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Jeffrey M. Berry

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Validity and Reliability Issues In Elite Interviewing

Many of the early important empirical works on policymaking in Washington were built around elite interviews. We first learned about how Congress really operates from pioneers in elite interviewing such as Lewis Anthony Dexter (1969), Ralph Huitt (1969), and Donald Matthews (1960). No less revered is the scholarship of Richard Fenno (1978), John Kingdon (1995), and Robert Salisbury (1993), who have produced enduring and respected work from elite interviewing. Yet there are few other contemporary political scientists working on public policymaking who have built reputations for their methodological skills as interviewers. Elite interviewing is still widely used as the basis for collecting data, but most interviewing depends on a few trusted templates. Most commonly, elites in a particular institution are chosen at random and subjected to the same interview protocol composed of structured or semistructured questions. For example, state legislators are asked a series of questions about their attitudes on particular issues or institutional

practices. Or policymakers involved in certain issues are selected and then quizzed about those matters. Some confident and skilled interviewers, like William Browne

(1988) and Richard Hall (1996), combine different interview approaches in their work but they are the exceptions and not the rule.

When scholars use a sample of interviews, it is the statistical manipulation of the coded interview transcripts that is considered to be the rigorous part of the research; the fieldwork itself is largely viewed as a means to that end. Unless researchers pay close attention to the field methodology, though, the “error term” in elite interviews can easily cross an unacceptable threshold. What if the questions are poorly constructed, or the subjects are unrevealing, or, worse, misleading in their answers? More to the point, how does the interviewer know if any of these problems exist?

Despite the common use of elite interviews to collect primary data, it is a skill that is rarely taught in graduate school. In contrast, methods courses pay enormous attention to the most minute of statistical issues, and newly minted Ph.D.’s enter the profession with an impressive proficiency in quantitative methods. What little training graduate programs offer related to interviewing is usually restricted to matters of question wording and bias (and often this comes about in training in

survey research, which relies on different kinds of questions). This lack of attention mirrors readers’ expectations of published work using elite interviews. There simply isn’t a demand for political scientists to document the resolution of methodological issues associated with this kind of interviewing. It is usually sufficient merely to describe the sampling framework (if there is one) and to reprint the interview protocol in an appendix.

The methodological issues in elite interviewing are serious and involve both issues of validity—how appropriate is the measuring instrument to the task at hand?—and reliability—how consistent are the results of repeated tests with the chosen measuring instrument? I’ve confronted these issues for years as almost all my research projects have used elite interviews. I was lucky enough to be trained by a master—Robert Peabody of the Johns Hopkins University. As a graduate student I followed him around the Congress and sat in on his interviews with legislators, staffers, and lobbyists. He taught me some of the basic skills of an interviewer. None was more important than this: the best interviewer is not one who writes the best questions. Rather, excellent interviewers are excellent conversationalists. They make interviews seem like a good talk among old friends. He didn’t carry a printed set of questions in front of him to consult as the interview progressed; yet he always knew where he was going and never lost control of the discussion. He gave his subjects a lot of license to roam but would occasionally corral them back if the discussion went too far astray.

His method illustrates the paradox of elite interviewing: the valuable flexibility of open-ended questioning exacerbates the validity and reliability issues that are part and parcel of this approach. As I’ve followed my initial training and developed my own style of elite interviewing, I’ve thought about the methodological problems of open-ended questioning and tried to develop ways to minimize the risks associated with this approach. Here I focus on three methodological issues common to this kind of elite interviewing. In each case, I’ll offer some suggestions to improve the chances that the data acquired won’t be badly compromised by validity or reliability concerns. These suggestions are far from foolproof. Open-ended questioning—the riskiest but potentially most valuable type of elite interviewing—requires interviewers to know when to probe and how to formulate follow-up questions on the fly. It’s a high-wire act.

by
Jeffrey M. Berry,
Tufts University

Passion, not Dispassion. During a recent trip to Washington I interviewed a trade association lobbyist about ergonomics standards being considered by OSHA. He responded to my first question with a half-hour diatribe against OSHA. He repeatedly denounced its behavior, accused bureaucrats there of unethical actions, and never acknowledged that there might be something to the workers' health and safety problems that the proposed regulations addressed. At one point he mocked OSHA, saying a bureaucrat there boasts that OSHA has "a Zen to regulate." At another point he said OSHA "intimidated witnesses" at a hearing—a very serious charge. At the same time, he gave a wonderfully detailed history of the development of these regulations, which is why I let him carry on rather than try to move him on to other questions I had. The trade group lobbyist was bright, articulate, and persuasive and I walked away feeling I had learned a lot on this issue.

But what I had learned was certainly not the "truth" about the OSHA regulations. Since a main focus of the research was to study how lobbies use arguments to push their causes, I had an interest in having him state his organization's point of view as baldly as he wanted to. Still, if the goal of interviews is to find out the truth about what happened—how was the bill passed, how was the deal cut, how was the judge chosen?—there is a very high risk of finding one interviewee more persuasive than the others and having that one interview strongly shape our understanding of the issue. It's easy to make oneself believe that one account is more accurate than another because a subject was more knowledgeable or more detailed in her answers, rather than admitting that we liked that person better or her story was closer to our own take on the situation. In the case of the lobbyist on the ergonomics regulations, it was easy to recognize the lack of objectivity. It was more difficult for me to judge the OSHA bureaucrat that I later interviewed. He was much more measured, *seemingly* more objective. But then again his political point of view was much closer to my own.

Interviewers must always keep in mind that it is not the obligation of a subject to be objective and to tell us the truth. We have a purpose in requesting an interview but ignore the reality that subjects have a purpose in the interview too: they have something they want to say. Consciously or unconsciously, they've thought about what they want to say in the period between the request and the actual interview. They're talking about their work and, as such, justifying what they do. That's no small matter.

Sometimes all we want to know is the subject's point of view and this problem doesn't loom as large. Or we're studying just a single case so no one interview is likely to carry too much weight. Other times, though, we're trying to come as close to the truth as is humanely possible for a number of different cases. How do we try to minimize this problem then? Here are three suggestions:

- Most obviously, use multiple sources. Although this goes a long way in guarding against self-serving or "party-line" accounts, it's much easier to preach than to practice. Elite interviewing is highly time consuming. It takes me two hours of transcription for every half hour of interview. If you've traveled somewhere to conduct the interviewees, there's limited time (money) to conduct them. If one is studying multiple

cases, it's breadth versus depth, a familiar problem to field researchers (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). It's very tempting for interviewers to go for breadth over depth—doing more cases rather than doing more detailed cases—because in elite interviewing the error term is largely hidden to those outside the project while the number of cases, the "n," is there for all to see and judge.

- Ask the subject to critique his own case. Don't show skepticism and don't challenge the subject. With subtlety, move the subject away from his case to the politics of the situation. For example, "Well, you have me convinced. Why aren't the Democrats buying this?" Or a bit more pointedly, "I'm a little confused on something. I read in the *Washington Post* the other day that labor was making progress with the committee chair. What's the part of their argument that resonates with legislators?" This latter approach, using a third party [the *Post*], is a way of taking the subject away from his own perspective without demonstrating one's own personal skepticism.
- Use the interview for what it is. If you've got an ideologue or someone who isn't going to be terribly helpful in a particular area because of their bias, think about where you can spend the time most profitably. Move more quickly to questions that might have a higher payoff.

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Excessive personal bias isn't a chronic problem. Some subjects are more than happy to tell you about the weaknesses of their cases or speak admiringly of the other side while detailing their successes. Even so, there's a danger here too. In interviewing a lobbyist for an airline trade group, I was struck by his tendency to lower his voice—so no one in the hallway could hear—when he criticized his own organization for its blindness about the industry's shoddy service. It wasn't until later when I was typing up the interview that I thought about how seductive this was. It's a little too easy to

believe you're getting the truth when it's coming from a source who is going out of his way not to give you the party line.

Exaggerated Roles. Before I spoke with this airline lobbyist I interviewed another lobbyist for a trade group in a different part of the industry. He quickly came alive and gave me a very animated, highly detailed account of the group's efforts on an important bill dealing with the aviation trust fund. (It became known as "Air-21" during its movement through the Congress.) In his rendition, his group was at the center of the lobbying effort. For years proposals to change the formulas in the aviation trust fund had gone nowhere but when former Representative Bud Shuster (R-PA), the highly influential chair of the Transportation Committee got behind it, the bill went through the House easily. The Senate was still problematic and in this lobbyist's history, a critical juncture came when:

We went to those who we wrote [PAC] checks to. We went to [Senator Mitch] McConnell and said "You know, you said you wanted to meet with stakeholders. Well, we're a stakeholder. You keep warning us what will happen if the other side takes over." So I said to him, "what difference does it make? You never do anything. You never do anything."

The hyperbole in this passage is obvious. Lobbyists don't talk to United States senators that way. Still, it is significant that he was in the room with Mitch McConnell [R-KY] to talk about what his group wanted. But while some of the hyperbole

was easily recognized, further research on the case made me rethink this group's role. Later, when I asked a staffer on the House Transportation committee which groups were active on the issue, this lobbyist's group was not included in the committee aide's list. And when I interviewed the other aforementioned aviation lobbyist, he mentioned a number of lobbyists active on this issue but not the one who said his meeting with McConnell was so pivotal.

There are at least three methodological issues illustrated here. One is simple exaggeration. All of us like to think that what we do has an impact and Washington-based elites may be among the worst of all since influence is the coin of their realm. It was easy to see the exaggeration in this case because it was so extreme. But it will usually be much more subtle, more skillfully conveyed, and much harder to detect. Second is the flip side of this coin. If the subject exaggerates his role, what got crowded out? There's always missing information in an interview, but exaggeration increases the amount of important information that's left out. Third, if there's exaggeration, doesn't that call into mind the credibility of everything the subject says, even the parts that have nothing to do with his role?

The good news is that there are some simple remedies for this problem. The bad news is that they can't fully solve it:

- Do your homework. One reason why I was misled by my interview with the first aviation lobbyist was because I walked in cold, not knowing a thing about the organization. If we're studying a single case or just a few, this usually isn't a problem. We've already become experts in the area under study before we do our interviews. But this project had many cases. Still, if I had just read one or two articles in *CQ Weekly* or the *National Journal* about this organization I would have recognized the problem a little more quickly and made an earlier movement away from his exaggerated and self-congratulatory account of the trust-fund issue.
- Ask about other participants and organizations. Don't assume because someone exaggerates their role that they'll minimize that of others. At the end of my interviews on this case I went back over this particular one and I noticed that he was relatively accurate about the other organizations that he discussed. My questions outside of his role turned out quite well. Once the pressure was off him to justify his personal effectiveness, he was an extremely helpful interview subject.
- Move away from impact questions. It's perfectly fine to ask about someone's personal role or that of their organization; you'll learn things other questions might not uncover. Nevertheless, when their account seems to place undue emphasis on their own role or that of their organization, it may be preferable to move quickly to other parts of your protocol. Again, your time with a subject is a scarce resource. Try to determine early on in an interview what part of the protocol is likely to yield the best answers. You can always circle back to a topic if you guess wrong. If you're using open-ended questions, there's no expectation that the conversation is linear and that you have to follow the order of the questions on your interview schedule.

To Probe or not to Probe. Elite interview protocols often rely on a limited number of open-ended questions. In a set of interviews I did for a current project on the political participation of nonprofits, I relied on a base list of just eight questions. Unlike the more passive role played by an interviewer using structured questions, this type of questioning allows the researcher to make decisions about what additional questions

to ask as the session progresses. Generally, these probes are prompted by two different situations. The first is probing to gather more depth about the topic of discussion. The interviewee may be terse, cautious or unsure about how much detail is appropriate. When this happens the natural tendency for the interviewer is simply to ask a follow up. Skilled interviewers know how to probe nonverbally as well. When a subject gives an answer that does not appear to contain all the information needed, the immediate response on the part of the interviewer should be to say nothing and stare expectantly at the subject. Silence immediately creates tension and the interviewer should be patient to allow the subject to break that uncomfortable silence by speaking again. If that doesn't elicit the information needed, the interviewer can ask a follow-up question.

The second reason to probe is the subject taking the interviewer down an unanticipated path. The interviewer must decide whether the subject has offered a distracting digression or an interesting new avenue to pursue. This kind of branching can be very rewarding and is one of the main benefits of open-ended questioning. Open-ended questions have the virtue of allowing the subjects to tell the interviewer what's relevant and what's important rather than being restricted by the researchers' preconceived notions about what is important.

For the interviewer the skill factor is knowing when to probe and when to continue with the sequence of questions on the interview protocol. Even allowing for some elasticity in the time the interview takes, there is a very real limit to how many probes one can ask. Instantaneous judgments have to be made to weigh the value of a probe on the subject you're talking about against "probe time" you may need later in the session. Subsequent probes may be more or less valuable and therein lie the difficult calculations that must be made quickly.

The critical methodological issue is that different interviewers might not probe at the same points in the session even if they hear the same answers to their initial question. The same interviewer might not probe at the same point or with the same question in two otherwise similar interviews. Consciously or subconsciously, we're always looking for certain things in an interview answer and our follow-up questions reflect this. The reliability issues become very serious if the responses are to be quantified or if more than one person is doing the interviews. As the interviewer prepares for a project where he or she must negotiate the tradeoffs between systematically following the interview protocol and following up intriguing (or incomplete) answers, some thought might be given to these suggestions:

- Write probe notes into the copy of the protocol you carry into the interview. Such scripted probes are for areas that you believe that most respondents will cover in answering the core question that you ask. Include critical material in these reminders and make a consistent effort to get the pertinent data even if it is not initially volunteered.
- Before the fieldwork commences, create an intermediate coding template. In the normal sequence of a research project built around elite interviewing, coding isn't done until after all the interviews are completed. Still, one can easily produce some outlining of what is to be coded before the interviews begin. Once this intermediate document is fixed in the head of all of the interviewers, it increases the chances that the probes will consistently fill in the information needed for each case or each subject.
- Create a set of decision rules as to what to focus on if time begins to run out. The order of questions on the protocol may have more to do with a logical flow of topics than a ranking of priorities. In a similar vein, have a clear

sense of what questions can be answered with a short answer, and those that require a longer explanation. Those questions where a briefer answer might suffice can be reworded on the fly so that they invite a more concise response. There is considerable variation in the expansiveness of interview subjects and the management of answers and probes can become pressing when the subjects are more talkative.

- Have some stock “bridges” to use when you need to get back to a subject area where you still need information. An unsatisfactory answer may go on for a while and take off into unproductive areas. Getting the subject back to the original question is tricky, particularly if an initial follow-up still didn’t get the information. One alternative is to move quickly to a new question rather than let the time continue to slip away. When I still haven’t gotten my answer I often circle back a few questions later. You don’t want to imply that the subject didn’t give you a satisfactory answer earlier, so it’s necessary to hide the sense that you’re going back to something you’ve already asked. I try to think of bridges that will get respondents back to my subject. Something like, “You know it’s really interesting you mentioned that about Congress because it made me think of a situation that’s common in the bureaucracy...” Bridges don’t have to make logical sense so don’t wait for a perfect opening. The subject isn’t going to stop to try to figure out how you got from A to B because they’re focused on listening to the question that you’re now articulating.

All these problems (and possible solutions) must be kept in mind and balanced as the interview moves along rapidly. If you’re taking notes rather than recording the interview, the challenge of dealing with the issues raised here becomes even more daunting. How can you make a clear-headed decision about your next question when you’re listening, trying to make sense of the answer, and taking notes all at the same time? Yet if you are conducting the interview correctly—as a casual, comfortable conversation—then the follow-up questions, the branching, the movement away from unproductive avenues to new areas, and the circling back should come across as a natural part of that conversation. If there are too many discrete areas where information is necessary, then open-ended questioning might not be the most appropriate alternative for research. For projects where depth, context, or the historical record is at the heart of data collection, elite interviewing using broad, open-ended questioning might be the best choice.

Even the most experienced researcher can’t anticipate all twists and turns that interviews take. The goal here is to encourage interviewers to think about their decision rules (or absence thereof) for guiding themselves through problems that emerge in this kind of research. One should not underestimate the value of flexibility to explore unanticipated answers. At the same time, it’s important to develop some consistency in the way one uses probes. Although each subject is unique, many of the problems we encounter in interviewing elites are common ones that we confront over and over again. Systematic approaches to those problems will enhance our confidence in the quality of the data.

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