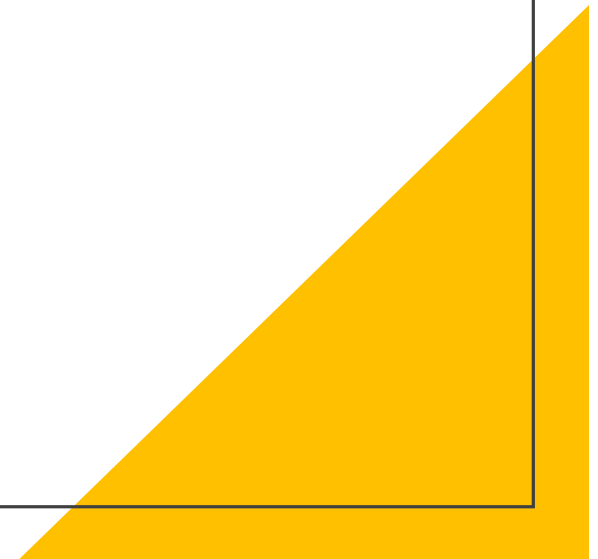
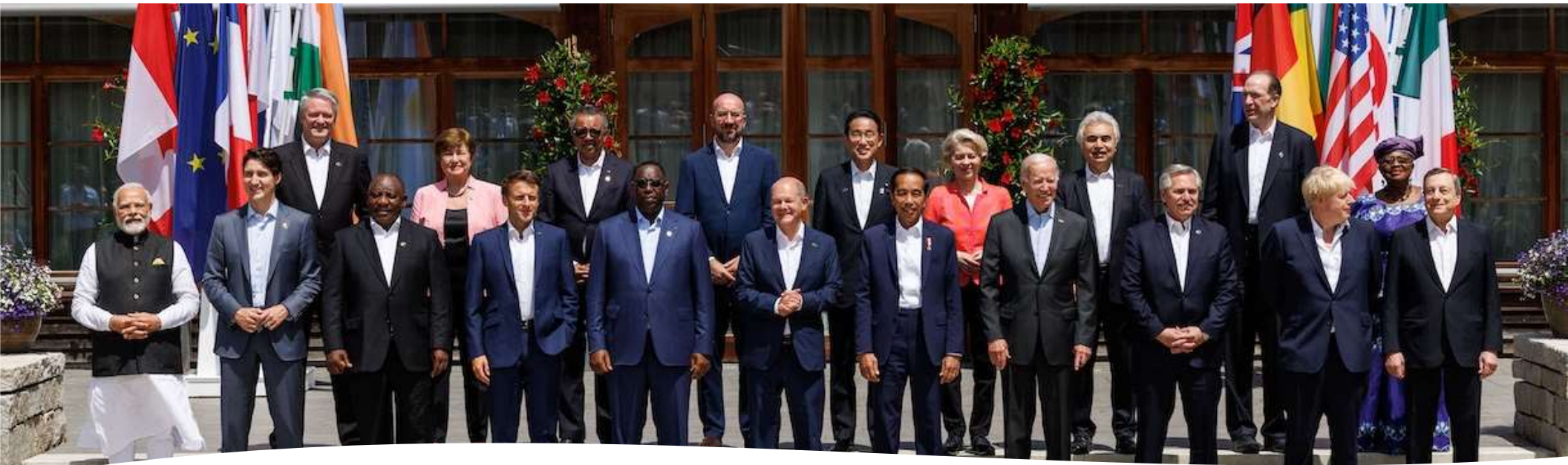




# Elite Interviews

Doing Political Research





## Who Are 'Elites'?

- No clear definition
- Those occupying a privileged social, economic or political position who can provide insights into institutions, processes and events which are difficult to discover in other ways
- Examples: elected politicians, senior government/NGO/IO officials, religious/community leaders
- Specific issues to address different to interviewing 'non-elite' research participants

# Why Interview Elites?



Corroborate what has been established from other sources



Establish what a set of leaders/senior officials think



Make inferences about a larger population's characteristics/decisions



Reconstruct an event or set of events



## Three sets of 'problems' with elite interviews...

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- *Practical problems*: how do you get access to elites? How do you interview them?
- *Philosophical problems*: how do you use them as a methodology? Empirical or interpretive? How might power relations affect the interview?
- *Analytical/presentational problems*: how do you analyse interviews/present them as findings? How do you use information given on condition of anonymity?



Practical  
problems:  
how do I  
get access  
to elites?



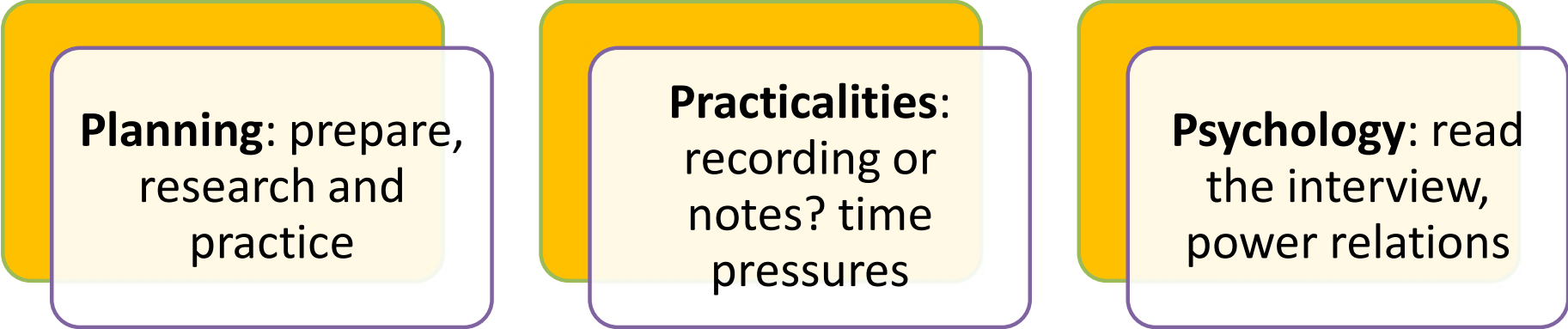
# The Approach

- Use status/institution?
- Flattery
- Use connections and snowball
- Be **clear** about timing, questions and topic
- Be **honest** on timing, questions and topic



May it please Your Majesty,  
I wish to inform you of an important  
occurrence I believe deserves your attention.

# How Do I Interview Them?



**Planning:** prepare,  
research and  
practice

**Practicalities:**  
recording or  
notes? time  
pressures

**Psychology:** read  
the interview,  
power relations

# The Questions

How should they be shaped?

Follow up?

Open or closed?

How to begin or end?



# Persistence

---

- How will you respond to
  - Avoiding answering a question?
  - Suspicion?
  - Digression?
- Listen to what is said and how it is said
- Reverse the order-or abandon it
- Prompt e.g. detail, elaborate/explain, return to a point

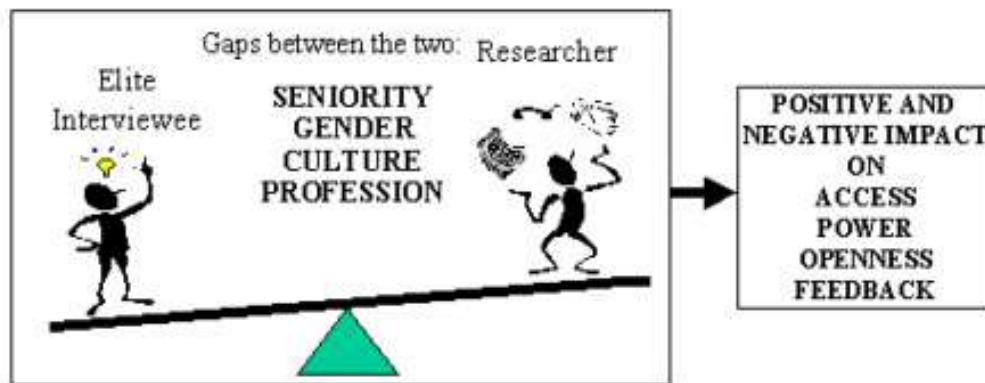
A photograph of two women sitting in red armchairs on a balcony, engaged in a conversation. The woman on the left is wearing a green blazer and the woman on the right is wearing a maroon dress. They are both gesturing with their hands. In the background, there is a blurred view of city buildings. A semi-transparent white circle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the title and a list of bullet points.

## Philosophical Problems

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- Interpretive or narrative approach?
- Facts or opinions?
- Central to research or providing colour?
- Triangulation with other methods?

# Power Relations?



**Figure 1.** Balancing act by the researcher in an elite interview.

Women's Studies International Forum 62 (2017) 99–106

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

**Women's Studies International Forum**

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wsfif](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsfif)

**Power in elite interviewing: Lessons from feminist studies for political science**

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**ARTICLE INFO**

**Article history:**  
Received 27 July 2016  
Received in revised form 1 May 2017  
Accepted 12 May 2017  
Available online 10 May 2017

**Keywords:**  
Elite interviewing  
Qualitative research methods  
Gender  
Feminist sociolinguistics  
Power

**ABSTRACT**

Power imbalances between participants are a central aspect of elite interviews. As feminist social scientists have argued, power imbalances can affect not only the practical structure of interviews, but also experiential and narrative dimensions of the relationship between interview parties. At present, there are limited means to concretely analyse power differentials in elite interviews. This article addresses this gap by drawing upon feminist sociolinguistics to develop an original "power index" to measure power in the elite interviewing context within the social sciences. The index is applied to interview text to explore its utility and develop a method that can be fruitfully extended in future studies. (308 words)

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**Introduction**

Elite interviewing is a key qualitative research method in the social sciences. Elite interviews are useful for the purposes of political biography and to ascertain the perspectives of those at the centre of political debates (Richards, 1996). Elite interviews also allow researchers to trace the policy process that underpins key political events (Leech, 2002; Tansey, 2007). Although elite interviewing is foundational to social analysis, mainstream accounts often lack critical reflection upon the issue of power and how it is refracted, pervades and potentially influences elite interviews. In contrast, some feminist social scientists have long argued that power relations are central to interviews, although generally the focus is upon the protection and empowerment of vulnerable interview subjects, rather than interviews with privileged elites (Le Acker et al., 1983; Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Cotterill, 1982; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Oakley, 1981; Olesen, 2005). More recently, feminist scholars focusing upon elite interviews have argued that female researchers may face inverted situations of power imbalance within elite interviews, and that certain strategies can be adopted to minimise control of interviews by respondents (Abels & Behrens, 2009; Puar, 1997).

Given this focus upon power, we should elucidate the term. Although rarely defined in the elite interviewing scholarship, it can be viewed as both situational and institutional. Power is held by an individual "where a certain proposed difference to significant outcomes can be made or resisted" by one person over the other (Lukes, 1986, p. 15, cited in Deem, 1994, p. 153). Accordingly, in the elite interviewing setting, power refers to the capacity of the interviewee to make or resist certain outcomes, with regard to responses to questions. The field of sociolinguistics centres on the analysis of social relations and power differentials, as reflected through language, and provides a useful tool to conduct a secondary analysis of elite interviews. Drawing upon and synthesising feminist sociolinguistics knowledge around language and power, this article develops a series of hypotheses about how language should look when a power relationship is in operation in an elite interview. The aggregate of powerful utterances of each participant in an interview is divided over the aggregate of powerless utterances in order to derive a "power ratio." A lower power ratio indicates less power in speech and a higher power ratio indicates more power. The difference in power ratios can be compared to ascertain the extent of a power imbalance between interview participants. The final section of this article applies the power index to one elite interview undertaken for a project on immigration policy-making, complemented by qualitative analysis of the same interview. Through a detailed analysis it demonstrates that the power ratio can be fruitfully applied as a tool to assess the power dynamics within elite interview material. The article thereby critically reflects upon these dynamics both for future interviews and for the interpretation and analysis of interview data.

Critical scholars have identified how gender may operate alongside class, educational status, race, ethnicity, disability and cultural context to shape interview power relationships (Bergvall, 1999; Marx, 2001; May, 2014; Orbach & Rinker, 2009). My focus on gender in this article

<sup>1</sup> That said, the focus on intersectional features is generally within the broader interview scholarship rather than elite interviews per se, see only Orbach & Rinker, 2009 for such a focus within political science.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsfif.2017.05.001>

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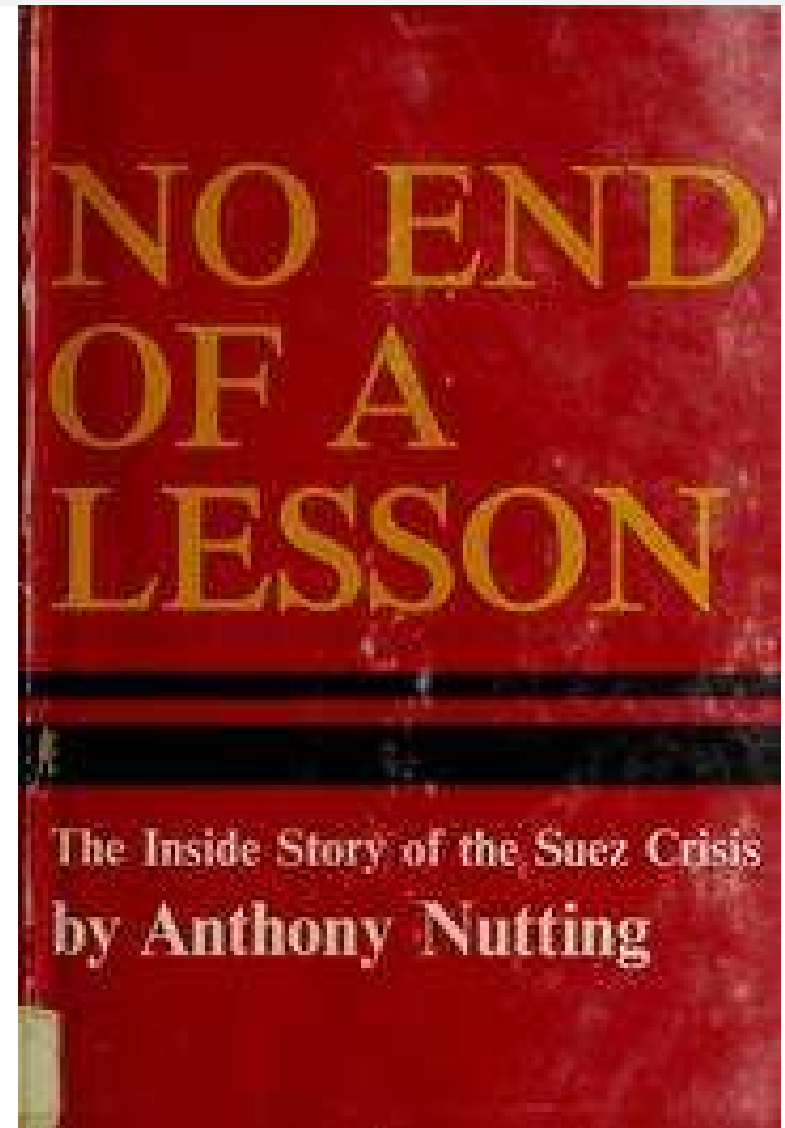
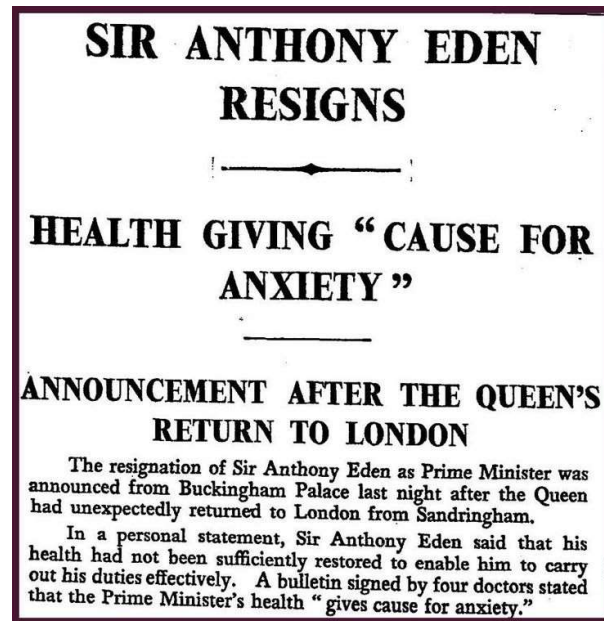
# Analytical Problems





Anonymity?  
On/off the  
record?

# The Suez conundrum (Lilleker)



# Conclusion

- Many methodological choices to make when interviewing: Who, where, how, positionality etc
- Interviewing elites presents extra difficulties: practical, philosophical and analytical
- But it is a very important method for researching certain questions
- Vital to prepare well and reflect on how design and implementation might affect your findings