

Interviewing the Australian Business Elite: 'Let's get down to business'

Martin Robson (School of Business, Economics and Public Policy)

Abstract

The use of the elite informants in managerial research is an important, fruitful and yet underdeveloped aspect of methodology. Elite respondents, at many levels of description, are ordinary human beings; at others, anything but ordinary. It follows that a failure to recognise the context of interviewing elites will result in corresponding failure to harvest the potential benefits. Business elites have enormous influence in the creation of the social, financial, cultural and physical environments that shape our experiences as individuals, families and organisations, particularly in today's business driven, consumer society. Therefore understanding how elites can be best approached in social research interviews facilitates not only a better understanding of elites but of the processes by which their environments are shaped and yet there is a paucity of literature concerning elite research methodology. My PhD research did not seek to address this gap but rather focussed on the social context of intuition use by elite Australian leaders in their decision-making and therefore this paper is a reflective piece describing my experience. It may however contribute to the field through a discussion of the rich and insightful descriptions of phenomena that can be elicited from interviews with elites, some challenges and potential pitfalls, and an examination and comparison of the literature with my experience as a Ph.D candidate.

Elite respondents were found to be well educated, experienced, highly articulate and intelligent, and familiar with the process of interview. They were confident, operated from a number of power bases and therefore had the potential to manipulate the parameters of the interview space if they wished to protect their interests. Interviewing in such a setting could have been an intimidating experience for me as a nascent researcher. However, the use of the telephone as a mediating device promoting anonymity, and the apparent reversal of typical researcher/researched power relations, facilitated the inclusion of direct, probing and even demanding questions that would otherwise be neither ethical, nor productive in terms of authenticity in typical social research circumstances. The participants responded positively to challenging questions and moreover there was an expectation to 'get down to business' that was seen as consistent with their own business practice and culture. The definition of the term 'elite' is discussed and justified with reference to the aspects of method and methodology that circumscribe the selection of elites in a research design. It is concluded that the Australian business elite interviewed and their context are indeed 'different'. Therefore, in order to maximise the use of such informants should therefore be approached 'differently'.

Background/Introduction

The term 'elite' is an ambiguous, sometimes emotion-laden term with multifarious individual subjective connotations. The people's dictionary *Wiktionary* defines elite, derived from the Latin *eligere* or 'to elect', as 'a special group or social class of people which have a superior intellectual, social or economic status as, the elite of society' (*Wiktionary.org* 2008 online). This definition implies making a choice through comparison against assessment criteria that establishes a dichotomy to define what is elite and what is not. However, common and general use of the word dictates that the criteria need not be limited to intellectual ability. Criteria could concern physical ability (sporting elite), talent, social networks, and attractiveness (social elite) or qualifications (academic elite) and it would be easy to generate an extensive list. However, as indicated in the *Wiktionary* definition, the term is also used to describe a privileged social class. Therefore the criteria would concern, to a large extent, inherited money

and power, rather than innate qualities or the independents and absolute achievements of an individual. Interestingly, the related Internet site *Wikipedia* gives such a definition in relation to the business elite.

The *élite* is a relatively small dominant group within a large society, which enjoys a privileged status envied by individuals of lower social status. Elite advantages are the usual ones of a dominant social class: easier access to capital and political power, a more rigorous education largely free of indoctrination, resulting in cultural influence, and leadership (Wikipedia.org 2008 online).

This sociological and Marxist take of the business elite implies domination and even oppression, or at least the unfair advantage of a small, self-reproducing class of people (Marx & Engels 1951; Grabb 1997) characterised by 'group consciousness, cohesion and conspiracy' (Burton & Higley 1987:219-238). On the other hand, sociological perspectives such as structural functionalism describe the elite as necessary, and a consequence of the superior qualities of some individuals over others (Pareto 1935; Sargeant 1983; Grabb 1997). It is evident that elites are celebrated for their achievements, particularly in individualistic and competitive societies such as the United States. Manifest examples of both sociological interpretations of 'elite' could be found recently at the centre of the American presidential elections. The incumbent George W. Bush, for example, whose rise can be attributed to an oligarchic dynasty, could be considered a good example of the former interpretation while Barak Obama, as a 'self-made man', an example of the latter. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to engage in a debate about the definition or legitimacy of elite classes and groups other than to make explicit the criteria used to define business elites within the context of my PhD. research, and this will be done in the first sections of the paper.

There is little debate, however, and I would argue it is self-evident that, through the decisions they make, business elites have a large influence in the creation of the social, financial, cultural and physical environments that shape our experiences as individuals, families and organisations, particularly in today's business driven, consumer society. It follows that studying the judgement and decision making of elites, and the context in which they operate, is pivotal to understanding the processes by which these influences emerge and therefore fundamental to understanding our own lives.

Despite this, research focusing on elite individuals is scarce, and texts discussing elite research methodology and strategy are rarer still (Pettigrew 1992; Hertz & Imber 1995; Ostrander 1995; Thomas 1995; Neuman 2000; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2002; Kezar 2003) and to an extent, inconsistent (Odendahl & Shaw 2001). While there is a plethora of literature concerning leadership, it must be pointed out that not all leaders are elite and not all elites are leaders. It seems that despite the benefits of research on elites outlined above, and the massive public interest in business, cultural, sporting and political elite, the educational elite have remained unconvinced and disinterested in studying our most important decision-makers. For those who subscribe to the view of elites as a self-replicating, dominant class this neglect of study and its missed opportunities, according to Ostrander (1995), serves the elite class by obscuring and thereby 'maintaining their position in society', (p. 133).

The overwhelming majority of social research and methodology literature concerns 'interviewing down', focusing on the 'average person or the poor and powerless' (Neuman 2000:345), and therefore the associated literature assumes and reflects this focus. However, it will be argued here that the issues, challenges and opportunities involved in elite interviewing are quite different from those involved in interviewing down (Odendahl & Shaw 2001; Desmond 2004; Smith 2006). Such a paucity of theory and applicable research practices necessitates a certain amount of improvisation and experimentation for those willing, interested or required to 'research up'. This paper will examine some of the issues revealed in the extant literature pertaining to elite interviews, such as defining and identifying elites, accessing elites, power relations and issues of authenticity, and compare these findings with the recent real-life research experience of a Ph.D candidate. The aim of the paper is to add to the literature by providing a reflective account of the experience of the author and add to the literature that does exist concerning elite interviewing methods. The significance of this is to

provide those researching elite groups with the benefit of the author's research in the field and offer strategies that can be employed to efficiently gather relevant, rich and authentic data.

Context of discussion

Experience in interviewing elite respondents began with an Honours thesis, which was completed in 2004 and titled 'Intuition and Elite Leaders: Rationale for the Non-rational'. I interviewed 11 'distinguished' Australian leaders drawn from the *Financial Review/Boss Magazine* 'True Leaders List'(s) from 2001-2003. The purpose of the research was to investigate how and in what circumstances these leaders used intuition, and its contribution to their effectiveness. The findings revealed that these leaders use intuition frequently in their judgement and decision-making and considered it vital to their effectiveness. Despite this, intuition was also found to be a silent practice that is rarely acknowledged publicly (Robson & Cooksey 2008; Robson & Miller 2005). The current Ph.D research seeks to understand and explain the silent or private nature of intuition use by investigating the perceptions of leaders in relation to its context of use and, moreover, how these perceptions impact on their judgement and decision-making. The discussion in this paper is a reflective piece based on 26 in-depth interviews conducted with CEOs, Chairs and Directors of large and/or significant Australian organisations, all with between 15 and 40 years self-defined leadership experience. It also draws tacitly on the 11 Honours research interviews conducted previously.

Defining the term

As alluded to in the introduction the word elite is contentious and emotive for some, and this is reflected in the responses of people when discussing the research. The first question is always, 'but how do you define elite?' (M. Jabri, 2008, pers. comm., 17th July). I have argued that, for many, this is often a subjective judgement and, in the context of this research, it can be made by viewing the list of participants in Appendix 1. Still, it is difficult to find a term to distinguish between populations, and one that clearly signifies that outstanding and influential interview participants may require different treatment (Dexter 1970). For those who prefer a more objective approach there is some debate as to who may be considered elite in business environments (Smith 2006), although they are generally identified as those who control resources (Onias cited in Smith 2006) and often associated with wealth (Odendahl & Shaw 2001). However, the business elite as defined here, consistent with Burton and Higley (1987) and (Pettigrew 1992), are those who occupy formal positions of authority within institutions and organisations. In relation to the current research, this would translate to Australian CEOs, board directors and senior management in public service institutions as well as private and public companies.

It is acknowledged however, that such a categorisation based on positional power may inadequately represent actual power relations and influence within an organisation. For example, Pettigrew (1992) points out that the power and influence of those in senior positions is somewhat mitigated by the influence of people both in and outside organisations as well as laws, traditions and culture at the societal, organisational and individual level. Smith (2006), in a post-structural approach to power relations, argues that using positional power as an organising principle ignores the transient and negotiated nature of power. Indeed at the extreme end of this debate are those complexity theorists who argue that the success or failure of an organisation is more due to external and environmental variables rather than actions of the nominated leader (Pfeffer cited in Dubrin, Dalglish et al. 2006). From this standpoint, it might be better to understand leadership, power and influence within an organisation through observation *in situ* for extended periods of time. It is agreed that this involvement may produce interesting and surprising results. However, the Ph.D research that informs this paper is not concerned with how much influence each particular leader has within an organisation but rather reasonably assumes these leaders do have at least some influence and uses their position to identify them as potential candidates. Certainly, the interview data supports this conclusion.

How are Elites Different?

While elite studies attracted a certain amount of academic interest in the 1930s since then Dexter (1970), supported later by Kezar (2003), claims that few subsequent advances have been made in understanding and this has consequences for the few who do take such research upon themselves. Kezar reflects that none of her previous training, reading and experience prepared her for the interviews she conducted with elite respondents. She implies here that the elite she interviewed were qualitatively and distinctly different from the usual typical respondent. Restricting the discussion to business elites, a number of aspects can be identified that separates them from the residual population.

Accessibility

Although Smith (2006) as an exception, found access to the elite respondents unproblematic, finding willing respondents is commonly cited by researchers as a significant barrier (Pettigrew 1992; Odendahl & Shaw 2001; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2002). Some researchers reported that it took years of phone calls and lead times of many months before the interviews took place (Kincaid & Bright 1957) and were often given an hour or less to conduct them (Odendahl & Shaw 2001). Elites are likely to be very busy people, who are in constant demand and receive many invitations (Dexter 1964). They are therefore likely to employ gatekeepers to restrict access (Kincaid & Bright 1957; Odendahl & Shaw 2001; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2002). Neuman (2000) argues that secrecy, seclusion and privacy are the hallmarks of elite settings. Moreover, in the view of Hertz and Imber (1995), elites are to an extent defined by the capacity to insulate themselves and suggest that this may go some way to explaining why elites are not studied more often.

In contrast to the consensus in the literature, I found that arranging for interviews with elites was a relatively easy task. A list of potential respondents was drawn up using current and past 'True Leaders List'(s) from the *Australian Financial Review/Boss Magazine* and articles in management magazines, as well as trawling through the websites of major Australian organisations, targeting boards of directors and their CEOs and making use of serendipitous and personal connections. The response rate in the first round of invitations was approximately 20%. Of course, it is impossible to know if there were reasons behind such a favourable result, or if it was simply a statistical aberration. However, on the basis of literature and comments made by the respondents, I detail four suggestions as to why this may be so.

First, I attempted to make it as simple and convenient as possible for the candidates to participate. Consistent with the advice of Lilleker (2003), I created a single page letter of invitation that was informative, coherent and most importantly, concise. I made it clear that interviews would likely run to an hour or less and that the respondent could determine the actual length. I also included the letterhead of the University and the names of the supervisors as well as my qualifications and awards in an attempt to establish my own credibility, which is considered by Welch et al. (2002) as more significant for elites than non-elite.

Second, I chose to include the word intuition in the description of the research because I believed it might attract interest as an under-researched but relevant aspect of leadership. The last question in my interview schedule probed the respondents for their reasons for participating and several confirmed their interest in the topic as motivation to accept.

The third and most cited reason for participation was the desire on behalf of the respondents to contribute to Australian business research. Participants saw this activity as contributing to the 'common good'. As one participant pointed out, they were more likely to agree to participate in academic research as opposed to journalistic or commercial research.

Power Relations

Elites are likely to have had high levels of education, experience in their job and exposure to a wide variety of social and business networks (Neuman 2000; Odendahl & Shaw 2001; Smith 2006). Moreover, they are likely to be highly intelligent, articulate and confident with high levels of interpersonal skills (Kincaid & Bright 1957; Hirsch 1995; Odendahl & Shaw 2001). They are also more likely to be familiar and comfortable with the interview format, research techniques, and even techniques by which they may manipulate and control such situations (Ostrander 1995; Thomas 1995; Neuman 2000). In many cases they can be considered 'professional communicators' (Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2002:615). Most elites, particularly those in formal leadership positions, are used to being in charge and having people defer to their opinions (Ostrander 1995). Researchers have found that elites will tend to steer the discussion in the direction they wish to take it, thereby protecting their interests or those of the organisation. Furthermore, if interviews are to be conducted in the natural setting of the respondents, this can mean plush and luxurious surroundings, personal assistants and, in my own experience, butlers. Collectively, these factors can lead the researcher, especially the nascent researcher, to feeling overwhelmed, intimidated and like a 'suppliant granted an audience with a dignitary', (Thomas 1995:7). I can confirm this from my own experience in face to face interviews.

This can produce a 'halo effect', which impacts on the dynamics of the interview and the quality of the data through a reluctance to appropriately probe or confront the elite subject (Ostrander 1995; Thomas 1995). On the other hand, the advantage of interviewing well educated, intelligent, and articulate respondents is the quality of data that may be elicited if the interviewer is experienced, confident and intellectually agile (Odendahl & Shaw 2001). Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (2002) point out that elite respondents are 'more than capable of dealing with demanding and probing questions', (p. 616). The extent to which the capacities of elite respondents can challenge the interviewer is clearly signified by Kincaid and Bright (1957), who advocate a strategy of 'tandem interviewing'. They argue that the combined acumen of two researchers is most able to exploit the potential of their elite sources to the fullest. Further supporting the assertion is their claim that this approach was called for by the respondents themselves. Clearly, this situation would be less often found 'researching down'.

The consensus of the literature, as discussed, assumes that the business elite operate from bases of positional, referent and expert power. It is also assumed in the bulk of the literature that this power will transfer onto the dynamics of the interview (Smith 2006). Desmond (2004), for example, argues that despite any strategy employed by a researcher an asymmetrical power relationship is inevitable. Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (2002) maintain that 'studies on elite interviewing are unanimous that the power balance is likely to favour the informant over the researcher' (p.615). Despite this, apart from normal nervousness prior to an interview and a healthy respect for the challenge, I seldom felt an imbalance of power relations. I felt comfortable, mostly confident and unfettered in my probing of the respondents. In fact I often felt stimulated and encouraged by their engaging and insightful explanations. On reflection, I can attribute the power dynamics I experienced to a number of perhaps unique factors that undermine the assumptions about power articulated by the literature.

First, it was clear to me that the positional power of the participant is consequential only in that it identifies them as an elite. Given I am not a member of their respective organisations, they hold no formal power over me. Second, referent power can be defined as the power that individuals or groups assign to an individual, and can be seen as aligned to status and reputation (Dubrin, Dalglish et al. 2006). A number of these elites are well known in business circles and with the wider public through interviews and commentary in the media. Had I followed the advice given in the elite research literature, advocating preparedness in terms of knowing whom one is dealing with, I would have certainly found out about the participants' history and achievements (Kincaid & Bright 1957; Zuckerman 1972; Odendahl & Shaw 2001). I can see the value in researching the informant if questions in the interview guide pertain to particular past or current events, matters or actions of the individual or their organisation. However,

my questions were of a nature that invited introspection and reflection in relation to their judgement and decision making in general. Who they were, and their particular organisation, served only as a backdrop to their experiences as human beings. The same questions could therefore be asked of anyone and necessarily sought no historical or objective facts. I believe this put me in a unique position, one that did not require research into the backgrounds of the respondents. Their history, achievements and personal context was only relevant and important as it revealed itself in their own narrative, and in relation to the research questions. I therefore made the decision to do no research on the individuals *prior to the interview*, other than what was necessary to identify them. I believe that this assisted me in gaining a level of objective detachment, which in turn helped me focus on their responses and on them as unique individuals, thereby mitigating the previously discussed 'halo effect'.

Third was a reversal that occurred in relation to expert power. Much of the previous elite research features focus in relation to the respondent's domain of expertise. However, this was not the case in my research. Participants were selected because of their assumed expertise but not interviewed about it. In fact, most had read nothing about intuition or had not thought about it extensively. I, on the other hand, had been researching and thinking about it for many years and, in relation to the topic, in a sense, I was the expert. I believe that this also contributed to more balanced power relations between interviewer and respondent.

Fourth, after conducting a number both face to face and telephone interviews, I concluded that telephone interviews (discussed further in the next section) both removed the impact of the discussed elite environments and provided a certain anonymity for both parties. This in turn further promoted symmetrical power relations as well as a greater subjective sense of anonymity for the participants (discussed further).

Rapport, candour of respondents and authenticity

Much of the literature discusses the unique context of researching elites in relation to the challenges posed, as well as strategies proposed to maximise frankness and openness through developing rapport with respondents (Odendahl & Shaw 2001). Gaining rapport and eliciting quality data in elite interviews is not as simple as creating a relaxed environment (Leech 2002). The age, gender, status, qualifications and the institution of the researcher can impact on access and play a part in the interview dynamic (Odendahl & Shaw 2001), which therefore affects the quantity and quality of data (Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2002).

Similarly, Neuman (2000) argues that all sub-cultures, and therefore elite sub-cultures, share language and behaviour. Failure to acknowledge and account for this may lead the respondent to believe that the interviewer is not to be trusted. Ostrander (1995), through the experience of researching members of the elite social class (aristocracy), recommends mirroring dress, language and body language consistent with their way of doing things. She is implying here that respondents are more likely to feel comfortable and therefore are more likely to open up if they feel they are talking to someone who appears to be one of them or at least someone who can appreciate who they are and their special status.

While I believe this is certainly true, I also believe that the context of the current research – the more egalitarian nature of Australian society and the more permeable nature of the business elite as compared to say, the British aristocracy – somewhat mitigated this concern. I would agree that dress and manner is important when dealing with elites 'face to face', and punctuality and efficiency is of prime importance considering their time constraints. I therefore made significant efforts to arrive in enough time to be punctual, and also to recover from the stress of getting to interviews by public transport in Sydney's heat. Obviously, the predominant use of the telephone for interviews neutralised these issues, with the exception of language. Here I had the advantage of a tertiary education in business and I felt that, at least to an extent, we were speaking the same language.

Along with others (Kincaid & Bright 1957; Odendahl & Shaw 2001; Berry 2002; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2002), Ostrander (1995) had no problem getting subjects to open up. She, along with Kincaid and Bright (1957) in fact found that, generally, it was those on the lower ranks who were less candid in their responses and more likely to assert power. Consistent with Ostrander, although there was some variability (Welch et al 2002), in general, I found that the respondents were extremely open and, in some cases, showed a level of frankness that was surprising to both parties. One respondent remarked that he was 'astonished' at the things he was saying to me. I attribute the participants' candour to the following factors stemming from the properties of the interviewer, the interviewee and the context of the interview.

Researcher

I would agree that the capacity of the researcher to be able to relate in a way that is familiar to the respondent is most useful. Odendahl and Shaw (2001) argue that if the interviewer is much younger, the person may not be taken seriously. As a mature age student on the baby boomer/generation x cusp, I was often close to the age of the respondents. I have varied and international work and life experience, speak two foreign languages, have read widely, and my undergraduate degree was broad in nature (Sociology, Human Resource Development, Communication and Human Relations majors, as well as some Law units). I believe the skills and knowledge gained, especially in the communications major, are valuable assets in this regard. They provided both an understanding of the communication process, and working knowledge and practical skills that I often used (Beebe, Beebe et al. 2005). Combined, I believe these factors contributed to the easy rapport I experienced with most respondents.

Thomas (1995) addresses the issue of self and self-concept to the interview space. He observes that given the discussed 'halo effect', the researcher should optimally be 'at ease with who he or she is'. As testament to his belief of the influence this can have on a researcher, he suggests acquainting oneself to the habits and rituals of the particular researched elite in order to maintain a detachment. With many of the participants, the conversation seemed like one between colleagues or collaborators interested in a particular topic as well as, intermittently, one of interviewer / respondent. I would not go so far as Berry (2002) however, who suggests that a good interviewer makes an interview seem 'like a good talk among old friends' (p.679). I believe in the elite context, one should use extreme caution with this type of approach, which could be interpreted as assuming, overly familiar, and therefore lacking respect.

I did recognise elements of a therapeutic relationship discussed by Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (2002) in that the interview gave respondents an opportunity to reflect on their leadership and decision-making style and, based on the words (below) from one respondent, the interview this may have been useful or beneficial for some:

Well, the great thing about participating in a research study like yours is that it often gives you the opportunity to reflect on your practice in ways that you perhaps otherwise wouldn't. Perhaps not so much wouldn't, but don't or can't or don't have time for. So by setting aside time to engage in, you know, a conversation with an independent researcher about issues which are fairly close to the way one does one's daily work, it's often extremely, ahh ... it's extremely helpful to do that.

Researched

Although it would be gratifying, as the researcher, to take all the credit for good rapport, I believe the most salient contribution was the willingness and ability of the respondents. As discussed, many business elites are professional communicators and disseminators of information, and they are often required to gain and maintain good rapport with a wide variety of people. The motivation to do so in the interview context has been attributed to the value of the sympathetic ear of a stranger (Dexter 1970; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2002; Kezar 2003) and in relation to the isolation that is chosen or imposed by their elite status (Dexter 1970). I have no comment on these

propositions, as I did not ask questions in relation to this. However, I do agree with Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (2002) in that their candour, frankness and apparent honesty was in part, at least, to the good nature of the participants. In addition, Berry (2002) points out that many elites will have had time to think about the interview topic and therefore will have something to say. As mentioned, the topic of intuition was of interest to some. Berry also found that elites seemed to enjoy being interviewed more than any other group in his experience. Although I have limited interview experience with which to compare, I believe the respondents, on the whole, seemed to enjoy the interview and I believe this did assist in maintaining their candour.

Two further factors encouraging openness emerged from the data itself. Many respondents, in the course of the interview, spoke of the tendency of the business elites to become more open in their personal views once they had established a good track record and felt they had 'nothing more to prove'. As previously mentioned, it was the lower-ranked executives who were less open for fear of sticking their neck out. All of the respondents had had more than 15 years' experience. I would therefore argue that along with the anonymity the study afforded them, their reputation and track record gave them confidence to speak their mind.

I would also regard the quality and quantity of the data as testament to the ability and openness of the participants. Many have a high level of experience and communication skill as well as a familiarity with speaking publicly for their organisation, and for and about themselves. Many are paid to deliver lectures at corporate and academic events (saxton.com.au; celebritiespeakers.com.au). Despite the demanding and introspective nature of the questions, asking them to examine aspects of experience as human beings they had seldom before examined (according to the participants themselves), their ability to do so was awesome. For example, the first interview I conducted resulted in a total of nearly 4000 words, gained in about ½ hour. Although Welch et al (2002) point out that quantity of data does not equal quality, in my opinion, their replies were coherent, concise and reflected their knowledge, experience, wisdom, insight and honesty.

Therefore, to an extent, I would argue that it was nearly impossible to ask a 'stupid' question and furthermore, it was impossible to know which questions would prompt the respondent to 'bring out the jewels'. For example, in this section of the interview, I ask the subject about their internal, subjective experience of an intuition or 'gut feeling'. I subsequently proceeded to ask a question that is rather 'stupid' considering the response (I was trying to address the issue of the importance of self-awareness).

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|-------------|---|
| Martin: | Perhaps I will use an example. You say you had a gut feeling about one of these guys that you didn't like... that wasn't suitable. Are you easily able to distinguish a gut feeling or a sense about somebody from maybe an emotion, a desire for an outcome or that kind of thing... |
| Respondent: | (Immediately) Yes, yes... That sort of sense is clear. I kind of... something's not right here, I don't like this... it's quite clear to me. |
| Martin: | Is it important to be able to distinguish between those two kinds of feelings? |
| Respondent: | What's the alternative feeling? |
| Martin: | Between intuition, a gut feeling and another kind of emotion, desire for an outcome or fear of an outcome... |
| Respondent: | Well they're just different senses. I mean, I don't have to distinguish them because they are different. I suppose the best analogy would be dreams. I'm quite a dreamer. And over the years ... and I find this is something I don't understand about myself ... It hasn't happened a lot, but it has happened to me and a couple of other members of my family, that I've had dreams which have predicted things... |

This CEO of a large, successful and mainstream organisation then told me of the prophetic dream, which accurately predicted the promotion of a superior. She further

detailed other psychic phenomena including predicting the birth dates and sex of several nieces and nephews, and at one point, sensing the exact time that a close relative had died.

Context of interview

Taylor and Bogdin define 'In-depth interviews' as 'repeated face to face encounters' (cited in Minichiello, Aroni et al. 2008:63). Although I would describe the interviews I conducted as 'in depth', they had neither properties and yet I believe I obtained excellent and relevant data. While I could have requested multiple interviews with the respondents, I do not believe this would have added much as I was always able to get through my interview guide regardless of the time frame. Any subsequent follow up questions were asked in a member check done at the end of the interview round. Moreover, I believe a request for multiple interviews would have been stretching the generosity of the respondents and might have reduced the acceptance rate.

As discussed, most of the interviews were conducted via telephone rather than face to face and I argue that this did not detract from the interview. Minichiello et al. (2008) points out that face to face or mediated, the success of the interview largely depends on the quality of the interaction and understanding that is achieved, and that electronic mediation has the potential to both *increase and decrease* this. I would support this view and add that the only relevant question is how thick, rich, authentic and credible the data is, and how useful it is to understanding the researched phenomena rather than how it was achieved.

The telephone, is an information-lean electronic medium (Beebe, Beebe et al. 1999) that excludes the visual channel, and therefore precludes observation of body language. However, I would argue that in the context of elite interviews, one is mostly too preoccupied with listening and analysing the elite respondent's dense and rapid replies to notice or take advantage of this in face to face settings. Furthermore, the lack of a visual channel has certain advantages. As Minichiello et al. (2008) point out, the use of telephone provides a sense of anonymity for the respondent, especially useful considering the intensely self-reflective nature of some of the questions, which was confirmed in one interview:

Martin:	Thanks very much, and thanks for sharing... some intimate aspects of your life with me, I do appreciate that.
Respondent:	Not at all... it's relatively easy with the anonymity of a telephone.

Aside from providing anonymity, mitigating the 'halo effect', and eliminating travel expenses, I found that the use of a telephone also freed me from the obligation to make eye contact and maintain an appropriate facial expression in a situation where I was doing 90% of the listening. I found that this was distracting and also extremely draining, and therefore potentially detrimental to the interview.

An additional factor adding to openness was the focus of the questions on the experience, opinions and views of the individual rather than their work, career or specific organisation. Thomas (1995) argues that this creates a separation between the interviewee and the organisation giving the respondent more freedom to express themselves and reducing the need for formalised or obfuscating responses (Thomas 1995; Odendahl & Shaw 2001). Furthermore, the nature of the research was academic and quite different to a journalistic interview, which is usually not confidential or anonymous and often seeks to gain information that may compromise the reputation of the individual and/or the organisation (Yeager & Kram 1995).

Delivery of questions

In-depth interviews normally run to two hours or more, which makes it possible to spend time developing rapport and trust with a respondent, and cover a wide range of issues and themes. With such flexibility and latitude, it should also be possible for the researcher to make multiple attempts at probing a particular issue in a variety of ways.

More time and a relaxed atmosphere also gives the respondent the opportunity to reflect and formulate a response (should they be motivated to) that is accurate and true for them. Furthermore, when researching down, asymmetrical power relations in favour of the researcher should dictate that questions be as open and as tentative as possible in order not to overly influence the data through the respondent operating out of a desire to please the interviewer (Dean & Whyte 1970).

However, in elite interview contexts, even if access is gained, respondents are not likely to grant interviews of longer than one hour, and sometimes less, and indeed, this was my experience. It follows that the interviewer makes the most of this limited timeframe through efficiency strategies. For Berry (2002), interviewers need skills in knowing when to follow comments made by the respondents and when to continue with the interview protocol, hence, good interviewing intuition on the part of the researcher is a prerequisite (Odendahl & Shaw 2001). As good intuition, at least in part, is based on experience (Sadler-Smith & Sparrow 2007), Zuckerman's (1972) claim that elite interviewing is not for the naive is justified.

My interviewing intuition (based on the experience of my Honours research) was to be as efficient, direct and clear as possible, not only using the open questions contained in the schedule, but frequently using closed and leading questions in succession. I was not fully cognisant of this until I submitted my first interview transcript for review by an expert in the field. Pat Bazerley tentatively put it to me that I was perhaps a little more aggressive and direct than she would have been (P. Bazerley 2008, pers. comm. 22 February). However, I believe that my direct manner of asking questions was appreciated, served the interests of both the respondents and myself, and was appropriate to the goals of the research in the unique set of circumstances that circumscribed the interview.

Based on the above discussion, elements of the interview can be summarised as:

- Limited time frame for interviews
- Extraordinary self-confidence of respondents
- Extraordinary intellectual and communication ability of respondents
- Rapid, rich, relevant and dense data
- Ability of respondents to cope with demanding and probing questions
- Relatively symmetrical power relations
- Excellent rapport and demonstrated candour

I would argue that all of these contextual factors point to the appropriateness of a direct, frank and even a demanding approach. Minichiello, Aroni et al. (2008) support a direct approach in relation to key or expert informants and the suggestion by Leech (2002) to give a one-minute summary of the project to begin the interview seemed contrary to my intuitive sense of the desire and expectation of the respondent. I simply made the offer of further information, which nearly all rejected. I therefore concur with Odendahl and Shaw (2001), who found subjects did not want to waste their valuable time in 'chit chat'. In this regard, I therefore argue here that interview dynamics with elite respondents are distinctly different to 'researching down'. From my experience, I would agree with Welch et al that these elite respondents 'welcome the opportunity of responding directly...' (Welch, Marschan-Piekkari et al. 2002:616). My research gave them such an opportunity. This was of course aligned with my interests, considering the work involved in transcribing and analysing interviews. Furthermore, I believe that being concise and to the point, 'getting down to business' so to speak, was perceived as normal practice and therefore culturally aligned.

I found that a mix of open, closed and leading questions was most useful, depending on whether I was 'fact checking' data that confirmed definitions and previously collected data or whether I was exploring new areas and themes. Often, I would ask a very open question to see if anything new emerged and then ask a closed question (if it did not) to see if their views were consistent with theory, data or my own hunches.

Often closed, open and leading questions would be used sequentially as in the following case, which sought to first establish a response, and then to elicit the thinking behind it:

- Martin: Would you say for example, if you made an intuitive decision about a strategic direction or acquisition or the appointment of somebody, would you announce that to the media and discuss it in those terms with the media?
- Respondent: Probably not... no.
- Martin: Why would that be?
- Respondent: I think we would probably dress it up if it was an announcement to the media. We would probably dress it up in some way, broadly speaking... (respondent elaborates further)
- Martin: So, does that relate to a sense that management needs to be scientific and to display that scientific approach to the outside world?
- Respondent: Well, partly that, partly that there is great emphasis on managing risk and so there's a whole range of pseudoscientific stuff about trying to quantify and manage risk and reduce risk... (respondent elaborates further)

As illustrated in the above example, the respondents consistently demonstrated their ability and willingness to correct or contradict the assertions I put forward in leading questions. At no time in any of the interviews did I have the sense that the data was compromised by the respondent 'trying to please', which Dexter (1970) regards as a key barrier to authenticity.

Limitations

The respondents were selected for the PhD focussing on the use of intuition because they were both elite and leaders of organisations. However, it is their status as elite is relevant to the discussion in this paper. A leader may not necessarily be considered elite just as someone who may be considered elite may not necessarily be a leader. Therefore, while conclusions drawn from this research may be useful and contribute to the large body of knowledge concerning leadership, it may also be misleading. Discretion must therefore be exercised by any researcher considering its relevancy.

As previously stated, the research from which these reflections and observations were drawn did not concern elite interview methodology, but arose as a consequence of it. The 'findings' were not findings in relation to a research question but rather opinions and beliefs gained through observations and experience of researching the business elite and therefore should be viewed in this context. While a point has been made of the responsiveness, honesty and candour of the participants which can be attributed to the relatively benign nature of the research topic and the anonymity afforded, it must also be recognised that this is just an assumption and that their superior capabilities could equally be employed to mislead, thus defeating the aims of the researcher should the participants consider it to be in their interests to do so. The political elite, for example, have been known to obfuscate and even obscure what they perceive to be the truth, providing challenges beyond the scope of this paper but would point toward utilising the intuitive as well as analytical capabilities of the researcher.

Conclusion

Much can be gained through understanding the views, experiences and stories of the Australian business elite especially considering the influence and wide impact of their decisions. However, elite research literature is characterised by parsimony and inconsistency, which makes entry to the field for nascent researchers a difficult one. Some of the findings discussed here, such as quality of data in terms of candour, rich descriptions and insights, and the general ability of respondents to communicate their views, concur with the consensus of the literature. Other findings such as the relative

ease of access to respondents and perceived relatively symmetrical power relations of the interview space do not. In terms of the discussed research, the qualities of the respondents and the context of the interview were quite different from those normally involved in 'researching down' and therefore required a different approach. The time constraints imposed by the respondents, their extraordinary self-confidence, their ability to articulate their views, their capacity to cope with demanding and leading questions, and the anonymity afforded by the use of a telephone all justified a direct approach. Open, closed and leading questions were used to maximise data collection without fear of compromising authenticity. Such a direct strategy served the interests of both the researcher and the researched, in terms of the quality of experience enjoyed by both parties, time spent in the interview, time spent transcribing the data, costs of the research and the development of a relaxed but engaged 'business like' rapport. Moreover, this strategy succeeded in eliciting excellent quantities of quality data, directly relevant to the research question.

It is therefore concluded that challenges posed and strategies advanced to maximise the benefits of elite interviews should be viewed in relation to the qualities and context of the researcher, informants, and the interview itself. Interviewing should be seen as a complex and unpredictable interpersonal process where there is no 'best way'. However, the more the researcher is able to be aware of the dynamics of the interview, the more useful and relevant the data and its interpretation will be. This would be particularly salient in elite research, such as the political elite, where respondents may have an interest in using their superior skills to render a particular outcome.

Future research

Understanding the diversity of humans, their behaviour and relationships, is central to effective social science. Furthermore, all social groups can be recognised as important to study. Because of the complexity of individuals and social systems no set of rules can guide the inquiry of individuals and groups. As opposed to research that seeks to control variables, explain, generalise and predict, qualitative interviews in the field are complex, messy and leads to findings which are not generalisable as each research ecology can be considered unique. Therefore, despite stating the need generally for more research into elite subjects, I would argue that contributions to the field will be, as in this case, emergent, and given value in hindsight rather than predicted. I would concur with Strauss (1987) who argues that it is most critical that researchers share their experiences and knowledge with the research community through publications and conferences such as the one this paper is written for, expanding the field of knowledge from which researchers can analytically and intuitively draw from in their work.

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Appendix 1

Participants 2008/7/8 PhD. Research

Jennifer Alexander	CEO, Australian Institute of Management, NSW
Helmut Bakaitis	Former Head of Direction, NIDA
Catherine Brenner	Director, Sucorp
Linda Burney	MP, NSW
Tim Castle	Barrister, NSW
Leigh Clifford	Director, Qantas
Ian Cohen MLC	MP, NSW
Peter Fox	Chair, Linfox
Annette Gallard	Deputy Director, DOCs, NSW
Geoff Garrett	CEO, CSIRO

Margaret Gibson	Director, Australia Post
Elaine Henry	CEO, The Smith Family
Susan Heron	CEO, Australian Institute of Management, VIC
Cherrell Hirst	Director, Qantas
Louise Kropach	CEO, Horse Sense for People, NSW
Rod Kemp	Principal, Barker College, NSW
Peter Lindley	Telecommunications Project Manager, VIC
Donald Mc Gauchie	Chairman, Telstra
Gavin Murray	Head of Sustainability, ANZ
Sue Natrass	Interim CEO Opera House
Maurice Newman	Chairman, ASX
Susa Priivald	Area Manager, DOCs
Dr Arthur Rickards	MD, ABRI, NSW
Jan Stewart	CEO, Lotteries Commision, WA
Horst von Sanden	MD, Mercedes Australia
Sue Vardon	CEO, Dept. of Family and Community Services, SA.

Participants in 2004 Honours Research

Nuno D'Aquino	Former Deputy CEO, Fosters Group
David Butcher	CEO, World-wide Fund for Nature
John Cloney	Chairman, QBE Insurance
Greg Combet	Secretary, ACTU
Peter Cosgrove	Chief of the Australian Defence Force
Lynda Dean	CEO, TP Health (Formerly Thursday Plantation)
Michael Hawker	CEO, IAG
Christine Nixon	Chief Commissioner Victoria Police
Elizabeth Proust	Managing Director, Esanda
Anne Sherry	CEO, Bank of Melbourne, and Group Executive for Human Resources, Westpac.
Keith Williams	CEO, Proteome Systems