

3-14-2020

How to Access Elites When Textbook Methods Fail? Challenges of Purposive Sampling and Advantages of Using Interviewees as “Fixers”

Esra Bakkalbasioglu

University of Washington - Seattle Campus, esra.bakkalbasi@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Models and Methods Commons](#), [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#), and the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Bakkalbasioglu, E. (2020). How to Access Elites When Textbook Methods Fail? Challenges of Purposive Sampling and Advantages of Using Interviewees as “Fixers”. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 688-699. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.3976>

This How To Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



How to Access Elites When Textbook Methods Fail? Challenges of Purposive Sampling and Advantages of Using Interviewees as “Fixers”

Abstract

Social science methods literature identifies gaining access as one of the main challenges of conducting elite interview research. However, the existing literature mostly fails to provide access strategies other than the “textbook” methods of sending email, letters, faxes, or making phone calls. Many researchers, especially the ones who conduct purposive sampling-based in elite interview research encounter various obstacles when they try to gain access to the potential interviewees. Especially in challenging research environments, textbook methods either fail the researchers using purposive sampling or considerably increase the time and energy spent to gain access to elite respondents. Drawing on the author’s own purposive sampling-based research in the Middle East, this article proposes an alternative access strategy adapted from journalism, using interviewees as “fixers.” This free-of-charge strategy not only shortens access time and decreases non-commitment of the potential elite interviewees, but also lends the researcher a partial insider status in the studied elite circle, and thus potentially enhances the quality of interviews.

Keywords

Elite Interviews, Interviewing Methodologies, Ethnographic Research, Purposive Sampling, Middle East

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the anonymous referees, Robert Pekkanen, Joel Migdal, Reşat Kasaba, and Semih Energin, for invaluable feedback.

How to Access Elites When Textbook Methods Fail: Challenges of Purposive Sampling and Advantages of Using Interviewees as “Fixers”

Esra Bakkalbasioglu

University of Washington – Seattle Campus, Washington, USA

Social science methods literature identifies gaining access as one of the main challenges of conducting elite interview research. However, the existing literature mostly fails to provide access strategies other than the “textbook” methods of sending email, letters, faxes, or making phone calls. Many researchers, especially the ones who conduct purposive sampling-based in elite interview research encounter various obstacles when they try to gain access to the potential interviewees. Especially in challenging research environments, textbook methods either fail the researchers using purposive sampling or considerably increase the time and energy spent to gain access to elite respondents. Drawing on the author’s own purposive sampling-based research in the Middle East, this article proposes an alternative access strategy adapted from journalism, using interviewees as “fixers.” This free-of-charge strategy not only shortens access time and decreases non-commitment of the potential elite interviewees, but also lends the researcher a partial insider status in the studied elite circle, and thus potentially enhances the quality of interviews. Keywords: Elite Interviews, Interviewing Methodologies, Ethnographic Research, Purposive Sampling, Middle East

The difficulties in conducting elite interviews¹—such as sampling, choosing venue and time, balancing power negotiations, self-presentation, constructing sound questions, getting answers, resisting manipulation, establishing rapport, and protecting the research and the researcher—are well-documented in the existing interview methodology literature (Beamer, 2002; Dexter, 1970; Hirsch, 1995; Mikecz, 2012; Ostrander, 1993). Moreover, researchers have shared best-practices and made various suggestions for sampling and interviewing to increase the quality of the data collected in elite interview research (Dexter, 1970; Harvey, 2011; Mullings, 1999). Developing interview skills are surely important for elite interview researchers; however, as Goldstein (2002) states, “none of these skills matter if you don’t get the interview” (p. 669). While, as Kezar (2003) and others (Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Hertz & Imber, 1995) generously emphasized on the centrality of access, I argue, as Herod (1999) puts it, “many standard texts on interviewing seem to assume that gaining access to institutions is relatively straightforward” (p. 315; see also Douglas, 1985; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Rubin, 1995). The existing elite interview literature recognizes the importance and difficulty of accessing the elites. Yet it does not provide any suggestions to researchers struggling with access-related problems.

Each sampling method has different levels of tolerance to non-response. In methods based on probability or convenience sampling (Tansey, 2007), researchers can easily replace a

¹ I use the term “elite” to define persons holding particular social, economic as well as political positions and power. Elites that I interviewed for my research were state and non-state agents holding key offices and making most of the decisions in the field I was researching.

non-respondent with another similar interviewee. Yet the cost of non-response is higher for researchers with more rigid samples, such as the ones using purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling, which is preferred, as Mikecz (2012) underlines, mostly by researchers who want to trace a process by interviewing a pre-defined and visible set of elites selected based on specific criteria, and necessitates researchers to access specific interviewees (Tansey, 2007). Elite interview researchers using purposive sampling make a list of the elites they want to interview before starting their research. As the research population is highly visible, for researchers using purposive sampling, finding the respondents' names and their professional contact details are relatively easy (Mikecz, 2012). Yet access is not always that straightforward. While researchers using snowball sampling get considerable help from their mediators to sample and access their respondents, researchers using purposive sampling are alone in their access effort. They need to contact and convince the potential interviewees to meet and talk to them. Besides, as the method depends on interviewing specific individuals, replacement of one interviewee with another one has a high potential cost on the research findings. In purposive sampling, sampling may be easier than many other methods, but it is definitely harder to access the sampled individuals.

The existing research methodology literature suggests the researchers trying to access to specific elites to send letters, emails, and faxes; or call the potential interviewee's office to explain the project and request the interview (Lilleker, 2003; Mikecz, 2012; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Ostrander, 1993; Peabody et al., 1990; Richards, 1996). However, recent works show that these textbook methods often fail researchers (Conti & O'Neil, 2007), particularly the ones conducting research in challenging environments (Denitch, 1972; Goode, 2010; Rivera et al., 2002; Roberts, 2013). In this article, I draw on my research experience in the Middle East to discuss access related problems encountered by researchers using purposive sampling and introduce an alternative access strategy, using interviewee-as-fixers, that I developed and used during my research.

At different points, I conducted interviews with political elites in Jordan, Israel, and Turkey. When I tried to access the names on my interviewee sample, I encountered a set of problems specific to accessing to a group of elites built through purposive sampling and exacerbated by authoritarian and volatile nature of the political environment in the Middle East. As a student researcher, I followed various methods of gaining access and often failed to secure interviews. In the following years, I develop a strategy, using interviewees as "fixers", to access political elites when conventional methods failed me. I argue that using interviewee-as-fixer strategy can help the researchers using purposive sampling to overcome their access related problem to a large extent by enabling faster access and partial insidership to their elite research group.

In presenting challenges of elite interview research and suggesting an access strategy to be coupled with purposive sampling, this article contributes to the existing literature on elite interviewing and the growing literature on conducting research in challenging political environments. While the interviewee-as-fixer strategy is useful for any researcher conducting purposive sampling, it is particularly helpful for researchers working in challenging environments or lacking pre-existing connections in their research field, researchers without institutional support or titles, and researchers lacking time or grant monies for a long field research, as well as any researchers who feel their positionality complicates their ability to make the first contact, including young, female, or foreign researchers.

The article proceeds as follows. Part I briefly introduces the most common challenges that researchers using purposive sampling encounter as they try to access elites on their sample. Part II discusses these challenges based on my own experiences among the political elites in the Middle East. Part III details the interviewee-as-fixer strategy as a way of minimizing disadvantages of access to a sample formed by purposive sampling. Part IV evaluates using the

interviewee-as-fixer strategy from a comparative perspective. By comparing interviewee-as-fixer to other strategies used by researchers using purposive sampling to access potential elite interviewees, it lays out the advantages as well as the potential shortcomings of this strategy and Part V concludes the article by bringing the previous parts together.

Characteristics of Elites

Existing methods for reaching potential elite respondents and securing interviews involve sending letters, emails, and faxes; or calling the potential interviewee's office to explain the project and request the interview (Lilleker, 2003; Mikecz, 2012; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Ostrander, 1993; Peabody et al., 1990; Richards, 1996). Researchers are assumed to significantly increase the chance of gaining access when they send informative letters to their targeted interviewees in advance, written on official stationery, and clearly outline the research agenda and the time the interview will take (Goldstein, 2002, p. 671). They are also encouraged to follow up their initial interview request by phone to establish a specific time and place for the interview (Peabody et al., 1990). While these methods may be sufficient for securing access in certain cases (Mikecz, 2012; Ostrander, 1993; Stephens, 2007), they fail to provide the expected results or work extremely slowly in many others (Conti & O'Neil, 2007; Denitch, 1972; Goode, 2010; Rivera et al., 2002; Roberts, 2013; Thomas, 1995).

Both Rivera et al. (2002) and Roberts (2013) underlined how the existing methods literature tends to focus on the context of advanced industrialized democracies, while saying very little on developing countries that might present more challenging research environments. Based on their research experience in Russia, Rivera et al. (2002) state that, they spent considerable research time making upwards of fifteen calls to arrange each one of their interviews. Roberts (2013) adds that even after securing the interview on the tenth or twentieth phone call, researchers can still fail to conduct the interview due to the widespread non-commitment among Russian political elites caused by the prevailing political context. The factors impeding access to political elites in Russia shows similarities across other challenging research environments. A survey conducted by Clark (2006) among American researchers working in the Middle East identifies that, similar to the Russia experience, the authoritarian political climate of the region causes various difficulties for researchers. Forty percent of the researchers surveyed for this project stated that they have experienced difficulties in obtaining interviews with key individuals (p. 418). The authors conducting elite interview research underline the following common characteristics of elites that make accessing the research sample highly challenging:

- a) Elites, both in developing as well as advanced industrialized countries, are considered to be the most difficult group to access as they are busy, and they have paid gatekeepers, such as assistants and secretaries to block outsiders (Conti & O'Neil, 2007; Ganga & Scott, 2006; Hertz & Imber, 1995; Kezar, 2003; Mikecz, 2012; Odendahl & Shaw, 2002; Ustad Figenschou, 2010).
- b) Elites in volatile or more authoritarian political settings are often more suspicious of researchers than their counterparts in advanced industrialized countries (Denitch, 1972). Fearing reprisals from superiors, or the loss of promotion, or the trust of their peers, they tend to abstain from giving interviews (Clark, 2006). In political settings with zero or little electoral accountability, elites may also tend to consider interviews time-consuming and unnecessary activities.
- c) Elites in some developing countries may be either not very familiar with or not as responsive to conventional interviewers' access methods of calling the

potential interviewee's office, sending emails to their work account, and faxing unlike their counterparts in advanced industrialized countries (Roberts, 2013). Where meetings are mostly arranged through personal connections, elites tend to ignore demands coming from outsiders.

Researcher's ability to access and secure interview with elite respondents is shaped by the above-listed common characteristics of elite groups which can be exacerbated by research context as well as the way researcher's positionality has been perceived. Every stage of interviewing elites calls into question positionality and power negotiations conducted between researchers and their respondents. The way researchers' positionality is perceived by their respondents potentially shape the quality of the interviews and information collected during the research. Multiple accounts underline that researchers' age, gender, ethnicity, race, or native language affects respondents' approach to them, the interview, the questions, and the research (Ganter, 2017; Herod, 1999; McEvoy, 2006; Mullings, 1999). Blix and Wettergren (2015) state that the research process significantly benefits when the researchers and the participants share similarities in terms of age, class, gender, ethnicity, and social status. While the interview process can give better hints on the effects of positionality on the research process and findings, it is harder to pinpoint how researcher's positionality affects their access to their potential respondents.

Some researchers who are outsiders to the research country or language do not encounter any difficulties in gaining access (Mikecz, 2012). Some even find their outsider status to be advantageous in gaining access to elites (Sabot, 1999). In some other cases, researchers find it difficult to access and interview elites who do not share their ethnic or linguistic background (Goode, 2010). While male researchers do not generally reflect on how their gender shapes their ability to access elites, there are various accounts from female researchers reflecting on how gender affects their access to mostly male elite circles, in some cases positively and in some other negatively (Reinhardt, 2009; Schwedler, 2006; Ustad Figenschou, 2010).

Researchers' ability to access elites is also highly predicated upon their personal status and institutional affiliation (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). In a 1993 study on access to elites, Parsons et al. concluded that inexperienced interviewers have higher gatekeeper refusal than experienced ones. While gender difference is statistically insignificant among experienced researchers, the same study shows that among the inexperienced researchers female interviewers have a higher gatekeeper refusal rate than male interviewers. Like any other researcher using purposive sampling, my access has been surely difficult and shaped by my elite respondents' characteristics as well as their perception of me.

Notes from the Field

Before my research in Jordan, I made a list of bureaucrats and politicians that I wanted to interview to delineate how different institutions approach the issue of renewable energy. Following the "textbook" suggestions of accessing elites (Goldstein, 2002; Harvey, 2011), I sent them emails detailing my research and requesting an interview. A week after the first round of emails, I sent follow-up emails. Later, I called my potential elite respondents' offices. Yet, I could not reach most of the names on my list. In multiple cases, I either did not get any response or was rejected by assistants. One of the key figures I wanted to interview was a high-ranking bureaucrat leading solar energy projects at the Jordanian Ministry of Energy. Conducting an interview with him was central to my research. After multiple emails and calls, I considered that his failure to respond might be related to my outsider status as a non-native Arabic speaker, or my positionality as a young, female Ph.D. student. Still hoping for access, I

asked help from a Jordanian friend who, I assumed, would have insider status, as a male Jordanian working for a ministry. My friend called the bureaucrat's office but could not get a positive response. Thinking it might be easier to arrange the interview in person, we went to his office at the Ministry, but his assistant rejected us by pleading the bureaucrat's busy meeting and travel schedule.

Of course, researchers' positionality and related insider or outsider status, are ever-shifting and permeable, as well as differentially experienced and expressed by members of the research community (Naples, 1996). As Chavez (2008) states, "a participant may draw us near as a member of the ingroup, but in the next moment, because of a social difference (gender, class, age, region) may distance herself from the researcher" (p. 478). The opposite is also possible. Later in the research, I conducted an interview with another bureaucrat working at the same ministry with my friend. At the very end of the interview, the bureaucrat asked if he could help me further. I mentioned that I had been, unsuccessfully, trying to reach a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Energy. He said he knew my targeted respondent personally and then he did something unexpected: he picked up his cellphone, called the bureaucrat, and arranged a meeting for me. Within an hour, I was interviewing the bureaucrat from the Ministry of Energy whose assistant blocked my interview requests for weeks. It was the longest and most fruitful interview of my research in Jordan. Before I left his office, the Ministry of Energy bureaucrat shook my hand and said he was happy to help "a friend's friend."

This experience taught me three important lessons. First, if your elite interview research is based on purposive sampling, non-response has a very high cost. If you want to gather information on the working of a specific decision-making structure or issue area you probably want to interview specific individuals. Not being able to reach them can significantly harm the strength of your research and robustness of your findings.

Second, if you conduct your research in challenging research environments, you will probably encounter more difficulty in accessing the elites in your purposive sample. Even though I emailed and called my potential interviewee's offices countless times, I failed to gain access to my targeted respondent. There might be multiple possible reasons for my failure. My targeted respondent might have decided to reject the interview based on my positionality as a young, female, Ph.D. student who is a foreigner. Yet my male Jordanian friend could not access him either. So maybe in this example positionality did not play an important role. He might have been reluctant to give an interview or considered it time-consuming and unnecessary. He might have been suspicious of researchers or fear reprisals from his superiors. Or maybe he never knew that I was trying to access him as his assistant did not communicate my request.

Third, it was possible to gain access to interview only when my initial interviewee who personally knew my targeted respondent called him and set the interview on my behalf. His gesture annulled potential negative effects of my positionality and gave me access to an interview that was a must for my research. Based on this experience, I developed an access strategy, using interviewees as fixers, making access to elites easier for researchers conducting purposive sampling based elite interview research, especially in challenging research environments.

Using Interviewees As "Fixers"

Based on my fieldwork experience, I argue that in using initial interviewees as fixers who contact potential interviewees and arrange the interview time and place, researchers using purposive sampling can significantly overcome their access-related challenges. Using fixers is a strategy mostly associated with journalism. Correspondents working in foreign countries generally work with local fixers who are paid to help them gain access to certain locations and people, while ensuring the journalist's safety. Fixers often work as mediators between

journalists and their subjects (Terry, 2011). They establish the first contact and secure the interview time and place on behalf of the journalist, yet they have a quite limited influence on the research content and interview process. Being an insider of the specific setting, fixers get paid to help the journalists to secure the desired interviewee(s) in a shorter time period with higher success rates (Sacco, 2003). I recommend a bona fide version of this strategy for social science researchers encountering access problems in their specific research environments.

I was a total outsider to the high-ranking bureaucrat from the Jordanian Ministry of Energy whom I was trying to interview. My initial interviewee who called him to arrange the interview on my behalf helped me to bypass the potential gatekeepers and provided me fast access. His call also shifted my positionality in the potential interviewee's eyes from outsider to partial insider, as he put it, to a "friend's friend." The fact that I got promoted by someone whom my interviewee considered as "one of them," significantly increased the time he spent for the interview and possibly improved the interview quality. It is also possible that this type of access prevented my respondents from making potentially inappropriate comments that many female researchers conducting elite interviews had to deal with during interviews conducted with male elites (Reinhardt, 2009; Ustad Figenschou, 2010).

By capitalizing on the initial interviewees' informal networks to access the names on the research sample, the interviewee-as-fixer strategy imitates the advantage of using a mediator that is intrinsic to snowball sampling without giving the mediator the power over the research sample formed based on purposive sampling strategy. Snowball sampling is preferred in cases where the researcher does not know exactly who to interview or when most of the members of research population are not easy to locate. In this sampling method, researchers rely on their initial interviewees as mediators/referrals (Koter, 2013; Lynch, 2013), not only to build their sample but also either give them access to potential interviewees. As Thuesen (2011) underlines, networks, social capital, and trust are paramount in gaining access to elites and the help of a powerful individual willing to facilitate access is essential to gain access to elites in many cases. In the case of interviewee-as-fixer strategy, using the initial interviewee(s) as insiders introducing the researcher to potential interviewees hastens access and gives the researcher a partial insidership without jeopardizing their sampling method.

Following my experience in Jordan, during my dissertation field research in Turkey, I mobilized my contacts and arranged interviews with two elites who were not in my initial research sample. As a "friend's friend," I was welcomed in these interviews. At the end of those first interviews, I asked my interviewees if they knew any of the elites on my list of targeted interviewees formed based on purposive sampling. Each one of my initial respondents personally knew some of the names. I asked if they could contact those people and help me arrange interviews with them. Both called a couple of the names from my sample that they personally knew and arranged the interviews on my behalf before I left their office. These two initial interviewees were my first fixers. With each interview, the number of my fixers increased.

Here is a list of suggestions for researchers using purposive sampling and want to implement the interviewee-as-fixer method. (1) You need to recruit your first couple of interviewees on your own. You can use textbook methods to access some of the names on your sample or you can rely on your existing connections to arrange your first interviews. If you fail to arrange any interview with names on your sample, you can target the second circle and conduct your initial interviews with names outside of, yet close to your targeted elite group. These interviewees can provide you insights about your target group and fix you interviews with the names from your sample. (2) Wait until the end of the interview to ask if your interviewee knows anyone from your sample and ask them politely if they would be willing to call them to help you to arrange the interview. Waiting until the end of the interview will prevent this mediator role from jeopardizing your interviewer-interviewee relationship. (3)

When you start an arranged interview, distance yourself from the fixer and establish an independent, one-to-one relation with your interviewee by assuring them of your impartiality. (4) Not every interviewee will accept to be your fixer and even if they do, they may not have success in their attempts to reach one of your targeted respondents and arrange the interview on your behalf. Do not forget that even if you succeed only a handful of times, you will save considerable research time and energy.

Elites tend to establish barriers that set them apart from society and hire gatekeepers to keep the researchers out. Thus, as Odendahl and Shaw (2002) argue, “the best entree to elite individuals for interviews is provided by members of the elites’ own group” (p. 307). Using interviewees as fixers not only helps the researcher using purposive sampling to gain access but also shifts the locus of access responsibility from the researcher to the elite fixer. As insiders to the studied elite circle, fixers can easily bypass the gatekeepers and reach the potential respondent in person. When contacted by a familiar colleague (the fixer), rather than an unfamiliar researcher, a potential interviewee feels an obligation to commit to the interview. Besides giving the researcher a fast track and free entrance ticket to the interview, using interviewees as fixers also contributes to the quality of the interview. The partial insidership that the researcher gains during the fixer-initiated access potentially works as an icebreaker, puts the interviewee at ease, and increases their trust in the researcher.

Under a Comparative Light

Researchers using purposive sampling constantly try to increase their percentage of access and reduce time spent to secure the interview time and place. Given that purpose, even conventional methods sometimes fail them, so some researchers hire assistants to help them access interviewees and set the interview time and place. Even though this strategy frees the researchers from spending considerable research time in writing letters, sending emails and faxes, or making calls to demand access, using assistants mostly fails to shorten access time or to provide access to elites who were initially reluctant to give interviews. Research assistants are mostly outsiders to elite circles as much as the researchers themselves. Thus, they encounter similar issues and their access is often blocked. Hiring assistants does not help the researchers to overcome common problems such as non-commitment and provide the researcher an insider status. Besides, hiring assistants necessitates a research budget that provides for their compensation which is not always possible for researchers, particularly those whose grants do not permit paying locals (Hertel et al., 2009).

To overcome the non-commitment problem, Petkov and Kaoullas (2016) used what they call “intermediaries” in their research. They define intermediaries as elite research participants with in-depth knowledge of the research project and inter-personal authority over the targeted respondents. Intermediaries not only formally introduce the researchers to the potential respondents but also accompany them to the interviews and get actively involved during the interviewing process. Intermediaries’ connections would potentially give the researchers a partial insidership and reduce the time they spend contacting interviewees and securing the interview time and place. However, using intermediaries can jeopardize reliability of the research in two ways. First, to recruit an elite intermediary to be present at each interview, researchers must have prior connections in the field and convince a well-connected elite (actual or former) to serve the role of the intermediary. Thus, it is only feasible for researchers conducting field research in highly familiar settings. Second, even though the intermediary’s presence at the interview reduces non-commitment problems, it curtails the researcher’s authority over the interview and harms their ability to establish independent relationships with the interviewees.

Interviewee-as-fixer helps researchers to overcome the main weaknesses of the above-mentioned access strategies. Contrary to hiring assistants or paying the intermediaries, researchers using their initial interviewees as their fixers do not pay them. Therefore, the method is suitable for researchers who do not have additional budget. Contrary to hiring “intermediaries”, interviewee-as-fixer strategy neither asks for extensive commitment of initial respondents nor jeopardize the interview process with the presence of the respondent who fixed the interview. It only takes a couple of minutes of the interviewees’ time to call their colleagues and set up the interviews. Yet by capitalizing on interviewees’ informal networks, connectedness, and reputation very briefly, researchers using their interviewees as “fixers” significantly increases the probability of gaining access and securing interview time and place very quickly. Therefore, the strategy is suitable for researchers who do not have previous connections in the research field or within the studied elite community as well as researchers who do not have time or budget for a long-term field research.

Despite its multiple strengths, interviewee-as-fixer strategy has some potential limitations. Being identified as the friend of a particular elite may backfire if the potential interviewee is not close to—or worse, has a tense or hierarchical relationship with—the fixer, yet feels obliged as the fixer is their colleague or boss, to say yes to the interview request. In this case, the interviewee may avoid answering some of the questions or giving detailed or sincere accounts. In this scenario, the researcher risks becoming a victim of the relationship between the initial and potential interviewees. However, since the fixer’s role is quite limited, ending once they set the interview time and place, researchers can easily disassociate from them and establish an independent relationship with each one of their respondents. Indeed, distancing themselves from their fixers at the very beginning of each interview is a good rule of thumb for every researcher using their interviewees as “fixers.” Researchers need to secure trust between them and their respondents by establishing themselves as independent researchers without personal connections to the prior interviewee, assuring interviewees of their impartiality, and showing their willingness to learn from the respondents (Leech, 2002).

A second potential limitation of the interviewee-as-fixer is that success of the strategy depends on the initial interviewee’s willingness to help the researchers and secure interview time and place for them. Fixing an interview for a researcher is a way for elites to show how well-connected and respected they are among their colleagues. For this reason, most elites are willing to help the researchers set up interviews. However, there is always the risk that a given interviewee will not be willing or able to help the researcher, especially if they do not know any of the people on the researcher’s list to interview. To minimize this limitation, researchers should increase the number of their potential fixers as much as they can with each interview. Diversification can help researchers minimize their dependence on certain elites and avoid putting the access burden on the shoulders of a single or few interviewees.

Another limitation of interviewee-as-fixer method is that, as stated earlier, using interviewees as fixers can only be used after the researchers establish their first contacts and conduct their first interview(s). To contact and secure their first interview(s), researchers can use textbook methods or activate their friends’ or colleagues’ contacts. If the first few interviewees are not from the target group but an adjacent one, researchers can use their initial interviews to familiarize with the research environment, test their questions, gather insights on the specific elite circle, and, most importantly, gain access to names in their sample. During my research, I made use of my friends’ contacts in my research field to access my first elite interviewees. While not in my sample, these initial interviewees gave me valuable insights on conducting research with elites in that particular political setting, they called their colleagues and fixed interviews with names on my sample. Even after the first interviews, researchers can continue to combine interviewee-as-fixer with conventional access methods to increase their chance to access more elite respondents in shorter time.

Conclusion

Interviewing elites is one of the most potent ways of learning about political and economic processes. Yet researchers conducting elite interview research face numerous obstacles in gaining access, and even more so if their research is based on purposive sampling and conducted in challenging research environments. In the absence of alternative strategies, researchers conducting elite interview research based on purposive sampling tend to stick with textbook methods, even when they are proven inefficient, highly time consuming, or simply fail. This article not only lays out the challenges of accessing elites for researchers using purposive sampling in challenging research environments but also provides an alternative strategy to overcome these difficulties. It, therefore, contributes to the established literature on elite interviewing and the emerging literature on the methodological difficulties of conducting research in challenging environments. It moves the conversation on elite interview research from recognizing the challenges of gaining access to theorizing and applying faster, more secure, and less expensive access strategies that can be coupled with purposive sampling.

Based on my elite interview research experience in the Middle East, I developed the interviewee-as-fixer strategy that helps researchers to set interviews with their potential elite respondents in a shorter time, free of charge, and with significantly higher commitment. Using interviewees as fixers also helps the researchers to gain partial insidership in their studied elite circle. Even though this strategy is based on my fieldwork in the Middle Eastern countries, it is suitable for accessing potential elite interviewees wherever researchers encounter access-related challenges.

Using interviewees as fixers is a highly feasible strategy, especially for researchers who do not have enough budget, connections, or institutional support; or who have a very limited time in the field and feel the negative impacts of their positionality in their specific research environment. Whichever group of elites they sample, it is imperative researchers using purposive sampling understand challenges of gaining access intrinsic to their sampling method and develop strategies to secure access in contexts where textbook methods fail them.

References

- Beamer, G. (2002). Elite interviews and state politics research. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 2(1), 86–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/153244000200200106>
- Chavez, C. (2008). Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 474–494. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol13/iss3/9/>
- Clark, J. (2006). Field research methods in the Middle East. *Political Science & Politics*, 39(3), 417–423. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20451776?seq=1>
- Conti, J. A., & O’Neil, M. (2007). Studying power: Qualitative methods and the global elite. *Qualitative Research*, 7(1), 63–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107071421>
- Denitch, B. (1972). Elite interviewing and social structure: An example from Yugoslavia. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 143–158. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267988>
- Dexter, L. (1970). *Elite and specialized interviewing*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Douglas, J. (1985). *Creative interviewing*. Beverly Hills, CA.: Sage Publications.
- Ganga, D., & Scott, S. (2006). Cultural "insiders" and the issue of positionality in qualitative migration research: Moving "across" and moving "along" researcher-participant divides. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(3).
- Ganter, S. A. (2017). Perception and articulation of own cultural otherness in elite interview situations: Challenge or repertoire?. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(4), 942–956.

- <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss4/1/>
- Goldstein, K. (2002). Getting in the door: Sampling and completing elite interviews. *Political Science & Politics*, 35(4), 669–672. doi:10.1017/S1049096502001130
- Goode, J. (2010). Redefining Russia: Hybrid regimes, fieldwork, and Russian politics. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(4), 1055–1075. doi:10.1017/S153759271000318X
- Gubrium, J., & Holstein, James A. (Eds.). (2002). *Handbook of interview research: Context and method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Harvey, W. S. (2011). Strategies for conducting elite interviews. *Qualitative Research*, 11(4), 431–441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111404329>
- Herod, A. (1999). Reflections on interviewing foreign elites: Praxis, positionality, validity, and the cult of the insider. *Geoforum*, 30(4), 313–327. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185\(99\)00024-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(99)00024-X)
- Hertel, S., Singer, M., & Van Cott, D. (2009). Field research in developing countries: Hitting the road running. *Political Science & Politics*, 42(2), 305–309. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40647531>
- Hertz, R., & Imber, J. (1995). Introduction. In R. Hertz & J. Imber (Eds.), *Studying elites using qualitative methods* (pp. vii-xi). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hirsch, P. M. (1995). Tales from the field: Learning from researchers' accounts. In R. Hertz & J. Imber (Eds.), *Studying elites using qualitative methods* (pp. 72-79). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kezar, A. (2003). Transformational elite interviews: Principles and problems. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(3), 395–415. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403009003005>
- Koter, D. (2013). King makers: Local leaders and ethnic politics in Africa. *World Politics*, 65(2), 187–232. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/505174>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Leech, B. (2002). Asking questions: Techniques for semistructured interviews. *Political Science & Politics*, 35(4), 665–668.
- Lilleker, D. G. (2003). Interviewing the political elite: Navigating a potential minefield. *Politics*, 23(3), 207–214. doi:10.1111/1467-9256.00198
- Lynch, J. (2013). Aligning sampling strategies with analytic goals. In L. Mosley (Ed.), *Interview research in political science* (pp. 31-44). New York, NY: Cornell University Press.
- McEvoy, J. (2006). Elite interviewing in a divided society: Lessons from Northern Ireland. *Politics*, 26(3), 184–191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2006.00267.x>
- Mikecz, R. (2012). Interviewing elites: Addressing methodological issues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18(6), 482–493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412442818>
- Mullings, B. (1999). Insider or outsider, both or neither: Some dilemmas of interviewing in a cross-cultural setting. *Geoforum*, 30(4), 337–350. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185\(99\)00025-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0016-7185(99)00025-1)
- Naples, N. A. (1996). The outsider phenomenon. In W. Kornblum & C. D. Smith (Eds.), *In the field: Readings on the field research experience*. (pp. 139-149). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Odendahl, T., & Shaw, A. M. (2002). Interviewing elites. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 299–316). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ostrander, S. A. (1993). 'Surely you're not in this just to be helpful': Access, rapport, and interviews in three studies of elites. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22(1), 7–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124193022001002>
- Parsons, J. A., Johnson, T. P., Warnecke, R. B., & Kaluzny, A. (1993). The effect of interviewer characteristics on gatekeeper resistance in surveys of elite populations. *Evaluation*

- Review*, 17(2), 131–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X9301700201>
- Peabody, R., Hammond, S., Torcom, J., Brown, L., Thompson C., & Kolodny R. (1990). Interviewing political elites. *Political Science & Politics*, 23(3), 451–455. <https://doi.org/10.2307/419807>
- Petkov, M. P., & Kaoullas, L. G. (2016). Overcoming respondent resistance at elite interviews using an intermediary. *Qualitative Research*, 16(4), 411–429. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115589646>
- Reinhardt, G. (2009). I don't know Monica Lewinsky, and I'm not in the CIA. Now how about that interview? *Political Science & Politics*, 42(2), 295–298. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40647529>
- Richards, D. (1996). Elite interviewing: Approaches and pitfalls. *Politics*, 16(3), 199–204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.1996.tb00039.x>
- Rivera, S., Kozyreva, P., & Sarovskii, E. (2002). Interviewing political elites: Lessons from Russia. *Political Science and Politics*, 35(4), 683–688. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1554810>
- Roberts, S. P. (2013). Research in challenging environments: The case of Russia's 'managed democracy.' *Qualitative Research*, 13(3), 337–351. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112451039>
- Rubin, H. J. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sabot, E. (1999). Dr Jekyll, Mr H(i)de: The contrasting face of elites at interview. *Geoforum*, 30(4), 329–335.
- Sacco, J. (2003). *The fixer: A story from Sarajevo*. Montréal, Canada: Drawn & Quarterly.
- Schwedler, J. (2006). The third gender: Western female researchers in the Middle East. *Political Science & Politics*, 39(3), 425–428.
- Stephens, N. (2007). Collecting data from elites and ultra elites: Telephone and face-to-face interviews with macroeconomists. *Qualitative Research*, 7(2), 203–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107076020>
- Tansey, O. (2007). Process tracing and elite interviewing: A case for non-probability sampling. *Political Science & Politics*, 40(4), 765–772. doi:10.1017/S1049096507071211
- Terry, D. (2011). *The fixer*. https://archives.cjr.org/feature/the_fixer_1.php
- Thuesen, F. (2011). Navigating between dialogue and confrontation: Phronesis and emotions in interviewing elites on ethnic discrimination. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17(7), 613–622. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411413998>
- Thomas, R. J. (1995). Interviewing important people in big companies. In R. Hertz & J. Imber (Eds.), *Studying elites using qualitative methods* (pp. 3-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ustad Figenschou, T. (2010). Young, female, western researcher vs. senior, male, Al Jazeera officials: Critical reflections on accessing and interviewing media elites in authoritarian societies. *Media, Culture & Society*, 32(6), 961–978. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710379667>

Author Note

Esra Bakkalbasioglu is an advanced Ph.D. Candidate in the Interdisciplinary Near and Middle Eastern Studies Program at the University of Washington. The focus of her work is comparative research, infrastructure studies, access to resources, and Middle Eastern studies. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: esrab@uw.edu.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank the anonymous referees, Robert Pekkanen, Joel Migdal, Reşat Kasaba, and Semih Energin, for invaluable feedback.

Copyright 2020: Esra Bakkalbasioglu and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Bakkalbasioglu, E. (2020). How to access elites when textbook methods fail: Challenges of purposive sampling and advantages of using interviewees as “fixers”. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 688-699. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss3/9>
