Rethinking Elite Interviews Through Moments of Discomfort: The Role of Information and Power

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Abstract
Interviews with policy and political officials are central in social science research. While these actors are traditionally conceived as elites, holding similar or more power and information compared to the researcher, a growing body of research documents that elite constitutes a variable category. We argue that researchers can glimpse the dynamic nature of power and information elites hold in moments of discomfort that arise throughout interview research. These moments illustrate the shift that takes place when the expectations of the elites regarding the researcher’s perceived resources shape the conditions of the production of knowledge. We call for problematizing professional status as the main marker of elite category in fieldwork preparation and training, as labeling people on a single marker of identity shapes how researchers conceive and approach them. The article presents examples from three moments of discomfort by focusing on recruitment of and social interaction with officials working on diaspora policy in Cameroon.

Keywords
elite interview, studying up, researching up, moments of discomfort, information, power

Introduction
Elite interviewing is among the most widespread research methods within social sciences. These interviews are particularly central in political science and policy research that examines political institutions, processes, and decisions. Elite interviews allow obtaining the perspectives of those that play central political roles and tracking the processes that lead to key political decisions (Richards, 1996; Kapiszewski et al., 2015; Duke, 2002; Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Boucher, 2017). Researchers often use the terms researching or studying up to describe elite research as an indicator of the power asymmetry between the researcher and the researched (Marx & Treharne, 2018; Desmond, 2004; Neal & McLaughlin, 2009). In this view, the elites maintain considerable power during interviews. Accordingly, researchers offer practical advice and recommendations on how to negotiate the unequal power relations based on their experience of accessing and interviewing elites (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Richards, 1996; Liu, 2018; Nir, 2018; Cochrane, 1998; Rice, 2010). Political scientists Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, the editors of Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods, in their foreword to Lee Ann Fujii’s book Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach also refer to studying up and describe it as “engaging professionals and policy elites who are as, if not more, powerful than the researcher” (Lee Ann Fujii 2018, xii).

In Canada, where we live, study, and work, the evaluation of the ethical aspects of research involving human participants follows the guidelines set out in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Government of Canada, 2018) which is a joint policy of Canada’s three federal research agencies. In this policy, the...

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word ‘elite’ appears only once, and the wording below illustrates how the elites are conceived:

In some cases, participants hold equal or greater power in the researcher-participant relationship, such as in community-based and/or organizational research when a collaborative process is used to define and design the research project and questions, or where participants are public figures or hold other positions of power (e.g., research involving economic, social, political or cultural elites) (Government of Canada, 2018, 135).

This conception has long been the traditional narrative in elite interviews. At the same time, several critical accounts regarding the role of power and information in elite research have emerged (Lancaster, 2017; Smith, 2006; Boucher, 2017; Neal & McLaughlin, 2009; Duke, 2002; Woods, 1998; Mason-Bish, 2018; Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte, 2018). Without doing away with the concept of elites, the accounts call for a consideration of the variable and dynamic nature of ‘elites’ as a category. Smith (2006) observes that the identification of certain individuals as ‘elite’ often relies on taken for granted assumptions about power. As indicated by Shai (2020, 5): “The power inherent in political or traditional leadership is not necessarily congruent with wealth or privilege”. Woods (1998) notes that elites are imagined, existing in a vertical relationship with the ordinary people. Conceiving elites simply as members of institutional units, for example, strips the term from its capacity to analyze the embeddedness of power, such as who can exert it and how (Duke, 2002).

Furthermore, the belief that power held by individuals can be transferred across contexts is questionable (Smith, 2006). These assumptions regarding unequal, asymmetric and static positions between the researcher and the elite interviewee, according to Mason-Bish (2018), leads to an “elite delusion” as it fosters preconceptions in the researchers regarding how they should access and interact with the research participants.

Previous studies that examine policy and political actors illustrate that one-size-fits-all strategies hardly work for accessing and interviewing elites (Nir, 2018, Sowatey & Tankebe, 2019). Elites are not only powerful, but they can be vulnerable as well. Mostly using reflexivity and positionality as critical tools (L. ee A. nn. Fujii 2018), researchers illustrate that elites are not as monolithic as they are claimed to be (Glas, 2021). They may worry about being exposed, be concerned about the adequacy of their level of knowledge, and experience personal and emotional impacts of policy, especially in controversial policy domains such as drugs, multiculturalism or hate crimes (Smith, 2006; Duke, 2002; Neal & McLaughlin, 2009; Lancaster, 2017; Mason-Bish, 2018).

Furthermore, while research with elites pose ethical and methodological challenges in all settings and negotiating access and establishing trust come with difficulties, these issues are often exacerbated outside of democratic contexts (Morse, 2018; Janenova, 2019; Reny, 2016). Researchers who conducted elite interviews in Sub-Saharan Africa document the importance of informal social networks, interpersonal relations as well as deference towards policy actors (Sowatey & Tankebe, 2019; Morse, 2018; Gokah, 2006). In authoritarian settings, elites may try to control the researcher’s agenda and objectives (Janenova, 2019).

Based on fieldwork that centered around conducting interviews with government officials working on diaspora policy in Cameroon, we build on this critical literature and argue for a dynamic conception of power and information in elite interviews. We suggest that researchers can glimpse the dynamic nature of power and information elites hold in moments of discomfort (The Critical Methodologies Collective, 2022; Lindberg & Eule, 2020), which arise during recruitment of and social interaction with policy and political officials. We present examples from these moments that illustrate elite interviews as fluid relationships of knowledge production that are shaped by shifting power and information dynamics. Our account highlights the shift that takes place when the expectations of the elites regarding the researcher’s perceived resources (money, information, time, influence) shape the conditions of the production of knowledge. This focus contributes to the growing literature that calls for variable conceptions of elites. Doing so, we call for problematizing professional status as the main marker of elite category in fieldwork preparation and training, as labeling people on one marker of identity shapes how researchers conceive and approach them (Mason-Bish, 2018).

This article proceeds as follows: The next section offers theoretical clarifications regarding our approach to elite interviews. The third section describes the objectives of research and diaspora policy. The fourth section explains the Cameroonian political regime as well as the first author’s experience with the diaspora policy. Afterwards, we present our findings regarding the analytical value of examining moments of discomfort based on the first author’s experiences with actual and potential participants.

**Theoretical approach**

There is increased attention to the conduct and content of interviews in policy research regarding how researcher assumptions and identity affect the production of knowledge. Policy researchers and political scientists not only question the treatment of methods as neutral instruments (Schwartz-Shea, 2019), but also call for making the production of knowledge more transparent and visible to other researchers (Elman, Gerring, and Mahoney 2020). Researchers who conduct elite interviews generally responded to this call by employing reflexivity and positionality as critical tools (Duke, 2002; Neal & McLaughlin, 2009; Lancaster, 2017; L. ee A. nn. Fujii 2018; Mason-Bish, 2018; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020; Glas, 2021). As critical and ongoing self-examination during research process, reflexivity means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation (Berger, 2015, 220).
Questioning assumptions about power relations and positions of power when interviewing elites is an example of employing reflexivity (Glas, 2021; Smith, 2006; Mason-Bish, 2018; Duke, 2002; Neal & McLaughlin, 2009). Researchers illustrate the impact and relevance of insularity, gendered power dynamics and differences in prestige and status when interviewing elites. Reflexivity also involves how the positionality of the researcher, such as their personal characteristics, multiple overlapping identities or theoretical perspectives, shape the research process from access to elite participants to the interaction during the interview (Tomkinson 2015a, 2015b; Lee A. nn. Fujii 2018). Intersectionality offers a useful lens to examine the issues tied to positionality. The practice of gaining access and interacting with participants is shaped by layered social and political identities that are a source of discrimination or privilege, advantage or disadvantage, empowerment, or oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Zinn & Dill, 1996; Runyan, 2018). Individuals occupy various social locations simultaneously. Their myriad intersecting identities layer together, and shape lived experiences.

During the fieldwork, the researcher must problematize the notion of “home”, which can be complex as they hold an intimate knowledge of the field and its population (Mandiyanike, 2009). The dichotomous understanding of insider - outsider status does not reflect the conditions of the field, where identities are socially constructed, context contingent, multiple and changing and transformed by dynamics of power (Cho et al., 2013). The researcher is therefore, even in their own country of origin, even when they share multiple identity markers such as gender, race, and nationality, are in an intermediary position that results in a diversity of positionalities based on their degree of socialization with the field and its population (Banks, 1998; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). These multi-positionalities are based on assumptions and impressions that vary over time and are maintained by both the researcher and the participants in the research (Johnstone, 2019). Employing these analytical tools, therefore, means a continuing practice of gaining access and interacting with participants is shaped by layered social and political identities that are a source of discrimination or privilege, advantage or disadvantage, empowerment, or oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Zinn & Dill, 1996; Runyan, 2018). Individuals occupy various social locations simultaneously. Their myriad intersecting identities layer together, and shape lived experiences.

These reflections illustrate that interviewing implies a social relationship that extends beyond the research encounter. Practicing reflexivity on positionality and power means taking research participants as actors embedded in their political, social, and cultural environment, who shape relations of power in their local context and the research process (ShaniNwabisa, 2020; Lian, 2019). They are also viewed as the custodians of insider information that can help researchers build causal narratives, flesh out case studies, and write oral histories (Morse 2019, 278). Given that what makes elites is their knowledge and power (Littig, 2009), we advance these reflections through a scrutiny of the fluid nature of these dynamics in elite interviews. In other words, since these are the main assumptions behind labeling some interviews as elite interviews our focus will be on these two aspects.

There are various definitions of what constitutes elite status and the many attempts to redefine the term indicates the contested nature of determining who is elite and who is not (Smith, 2006, 646, Solarino & Aguinis, 2021). In this article, we adopt a political perspective and understand elites as a group of people who hold or have held a privileged position in society and influenced political processes and outcomes more than the general members of the public. This understanding requires a deeper reflection on dynamics of power.

The power relations between the researcher and the participant are unstable and complex (Pile, 1991). In this respect, many researchers, particularly from the feminist tradition, have called for a greater consideration of power relations in qualitative research (England, 1994; Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Bondi, 2003). The existence of an abundant literature reporting particularly complex debates between diverse and varied interpretations, make the concept of power, one of the most contentious concepts in social sciences (Few, 2002). Power can be defined from a structural point of view as “an inscribed capacity, something which is appropriated by particular individuals or organizations”; or from a post-structural perspective “as something more diffuse and mobile that is exercised not appropriated and that continually circulate” and allows “more possibility for the role of individual agency” (Smith, 2006, 644–645). In line with the reflections regarding intersectionality and positionality, we understand positionality in the post-structuralist sense. We do not take the nature and the scope of power and information for granted either. We perceive power and information as relational that depend on the relationship between social actors. As clarified by Alvesalo-Kuusi and Whyte (2018, 149), “(w)e cannot say that one individual or group or institution is powerful unless its power is defined in relation to other, less powerful, individuals, groups, or institutions”. We propose that knowledge and power traditionally attributed to policy elites are multiple, fluid and changing.

Our departure point is that qualitative research process is filled with moments of discomfort. These situations can occur at any stage of the research process, starting from defining the subject of the research, conducting the fieldwork, analyzing the data to communicating research results to different audiences. While qualitative researchers previously argued that discomfort occurring during data collection can be understood and examined as data (Wellings, Patrick, and Kirsti 2000), more recent work emphasizes their analytical value broadly. These moments of discomfort, or ‘accidental’ moments as coined by L. A. Fujii (2015), can allow deeper understandings of the social and political world, in which the interviewees and researcher are embedded. Similarly, we see moments of discomfort as opportunities for knowledge production that allow a careful consideration of the ethics and politics of the research process (The Critical Methodologies Collective, 2022; Lindberg & Eule, 2020; Tomkinson, 2015a). Following this call, we interrogate moments of discomfort that arose during the first author’s doctoral fieldwork on governmental elites who worked on Cameroonian diaspora policy. In the
next section, we explain the research, policy, and political context.

Research objectives and policy context

During the last decade, many African countries have developed public policies aimed at harnessing the resources of their diasporas in their socioeconomic development efforts (Plaza & Ratha, 2011; Ratha et al., 2011; Chacko & Gebre, 2012; Adepoju, 2007). In the same vein, international organizations such as the World Bank have conveyed the idea that the diasporas hold significant promises for the socio-economic development of developing countries (Turner & Kleist, 2013). The aim of the first author’s doctoral research was to examine how the capitalization of the potential of the diaspora for development has become an object of public policies in Cameroon. The focus was on understanding through which mechanisms this idea disseminated and identifying the circumstances of its placement on the governmental agenda by political actors. Therefore, while the research project concentrated on a single country, the authors were aware that the actors and organizations involved in the diaspora policy were multiple, such as former and current civil servants from ministries and public agencies, members of parliament, experts, and professionals from international and non-governmental organizations.

Consti tutional debates about the Cameroonian political regime illustrate its contested nature. Observers agree that presidentialism is its anchoring character (Olinga, 2006; Tcheuwa, 2003; Ondoa, 2002; Miscoiu & Kakdeu, 2021). The political system of Cameroon as well as the reflections of other researchers focusing on the African continent illustrate that the politico-administrative context is deeply marked by concealment and the fear of expressing opinions on public policy or on societal issues (Ngo Mayack, & Josiane, 2020; Ouédraogo, 2016). Within this context, what will be disclosed to and concealed from the outsiders becomes a delicate political exercise. This did not come as a surprise to the first author who enjoyed an insider-outsider status (ShaiNwabisa, 2020; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) as he had worked as a civil servant in the Ministry of External Relations before he started his PhD in early 2017 in a Canadian university. He was part of the working group responsible for monitoring and evaluating the Management of Cameroonians living abroad program. The internal evaluation of the program performance indicated mixed results. In this regard, the working group was unable to claim that the program was successful. As a result, instead of announcing unsatisfactory results to decision-makers, working group members withheld information from other stakeholders. These officials (the first author included) feared that by making the sub-optimal performance results accessible, they would risk the program being terminated or merged into another program by the Interministerial Programs Evaluation Committee. This example illustrates the threat of not obtaining accurate information from policy and political actors in elite interviews, a danger that has been previously documented in the literature (Morse, 2018; Janenova, 2019; Gokah, 2006).

Method and Limitations

This research project is based on fifteen semi-structured interviews with diverse policy actors, such as former and current civil servants from ministries and public agencies, members of parliament, experts, and professionals from international and non-governmental organizations. The participants are or were members of organizations that have potentially contributed to the emergence and institutionalization of the diaspora option in Cameroon. Some were nominated by their administrations and others were referred to the researcher because of the role they have played and their expertise in the diaspora option in Cameroon. Some of the identified participants had changed jobs or retired by the time of the fieldwork. Even though the aim of this research project was not to establish “the truth” (Richards, 1996) regarding the diaspora policy, capturing the knowledge of potential research participants was vital. Therefore, we held doubts about data reliability and the willingness of elite interviewees, especially of those from the Ministry of External Relations, to offer uncensored accounts of policy. Even though the research project did not focus on the success or the failure of the diaspora policy, as we expected, they were hesitant to communicate information that they considered critical for the maintenance of the policy. Furthermore, the same doubts were relevant for the potential interviewees from other ministries who were willing to have more influence on the policy. Since our focus was not on how elites construct policy and justify their policy preferences (Lancaster, 2017), we might have missed opportunities in the examination of policy development from this perspective. However, as this article seeks to illuminate the dynamics of power and information by scrutinizing the moments of discomfort during research process with elites, our focus is not on the accuracy or the reliability of the information regarding diaspora policy.

Findings

In this section, by offering an examination of different moments of discomfort that arose during the research process, we illustrate the relational and changing aspects of power and information. It is important to indicate that we developed this conception by reflecting on what these moments of discomfort mean for elite status and interviewing. First, we document the control-seeking attitudes of some government elites vis-à-vis the researcher that illustrates the reticent elite who expects the researcher to echo their policy views. Afterwards, we reflect on an exchange the first author had with a potential research participant from a government department who demanded financial compensation for their involvement with the research. Finally, we reflect on how the insider-outsider status of the first author has shaped the planning and the format of the
interviews. Our examples document that during the research process, between the researcher and the researched elite, who holds power and information shifts rather than remaining stable. Finally, our findings suggest that institutionally similarly situated elites may have varying assessments of their power and that of the researcher. It is likely that elite interviewees present variable appraisals of the researcher, seen as someone who can help spread their agenda to government officials to being insecure about the interaction.

**Attempts To Control Research Objectives And The Researcher’s Agenda**

This first moment of discomfort shows that outside democratic contexts, in which elites are hesitant to express their policy opinions, they might project their power to the researcher to influence policy makers through the research findings. The researcher can be coopted as the voice of the reticent government official; the elites seek to direct this voice in a direction that aligns with their expectations. The feelings of discomfort that come from elites trying to control the research agenda have been documented before (Janenova, 2019; Mikecz, 2012; Morris, 2009). However, the example below on such a moment of discomfort highlights an inversion of the balance of power in favor of the researcher. Indeed, the non-democratic and authoritarian political context where the elite is embedded is a vulnerable situation where they develop expectations of the researcher, whom they consider to be protected by the academic and scientific nature of work. In this respect, the elite actor encourages the researcher to carry the discourse of the reticent voices stifled within the political-administrative apparatus. Our observation complements the narrative of elite control of the research agenda by noting a motivation related to the political context that prevents elites from openly assuming their policy views.

Since the doctoral project of the first author was quite specific, his focus for knowledge production was on targeted elite interviews. He personally knew some of the potential participants as he had worked alongside them at the Ministry of External Relations. In that sense, informal social networks as well as professional ones were vital for the recruitment of participants (Morse 2019; Sowatey & Tankebe, 2019). The government elites that he knew prior to his PhD adopted two postures: reluctance or eagerness. The first group questioned him about his willingness to take up the implementation and the evaluation of diaspora policy, which were very far from his research subject. These participants felt that his dissertation should address the institutional constraints that prevent the diaspora policy from reaching its objectives. However, the research objectives were limited to the emergence and institutionalization of the diaspora policy. He therefore had to re-specify his research question to the participants by insisting that while he found these concerns very important, his work did not intend to respond to all issues raised by the policy.

The second group of senior officials were eager and enthusiastic to take part in research. The following excerpt is illustrative in presenting this approach “ […] This is the type of research that is needed in this country to make our government understand the importance of the diaspora for the development of the country” (Interview with government official, January 6, 2020). Again, far from being the purpose of the doctoral research, this comment exemplifies the power of elite participants as they try to shape the researcher’s agenda. The first author responded within the similar lines and explained the purpose of his presence, clarified his role as an academic researcher and emphasized that the participants were free to consult and use research findings that provide them with relevant evidence to convince their organizational superiors. As reminded by Janenova (2019, 2) regarding her research with civil servants in Kazakhstan:

Public administration research is highly discouraged in a nondemocratic state as it presents potential risks for career implications of senior officials. The nature of an authoritarian context influences and shapes the behavior of the government officials: They tend to talk within the scripts of the official statements, an independent media and strong civil society do not exist, and critical voice is suppressed. In such a challenging environment, researchers learn to navigate informal rules and relationships.

The participants who were still in office were reluctant to share information compared to retired officials and elites from international and non-governmental organizations. The participants were familiar with scientific research, and they had apprehensions about the impact that this research could have on them or on their organization. As pointed out by Ngo Mayack (2020), the local researcher must remain cautious and focused on his research question to avoid being instrumentalized by the interests of the participants to navigate the research process firmly and professionally. In the field, therefore, the first author had to constantly negotiate his insider-outsider position with these elites (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, ShaiNwabisa, 2020). His previous experience allowed him to understand their reluctance to share information as an insider and to examine it as an outsider.

**Asking For Monetary Compensation For Research Participation**

In this section, we will reflect on a moment of discomfort that was unexpected: one of the potential participants that the first author reached out to asked for monetary compensation for their time. Initially, we had identified him as a potential participant since he was working at one of the Ministries involved in the diaspora policy. The consent form sent to all potential participants clearly indicated that participation in the research does not involve financial benefits. Among the benefits and advantages for research participants, we had identified an opportunity to reflect on and discuss their own
experience regarding the emergence and institutionalization of Cameron’s diaspora policy. In addition, it was specified that the research could be valuable for the participants as it gives them the opportunity to specify the role and the place of their organization and to illustrate its contribution to diaspora policy. After agreeing to be interviewed and receiving the research consent form through email, the participant inquired if there was any monetary compensation for his involvement with the research. The first author responded that the ethics certificate granted by his research institution was based on voluntary participation and that he was not allowed to offer such financial compensation. Afterwards, this potential participant completely stopped communicating with the first author. Below we reflect on the context and the significance of this experience.

Offering monetary incentives to research participants remains a source of controversy in research ethics (Largent & Lynch, 2017). It is one of the issues that need to be taken into consideration as a component of the consent process. The Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement “neither recommends nor discourages the use of incentives” and notes that “Where incentives are offered to participants, they should not be so large or attractive as to encourage reckless disregard of risks” (Government of Canada June 2021, 6). In other words, the interpretation of policy leaves these considerations to the discretion of researchers and the Research Ethics Boards (REBs) of their academic institutions who often struggle with evaluating the suitability of incentives and reimbursement (Vellinga et al., 2020).

Establishing appropriate level of payment for research participation is an ongoing concern, while offering research participants too much money could lead to undue inducement, offering them too little money could result in exploitation. Some others insist that “monetary incentives to people can backfire by overall reducing intrinsic motivation, in this instance intrinsic motivation to behave altruistically or undertake civic duties” (Zutlevics, 2016). For Largent and Lynch (2017) in the United States, many REBs adopt an extremely cautious approach to payments to research participants and have a payment conservatism- keeping payments too low—considering higher payments could lead to coercion and undue influence. However, small incentives can lead to the exploitation of people who are vulnerable because of their socioeconomic status and needs that may prompt them to participate in research. Monetary incentives are particularly questionable when the risks associated with the research are high or when the participants find themselves in a dependency relationship with the researcher (Vellinga et al., 2020).

In the moment of discomfort we are treating, the question was not necessarily about whether monetary incentives were ethical or not and under what conditions. It rather pertained to us not even considering reimbursing research participants that we had identified as elites for their time. While we cannot speculate on why the potential participant asked for reimbursement or why he stopped responding communication requests but we can reflect on the dynamics of power. Our reflection on the moment of discomfort that arose after the potential participant’s inquiry regarding the monetary incentive and his reaction to the lack of reimbursement, was an accidental moment, as described by L. A. Fujii (2015).

“Once the researcher begins to pay closer attention to accidental moments, she might begin to make discoveries. She might become aware of expectations she did not know she had. She might notice the different ways that people type her” (L. A. Fujii 2015, 527).

The moment provokes questions about the potential participant’s perception of the researcher as a public servant placed on leave who completes a PhD at a Canadian university. In the Cameroonian context, such a status carries with it the presumption of financial affluence, which the participant may wish to benefit from, including deciding to withdraw from the research to put pressure on the researcher to comply with the financial requests. This example illustrates the embedded and relational character of power during the research process. “Research ethics is not something coming to us from out there” but very much tied to the interpersonal relations and issues “of power, knowledge, agency, (individual and collective) identity, and control, to name but a few” (Roth, 2005, para.10). However, research ethics protocols overlook the relational aspect of power, or their focus is mostly on protecting the potentially vulnerable participants but often they are silent on research with elites.

Informality and Information Seeking On Canadian Universities And Immigration Programs

Previous research documented the challenges of conducting research for researchers employed in the Global North in their country of origin located in the Global South (Goduka, 1990). Familiarity with the context or sharing the same identity markers as race, nationality and gender as the research participants does not guarantee easy access to interviewees, especially when the target population of the research face vulnerabilities (Miryoga, 2019). This might result in accesses and positionalities challenges for the researcher (Johnstone, 2019; Mwangi, 2019).

Our last examples pertain to how the first author’s insider-outsider status has shaped the planning and the conduct of elite interviews. These examples document the role of informality in elite interviewing in weak institutional contexts (Morse, 2018) where informal interpersonal relations are the cultural norm rather than formal official ones. On one hand, they show how some elites try to instrumentalize interviews for their own benefit by seeking information from the researcher that are not related to the research but also the dynamic and fluid nature of power and information.

While being familiar with research participants could facilitate access and recruitment, it can also shape the logistics of elite interviews. Two retired senior officials, with whom the first author had collaborated with while they were still in office, insisted that the interviews take place in their homes since they wanted to lunch have together. The first author
suggested instead that the interviews take place at the office he rented for the fieldwork. They declined the offer and reiterated their invitation. The first author could not refuse this request since it could have potentially meant not being able to conduct interviews with these two key actors who had succeeded each other as the head of the service responsible for steering the policy on diaspora. In both cases, the interviews did not go smoothly due to numerous interruptions and an excessively relaxed atmosphere. Before the end of the interview, the two participants ultimately understood the researcher’s apprehensions regarding the informal conduct of the interviews. Both participants suggested resuming interviews the next day based on the researcher’s availability. It is crucial, therefore, for the researchers to maintain a certain distance from the participants when they are in a familiar terrain, by adopting postures that place them neither very close nor very far from the research participants (Sowatey & Tankebe, 2019; Morse, 2018). We find these dynamics instructive for researchers whose research entails collecting data principally from elites.

Almost half of the participants, especially senior officials, requested information on different immigration programs in Canada, especially for skilled workers and students, at the beginning of the interview. Some wanted to put the first author in touch with friends or relatives who were interested in immigrating to Canada. To maintain the conviviality of the discussions and not to frustrate the participants, he informed them of his availability to discuss these topics in detail after the interview, subject to time constraints. However, he avoided promising to meet their friends or relatives who wanted more information on how to immigrate, study and work in Canada even though it is understandable why the researcher might be tempted to make promises following requests from participants (Ngo Mayack, & Josiane, 2020). It is therefore important for the researcher to act strategically: to downplay his power regarding the information they hold, show deference and tact to safeguard access and ensure a constructive interview (Gokah, 2006).

The first author’s status as a civil servant, especially when he interviewed current and former civil servants from the Ministry of External Relations, was not always a boon in the field. These interviewees were apprehensive about their proximity to their research field both in terms of the subject matter of the research and in terms of some of the sites of investigation such as the ministries. This additional level of complexity placed him in a hybrid insider - outsider status (van Hooft, & Christine, 2019) as he shared various characteristics with some interviewees, namely the civil servants. However, he remained an outsider regarding other characteristics - as an expatriate, a graduate student, a researcher in a foreign university. This shows that he was no longer perceived as belonging to a community or organization in which they have served. Previous professional or academic relationships or identification with one’s research participants can, depending on the context, facilitate or hinder data collection and interpretation.

**Conclusion**

Through our focus on the researcher’s relationships with potential and actual research participants during moments of discomfort, our article contributes to the growing body of research on how researchers should understand and prepare for interviews with elites. We believe that moments of discomfort are analytically informative especially in the study of sensitive or politicized topics (Lindberg & Eule, 2020; Lancaster, 2017). Our analysis on power and information has mainly treated the issues of recruitment and interaction. We documented that information seeking attempts of elites from the researchers can also be examined by analyzing the timing, the type of information sought, and the incentive offered.

This article adds to the growing body of research that offers insights on elite interviewing. It sheds light on the dynamics of information and power by focusing on moments of discomfort that arise during the research process. The examples we offer illustrate the dynamic and fluid nature of information and power held by researchers and the elite research participants. Accidental moments’ that create discomfort are opportunities for the researchers to better understand the context of their research as well as their own positioning within that context. Those moments allow the researchers to have access to how people make sense of the world around them, on the one hand, and how power and authority can make one set of meanings prevail at the expense of others, on the other hand (L. A. Fujii 2015). Elites’ expectations of the researcher’s perceived resources influence the production of knowledge. In this regard, the researcher must act strategically to minimize the impact of informality and how it is perceived by elites on the conduct of fieldwork. Moreover, this article highlights the need for researchers to problematize professional status as the primary marker of elite category in fieldwork preparation and training, as labeling people on a single identity marker has important influence on how researchers conceive and approach them. This understanding will help better preparation for fieldwork and navigating the process of elite interviewing. Our analysis is particularly relevant to qualitative researchers whose work entail collecting data principally from elites.

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