for transforming power relations in society through interviews, narrative and feminist methodology also offer methodological principles to facilitate this new approach to interviewing.

Although other principles can be extrapolated, these are some of the major points that would seem to help develop a "transformational elite interview." Many of them overlap and are interrelated; they are only separated to ease description. These principles also refer to the concepts outlined in the previous section on feminist and narrative research assumptions. Although feminist and narrative inquiry researchers provide guidelines for developing transformational elite interviews, there are many issues that arise that researchers will need to struggle with if they choose to conduct these types of interviews.

Developing commitment and engagement. Elite interviews, as traditionally constructed, require minimal commitment or engagement. Greater engagement might be obtained by asking informants reflective questions or having them keep a journal prior to and after interviews. Multiple interviews would be encouraged if possible. The researcher in the elite interview usually has a significant amount of engagement because they have done research prior to the interview. However, further engagement might be created through journaling (described in detail in the following). Also, researchers are encouraged to form a two-way relationship that may be longer term, for example, maintaining some relationship after the formal interview.

Committing the overcommitted? One of the main characteristics of elites is that they are busy and have limited time. Trying to gain access to these individuals for multiple interviews may be desirable but not feasible. Are there other ways to maintain and develop a connection that takes less time such as email or phone calls? Perhaps engagement and commitment need to be rethought within the context of this population. New techniques for extending engagement need to be developed.

Herzog (1995) found that she was able to develop a long-term commitment from Israeli female political leaders because the study provided a forum for them to discuss major issues that were of concern to them with an informed person (the researcher). The women answered a survey, sent articles about themselves, interviewed, and attended discussion groups. She eventually developed discussion groups to gather data, to have them see their concerns and issues were shared by others. Herzog noted:

> These meetings served as a good opportunity to meet other women in similar situations, to share and compare their experiences and to learn from one another. The meetings were held in an ex-territorial and safe setting and were not part of the everyday political surroundings. These meetings were supportive and a means of female empowerment. (p. 179)

This may not work within all settings and with all populations, but her study provided one way to think about obtaining a long-term commitment that can lead to transformation.

Creating mutually trusting relationships. Elite interviewing has always stressed the importance of making the interviewee comfortable. Yet, this trust was developed to obtain information to expose the elite or gain access. Transformation will be elusive if elites feel that they are being used, judged, attacked, or threatened. Transformational elite interviews require careful attention to introducing the interview and to establishing a relationship to develop a climate where transformation is possible. The interviewee is more likely to share his or her own personal perspective, which can then be examined and perhaps challenged, if he or she feels comfortable with the interviewer. As feminist research reminds us, mutual trust is more easily developed if the interviewee knows the researcher believes them, at least initially. In Aldridge's (1995) study of Anglican clergy, he purposefully emphasized elements of his experience and background that was similar to the elites he was interviewing to develop trust. Feminist researchers assume that identification with respondents enhances the researchers' interpretative abilities rather than jeopardizes validity (Bloom, 1998). They also believe that rapport leads to trust. One of the key ways to develop identification is through rapport. There is a tendency to try to develop a strong interconnection with the person interviewed because this would facilitate his or her openness to the process of reflection and possible transformation.

Can authentic mutual trust and rapport be developed? But rapport implies an affinity, conformity, or harmony that one may not be able to achieve authentically because the individuals have such different experiences (Seidman, 1991). Researchers are beginning to provide perspectives on the problems of rapport, and it is hoped that this will shed light on this issue (Lincoln, 2001).

Also, what happens when informants feel betrayed by trust? Pierce (1995) described this dilemma:

> Michael expressed interest in my dissertation prospectus. I naively assumed that he might find it interesting and provided a copy for him. As I discovered, he was highly offended by my literature review. He was really hurt because my prospectus, in his words, portrays all these wonderful secretaries and paralegals who support these asshole attorneys. And how did I think he would respond, but to take it personally because wasn't this really about me, and Jane (his secretary) and Debbie (his paralegal). He continued to say how much I had hurt his feelings and then started to talk about what a good interviewer I was. It is a special skill, but dangerous skill because people feel so comfortable talking to me that they might reveal a confidence they would later regret. (pp. 102-103)

Throughout the study, Pierce (1995) felt as if she were betraying people in having them open up about issues that exposed negative aspects of their behavior. Aldridge (1995) also described this sense of betrayal with Anglican clergy who unabashedly made sexist remarks throughout the interviews.

Building in reflexivity. The interviewer should be encouraged to reflect on his or her own privilege because most faculty come from middle- or upper-

middle-class backgrounds and are still predominantly White. This privilege may facilitate connection with the elites interviewed and could help the researcher to see them as similar to self and not "other." In addition, the researcher should reflect on how the elite is disempowered in his or her own life. Identifying these power dynamics as points of departure could help shape the interview differently. Finally, the researcher cannot assume that those in power have a particular epistemology or worldview. Research from positionality theory has helped to dispel the notion that just because someone is White, a woman, or in power that they hold a particular view (Collins, 1993; Wolfe, 1996).

The researcher also needs to reflect in a journal on his or her own biases toward people in positions of power and to examine how these feelings may impact the interview situation (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). The transactional nature of relationships will result in the information provided by elites being impacted by the researchers' perspectives and attitudes. Dexter (1970) warned that elites, who often have more conservative perspectives, may not be as forthcoming when interviewed by academics who are perceived as liberal, especially if they pick up negative cues from the researcher. Dexter noted that "elites create stereotypes about what social scientists are like, and therefore they help to determine the role informants play toward social scientists" (p. 154). As a result, the interviewer must examine and become aware of his or her biases. Because there is virtually no way for the interviewer not to impact the nature of information shared, keeping a journal, taking note of one's reactions to responses, observation of the interviewee response to interviewer's comments, taking into account both the interviewer/interviewee responses and reactions in writing up the results, and other practices for examining and clarifying possible biases are recommended.

Is self-disclosure and reflexivity appropriate? When conducting interviews with individuals with lesser power, sharing information about the researcher is a way to equalize power. Does this help in equalizing power when the researcher is of a lesser status? Can self-disclosure actually heighten power differentials and provide more ways for the elite to retaliate if they move in that direction? Aldridge (1995) explored these notions when interviewing Anglican clergy. He revealed information about his identity as a sociologist and his life in a prestigious university to have the elite see him as occupationally similar and equal and believed that equalizing power was imperative to gaining access to information. Yet, this is an area where there is virtually no information to guide decisions as few researchers have developed or tested strategies.

Fostering mutuality. There are several methods suggested in feminist and narrative inquiry for creating mutuality within the elite interview (Bloom, 1998; Herzog, 1995; Lather, 1987; Mischler, 1983). Traditional elite interviews entail a process of identifying the interviewee's perspective of reality and

reflecting this interpretation in the written report. Transformational elite interviews should involve a mutually defined interpretation of the interview, allowing a place for the researcher's voice. This equalizes the power of the text, representing multiple interpretations. Also, rather than developing questions based on background research, the questions should partially emerge within the interview setting, providing a more mutual exchange that includes the elite's interests and perspectives and emerging interest of the interviewer. The elite interview should be conversational rather than following a formal interview protocol. Aldridge (1995) noted that "if I had presented myself with a highly structured interview schedule, I am sure it would have endangered rapport. Clergymen are used to being in a position of authority, leading discussion rather than following it" (p. 121), yet he acknowledged the importance of the unstructured format for asserting his own voice as well.

What are the borders of mutuality? Having developed a relationship with the interviewee to facilitate two-way communication, trust, and perhaps transformation, what happens when the interviewee expects to continue with the research process such as reviewing the research report or member checking? What if the story portrayed points out how elites interviewed have enabled oppression? What does the interviewer do in this case? Most researchers suggest only providing the interviewee with information that pertains to their particular interview. But, this is an issue that researchers may need to consider as they conduct these types of interviews. There is guidance in this area, and researchers need to be sure to read methodological advice in this area. No matter what is read, however, these borders are in constant flux, and new questions will emerge.

Or, what if the interviewee tries to develop a more personal relationship? Pierce (1995) described this dilemma in her study:

> Our conversation took a more personal turn, Stan asked me what I would like to do if I wasn't in graduate school. . . . This opened a long discussion about his frustrations about being as attorney, how much work it was and how little the psychological payoffs were. Although the conversation had given me insight into the pressures of a trial lawyer, I felt guilty as relationships grew. (p. 97)

In developing trust and mutuality, how might we also open the doors to deeper interpersonal relationships that are lopsided, with the interviewee feeling a closer connection than the researcher?

Creating an environment of empathy and/or care. Elites value the opportunity to talk to an understanding stranger (Dexter, 1970). Because the interviewee has researched the issue at hand, they can be more versant and empathetic than a stranger on the street but have less stake in the issue than if the elite were to talk to a colleague, assistant, or even a spouse. Dexter (1970) found that elites enjoyed the interview more than many other people he had interviewed; he believed this may be based on a deep loneliness that results from

the nature of their position and power. Clearly empathy and care will enhance trust and engagement in the interview as well. Transformational interviews should entail empathy without moral judgment but should also challenge the elite's interpretations. The interviewer may exhibit evaluation—interpretation with moral judgment—that often results in "othering" or separation from the other person. Lastly, empathy is critical within the discussion of elite interviewing because it helps to define if and when action or intervention might be taken. The more the researcher empathizes with the interviewee, the better he or she is able to understand what the effect of consciousness raising or challenging the interviewee's interpretations will be (Meyers, 1994).

Is empathy enough? Although the researcher tries to treat every individual with an ethic of care and to empathize with the interviewee, at times this will be challenging. Dexter (1970) provided a powerful example of scholars who have studied committed members of the Klu Klux Klan. Can a committed feminist have an empathetic relationship with members of the Klu Klux Klan? The researcher may find he or she feels hypocritical for relating to or developing rapport with such groups. Most scholars who interview elites will not have these extreme cases, but they may feel animosity toward interviewees for perpetuating inequalities.

Pierce's (1995) animosity to the lawyers she studied because of the negative ways they treated secretaries and paralegals created problems; she was unable to hide and eventually did not want to mask her feelings. She presented the way her understanding moved to anger:

> A similar epiphany of anger occurred on a long work day with another male lawyer, after working all day on a motion, the lawyer threw the motion at us and screamed as we ran out the door to the courthouse, "and don't fuck up." (p. 100)

Pierce reflected how the casual and demeaning comment resulted in her icily retorting to the lawyer that they didn't fuck up. The icy retort did not improve relationships but further alienated the lawyers who gave her a gag gift, "the big ball blaster," a plastic gun to make fun of her assertive comments (p. 101). However, she felt she needed to authentically express her anger and feelings within the situation. What should be the relationship with the interviewee when the interviewer is filled with anger and hostility? Authenticity may be difficult to achieve. Reflective journaling can help, but it may not be enough. These are limitations that need to be considered and struggled with.

Manifesting egalitarianism and thinking about power. A fundamental problem for researchers is an assumption of the positionality of others or even themselves in relation to the person interviewed (Bloom, 1998; Briggs, 2002; Pierce, 1995). It is important to allow the respondent to define his or her position. Many elites may see themselves as disempowered or marginalized, and it is important not to stereotype these individuals before the researcher has had time to meet them and hear their story. Also, the elites may see the interviewer

as either of equal or higher status than themselves. Once an interpretation of the status is made, then the researcher can begin to equalize power relations and develop an egalitarian environment.

The interview relationship exists in a social context; social forces of class, gender, race, and other social identities will impact the interview situation. How do these social identities impact the elite interview uniquely from other interviews? Will women and persons of color have a more difficult time creating transformation within elite interviews? Will women or persons of color who reach elite positions trust White male interviewers? It is recommended that interviewing someone three times helps to break down these social barriers that often exist, especially when people first meet (Seidman, 1991). Also, demonstrating a consciousness of sexism and concern for gender equality is important.

Can egalitarianism be achieved? At times, the researcher will be at equal status, but when interviewing elites, there is a great possibility they are of a lower status. One fieldworker, Josef (1996), described how the men in the village treated her as a younger sister and that this negatively impacted the study. She noted how we are bound by interviewees or informants in terms of identity and how this impacts on the information gathered. Pierce (1995) also noted how her lower status as a paralegal and woman in a law firm created difficulty within her study. She resisted their attempts to minimize her knowledge and expertise and noted that their techniques were adversarial, including intimidation with the goal of controlling and directing her. Her attempts to shift power created difficulties and eventually closed down access to information. How does one have an elite see you as an equal? Attempts to assert power and to change relations may have a negative effect on the study. What models can we develop for equalizing power in this direction?

Fostering transformation with respect and without judgment. Research on moral philosophy within the feminist tradition focuses on moral reflection that asks people: Do you want to be the sort of person that would do such and such (Meyers, 1994)? Rather than the typical Kantian moral prompt—How would you like to be treated?—the former question focuses reflection on the process of interpreting the moral significance of various courses of action that one might undertake both in light of one's own values and capabilities and also in light of one's understanding of others' needs and circumstances (Meyers, 1994). Posing the question in this way spurs people to think about who they are and who they aspire to be. It does not presuppose that one's moral identity is fixed or that everyone's is the same. This allows the person to weigh or reconsider issues and provides room for change as one reassesses values.

Another aspect of transformation was mentioned in the section on mutuality (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The interviewer may need to help the interviewee name or interpret a particular perspective or viewpoint that they

express. Part of advocacy/consciousness raising is providing elites with new language and viewpoints that help foster the demystification process. One method for eliciting this new language and viewpoints (and developing demystification) is multivocality—encouraging the interviewee to describe different narratives. Elites are often inclined to describe the institutional perspective and to bury their personal view. The interviewer is encouraged to ask respondents to address a topic from more than one point of view, actually fostering this type of thinking—perhaps promoting elites to see situations from the perspective of people in marginalized perspectives. This technique can result in the person comparing and contrasting these belief systems in ways that lead them to reconsider their worldview.

How can you challenge ethically, and what are the effects on access? Transformational interviewers feel they have a moral responsibility to help someone discover that they have been oppressive. Yet, pointing out the inequity that the interviewee has caused can be extremely damaging to his or her self-esteem and identity. Should researchers become involved in an activity that could potentially harm other people? Also, feminist researchers stress nonjudgment of people's stories (Bloom, 1998). How does asking people to reflect on the oppression they may have caused or naming behaviors promote judgment and put the interviewer in a dangerous, perhaps unethical position? The feminist moral reasoning approach presented earlier may work, but we need more information about this technique within the interview setting. And, are there other approaches?

Ostrander (1995) described some strategies for asking threatening questions of elites and

> getting solid answers so they don't just talk. The first is learning their language so I can ask terms they find more acceptable and will understand. The second is explicitly stretching the bounds of etiquette and defining the interview situation as different from daily social intercourse. The third is asking difficult questions on particular situations and events known to me from independent sources that I could use to query or challenge elites knowledge or point of view. (pp. 146-147)

Herzog (1995) found that the challenging interview questions allowed the Israeli female political leaders to further understand their circumstances and were powerful in leading them to transforming their views. However, her study did not involve the negative exposure of Pierce (1995) with the legal context or Aldridge (1995) within the church in naming sexism and classism.

Some elites may resist the notion of having their interpretations challenged. The result may be minor, where the interviewee closes down personally, but it can also be dramatic, such as closing down the project or even retaliation. Being cognizant of the interviewees' reactions within the transformational elite interview process is important. But, the researcher may not be able to read the situation, and the interviewee may not signal that he or she is uncomfortable with this approach. The researcher may want to con-

sider whether the interviewee should be informed about the approach to guard against a later breakdown in relationship. Yet, this action may jeopardize the opportunity to obtain an interview. We need information about elites' perspectives on this new approach to interviewing.

Pierce (1995) took what she called the outlaw position, challenging elites' behavior that she interviewed, especially after she had been victim to two major episodes of marginalization. She noted that she

> told Michael that [she] would continue to be friendly and professional, I also put him on notice by telling him that he's currently on my "shit list." By putting his behavior on notice—he has to do lots of penance to get off . . . such a move not only displaced his authority, but serves to position me as the final arbiter of appropriate behavior and to get him to challenge his own behavior. (p. 104)

But her interviewee shut down and it appears did not grow as a result of her challenging. Her transgressive move explored and exploded the discursive structuring of expected gender behavior but did not assist in modifying the lawyer's beliefs system. She hoped though that "his surprise at my expertise and skill as a sociologist suggests that these skills are incommensurate with his expectation of the typical female paralegal role" and hopefully by unsettling the boundaries he will have altered his views and be transformed (p. 106). By the time she challenged the elites she had obtained the information she needed, but had she not been as far along in her study before she challenged belief systems, access would have been closed off. Thus, decisions about challenging elites must be made very judiciously and perhaps toward the later part of the study, if possible, as Pierce did within her study.

CONCLUSION

Transformational elite interviews have the potential to enrich research methods/the social sciences, methodological training, and society/people in many important ways. First, many prominent writers have expressed concern over the limitations of current approaches in the social sciences. Briggs (2002) noted that "members of dominant sectors use interviews in furthering institutionalized agendas" (p. 914). He believes that disrupting this usage of interview data and narrative is critical to creating social equality but is searching for an approach. He argued that interviews (particularly elite interviews) shape contemporary life in powerful ways and that by changing the nature of interview discourses we might also alter inequalities. Transformational elite interviews are a method to achieve Briggs's disruption of the normal course of interviews and provide an approach to alter interview practices in the social sciences as Briggs noted is direly needed. Furthermore, transformational elite interviews offer a way to disrupt hegemonic discourses in ways that have potential for keeping lines of communication open between

elites and social scientists. The respect, mutuality, and trust outlined in this approach help in not outright alienating elites as has occurred within other approaches.

I have argued that this method offers ways to improve methodological training. As noted at the beginning of this article, there is very limited writing or scholarship to guide researchers who want to alter their approach to interviewing elites. I have outlined areas to focus training (how to develop trust or equalize power) as well as problems that researchers might encounter. Researchers need to understand, for example, that reflexivity with elites can be fraught with particular problems and should try out this process in pilot interviews. Teachers can develop assignments in which students are reflexive in an elite interview and share their experiences and challenges with classmates, a situation where the consequences are not severe. In particular, I have highlighted the need to expand discussions around power relations in training researchers on researching up.

Third and most important, I have argued that transformational elite interviews improve society and individuals. Examples were brought in to illustrate this potential. Herzog's (1995) work with Israeli political leaders demonstrated how these women's lives benefited from the challenging of perspectives, mutuality, and trusting environment to share concerns. Pierce's (1995) challenge of and exposure of the sexist, classist, and oppressive practices of lawyers in her study provided a way for them to rethink their work. Because she developed trusting relationships with the lawyers, some felt betrayed, at least for a time. It was quite hard for them to admit to and acknowledge this behavior, yet over time, it may have an increasing effect on not only that firm but also others. Aldridge's (1995) questioning of Anglican clergy's sexist behavior was achieved through his building common ground, equalizing of power, and being open to having them alter his perspective. Although these researchers were not familiar with the full range of principles of transformational elite interviews, they used some of the approaches and had positive results on transforming institutions, organizations, and individual lives. Understanding the long-term effects of transformational elite interviews is an area in need of research in the future.

I hope I never leave another research site feeling disappointed. I know that many people might resist the transformational interview approach, but I never want to finish a project without having at least tried to relate deeply to the person I am interviewing, to allow them to alter my perspectives, so that we learn from each other and contribute to stopping the cycle of oppression.

NOTES

1. Not all critical theorists see emancipation and empowerment as a primary goal, but it is a major assumption within this research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Some scholars express concern about whether researchers have true rather than false consciousness about power conditions. There is doubt about researchers' capabilities to always adequately assess power conditions.

2. There are ethnographers who are also functionalist and critical theorists, but the majority conducting elite interviews comes from a constructivist perspective. Thus, I am generalizing about ethnographic elite interviews; some may represent different paradigmatic assumptions.

3. Please see the references texts in this section for fuller descriptions of feminism or narrative inquiry.

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Dr. Adrianna Kezar is assistant professor at the University of Maryland, editor for the ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Series, and former director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. Dr. Kezar holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in higher education administration from the University of Michigan and B.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her scholarship focuses on higher education leadership, diversity issues, organizational theory, systems change, and administration. She is published in several journals, including Journal of Higher Education, Review of Higher Education*, and* Research in Higher Education*.*