Researching Elite Interviewing in Higher Education in Postcolonial Bangladesh

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Abstract

The concept of "elite interviewing" is a recent phenomenon in educational research and has been studied widely in the Western context. Drawing on my own experience, this article traces the challenges and difficulties involved in "elite interviewing" in higher education in post-colonial Bangladesh. It is based on a critical methodological perspective, using a thematic analysis of interviews with 28 higher education policy-making elites working between the 1990s and 2010s at the state level in Bangladesh. This article examines how the local power structure within the current socio-political context emerged from a long colonial past, and how this in turn influenced elite interviewing. It looks at how the researcher, who's onto-epistemological as well as geopolitical position originated from and has been influenced by both Global South and Global North contexts, negotiated with this distinctive power structure in elite interview settings to understand the "micro-politics" of neoliberal policy formulation in Bangladesh. In its critical analysis of elite interviewing, this paper traces how "everyday social practices" drawn from colonial practices, for example, the use of "sir" and acknowledging "supremacy" and "power conflict" served as a form of "capillary" domination of relations to respond to the power structure and neutralise specific identities, positions, and experiences in elite interview settings.

Keywords

elite interviewing, postcolonialism, power structure, everyday social practice, higher education, Bangladesh

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The concept of "elite interviewing" is a recent phenomenon in educational research and has been studied widely in the Western context. Drawing on my own experience, this article traces the challenges and difficulties involved in "elite interviewing" in higher education in post-colonial Bangladesh. It is based on a critical methodological perspective, using a thematic analysis of interviews with 28 higher education policy-making elites working between the 1990s and 2010s at the state level in Bangladesh. This article examines how the local power structure within the current socio-political context emerged from a long colonial past, and how this in turn influenced elite interviewing. It looks at how the researcher, who's onto-epistemological as well as geopolitical position originated from and has been influenced by both Global South and Global North contexts, negotiated with this distinctive power structure in elite interview settings to understand the "micro-politics" of neoliberal policy formulation in Bangladesh. In its critical analysis of elite interviewing, this paper traces how "everyday social practices" drawn from colonial practices, for example, the use of "sir" and acknowledging "supremacy" and "power conflict" served as a form of "capillary" domination of relations to respond to the power structure and neutralise specific identities, positions, and experiences in elite interview settings.

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Introduction

Researching the state-level policy-making process with its politics of change by studying policy actors involved in these changes is often known as "elite research" (Walford, 2012). In elite research, a researcher needs to be engaged with participants to elicit their accounts of the authentic process of policymaking (Halpin & Troyna, 1994).

Although the literature about elite interviewing methodology expresses grave concerns about the difficulties involved (Anyan, 2013; Ganter, 2017; Selwyn, 2013), I was unaware of those concerns at the initial stage of my Ph.D. research project. In developing a conceptual framework of policy borrowing for that study, I learned that the two different traditions – comparative education and policy sociology – have different perspectives on how policy takes processes from one context to another. Engaging with these two traditions, I also understood that both traditions involve some methodological issues (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). In looking at policy analysis, Ball (1990) argues that "the field of policy analysis is dominated by commentary and critique rather than by research" (p. 9).

Such scholarly discussions influenced me to engage rigorously in conceptualising "elite interviewing." They led me to explore what is meant by "policy elite" in the postcolonial context of Bangladesh, framed by questions such as, what could their [elites'] power structure

be, and in what ways do they act and react? and Are they being influenced by their own "everyday social practices?" Scholars that adopt the postcolonial theoretical lens focus on how residual colonial power relations still influence and affect the current policy affairs of postcolonial spaces (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1990). Engaging with postcolonial literature, I understood that postcolonial Bangladeshi policy elites would act somewhat differently from those in non-colonial societies. It has been argued that the power structure in postcolonial Bangladesh emerged from within the colonial relationships that shaped the nation into what White (1999) calls "a weak state in a strong society" (p. 39). In such a strong society, the power elite operates within a web of social relationships that could be described as what Foucault (1980) calls "capillary" power acting through everyday societal practices.

However, since much of the literature focuses on elite interviewing in Western contexts, relatively little attention has been devoted to how the power structure of the local context influences elite interviewing and how a researcher negotiates with this distinctive power structure at the societal level to understand the processes that led to the policy formulation based on neoliberal ideas. Indeed, most of the published studies were conducted in the UK and the USA and thus might provide a circumscribed view of elite interviewing. This article discusses the challenges and difficulties in "elite interviewing" in the post-colonial context. This article unpacks how the power structure that evolved from the colonial legacy influences and shapes elite interviewing and how a researcher may interplay with the power structure in the context of postcolonial Bangladesh. It argues that an understanding of the socio-political context of the local power structure is needed to use an effective elite interviewing method in a postcolonial space.

The concept of "everyday social practices" as a form of "capillary" relation of domination was used to analyse responses to the power structure in postcolonial Bangladesh. These practices can neutralise certain identities, positions, and experiences of the policy elites. The case of Bangladesh offers insights not only into the process of elite interviewing in this postcolonial country context but also into the methodological challenges of using in other contexts the elite interviewing strategies developed in Western contexts.

In this paper, I first critically engage with literature conceptualising the idea of elite interviewing in educational research. I then provide an understanding of postcolonialism and the power structure of Bangladesh, examining how the colonial political processes have remained and still influence and shape the contemporary power structure. Finally, I examine how power structure at the societal level influences elite interviewing and how I, as a researcher was able to interplay with this power structure based on the idea of everyday social practice as a form of "capillary" power of domination to understand how policies that circulate globally were shaped in the local context.

Conceptualising "Elite Interviewing" in Educational Research

Researching elite participants is a relatively recent phenomenon in education policy research (Halpin & Troyna, 1994; Howard & Kenway, 2015; McClure & McNaughtan, 2021; Walford, 2012). Until the 1990s, numerous educational researchers focused on "researching down," where researchers looked at those less powerful than the researchers themselves (Walford, 1994). However, an increased contestation of neoliberalism within education policy has led to research on neoliberal education policy formulation through "studies of politicians, government officials, and pressure group members at the local, national, and international levels" (Walford, 2012, p. 111). For example, in the early 1990s, several policy sociologists addressed the ethical and methodological challenges in researching the "New Right" education policy reforms during the 1980s in the UK (see Halpin & Troyna, 1994; Walford, 1994). Since then, most of the researchers on elite interviewing in education have continued to focus on how

to access research sites and participants, effective interview techniques to be used, and the interpretation of data as well as ethical issues (Howard & Kenway, 2015; Walford, 2012).

Different from researching down, the critical concern about elite interviewing is that people in positions of power are out of reach for several reasons, including their business and mobility, unwillingness to be interviewed, and potential risks for researchers (Nader, 1972). Most importantly, as elite interviewing is involved in understanding the "micro-politics" of taking a policy initiative and attempting to relate these with broader power relations, access could be problematic where a policy initiative seems controversial and contested (Walford, 2012). Moreover, once access is ensured, the next challenge is building rapport with elite participants and keeping a critical distance from them to generate data (Mikecz, 2012).

Perhaps an even more problematic issue is that the narratives generated through interviewing may not provide accurate descriptions of a policy elite's behaviour (Beckmann & Hall, 2013). Policy elites' narratives may express what they wanted to affect in the policy formulation process rather than how they wanted to use it for personal and political gain. Ball (1994a) argues that data collected from elite interviews are often presented without establishing links between theory and analysis, further noting that "most analysts leave the interpretational relationships between data and analysis heavily implicit" (Ball, 1994b, p. 113). For him, policy research is not only about analysing the processes but also about the meaning, discourse, and ideologies. It is, therefore, significant to look at whose discourses are considered in the policy-making process since the discourse speaks not only to the policy but also to the actors (Ball, 1994b). Indeed, Ozga and Gewirtz (1994) are concerned with the ethical dilemma of elite interviewing in education policy making. In most cases, they argue, policy researchers generate funding from different state and non-state funding agencies and work within the specific terms and conditions attached to funding, which could therefore affect their value positions. They emphasise adopting a "critical theory approach" to education policy research.

The above discussion has shown that literature about elite interviewing has focused more on the methodological aspects of individuals, personalities, and the process rather than on how the socio-political context influences elite interviewing. Moreover, most of these works have emphasised the case of Western contexts, potentially providing a version of elite interviewing that is inappropriate for other contexts. The case of elite interviewing in postcolonial Bangladesh reveals not only how power structures from a South Asian context, which emerged from its colonial legacy, can shape elite interviewing but also how interplaying with such power structures at a societal level can help the researcher to understand the "micro-politics" of neoliberal policy formulation in Bangladesh. In the following section, I discuss postcolonialism and the ways the power structure of Bangladesh emerged from the nation's past colonial history.

Understanding Postcolonialism and the Power Structure in Bangladesh

Scholars adopting a postcolonial theoretical stance discuss the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised and the influences of these continuing power relationships on current policy affairs of the postcolonial space. In *Black Skin, White Mask*, Fanon (1984) scrutinises how the psychological process of "identity" has been created in postcolonial countries through the desire for "whiteness." Fanon (1968, 1984) contends that despite colonial countries achieving independence, they remained culturally and mentally colonised because they absorbed the colonial rules and practices into their systems. For Fanon, postcolonial bourgeoisie often used the dominance of power like colonial power was used over most people. In line with Fanon, Spivak (1988) explores how the subaltern's perceptions of self and reality have changed and how colonial cultural supremacy has been legitimised through "epistemic violence" over the "subaltern" mind. By the idea of "epistemic violence," Spivak (1988) refers

to how British colonial powers justified their imperialist project in the name of the "civilisation" of British India. British colonial power created indigenous elite groups to "speak for" the subalterns' condition rather than allowing them "to speak" for themselves. Through this narrative, the "reality" of the subaltern became normative.

Unlike Fanon and Spivak, Bhabha conceptualises how migratory movements of cultural formations across a global division of labour have created identity and difference (Rizvi et al., 2006). Bhabha (1994, p. 45) uses the term "hybridity," arguing that the colonial views and values are not absolute in postcolonial countries; rather, "the effects of colonial power are seen to be the production of hybridization." Bhabha (1994) argues that colonial discourses produce a subordinate subject (the colonised) that *re*produces colonial habits, attitudes and values; such "colonised" individuals cannot fully realise how they are downplaying the imposition of power by the coloniser. The way in which colonial attitudes, habits, assumptions, and values are copied by the colonised is referred to by Bhabha as "mimicry." These postcolonial theories provide a robust basis for understanding how the power structures of postcolonial Bangladesh have been developed, circulated, and played out throughout contemporary society in Bangladesh.

After Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, the "military-bureaucracy oligarchy" consolidated its power over the state of Bangladesh (Alavi, 1972). The military rule from 1975 to 1990 caused the declaration of martial law, the disbandment of political parties, and abandonment of the Constitution of Bangladesh. Paradoxically, it opened the opportunity to expand NGOs' activities "largely due to the regime's effort to enhance its legitimacy at the grassroots level" (Haque, 2002, p. 413). In the name of ensuring "good governance," NGOs have been politically empowered in post-military regimes (Lewis, 2004).

However, the relationship between "civil society" and the process of governance has been deeply influenced by the long history of elite control of political and economic resources, "widespread rent-seeking and corruption, pervasive patron-clientism, and a patriarchal ideology" (Davis & McGregor, 2000, p. 56). Historically, Bangladeshi society has been characterised by patron-client relationships where all sorts of people among the power elite are driven by personal gain (Hossain, 2006; Kabir, 2021; Kochanek, 2000). Consequently, the state of postcolonial Bangladesh remains weak, and still considers the military-civil bureaucracy a source of power (Davis & McGregor, 2000; Zafarullah, 2013).

Most importantly, the long colonial past and post-independence socio-political development shaped the Bangladeshi elite as an unstable class alliance of underdeveloped industrial bourgeoisie, the military bureaucracy, and NGO-based civil society groups (Kabeer, 1988). The lack of effective distribution of economic and political resources to the political institutions in postcolonial Bangladesh made these institutions inherently weak. Thus, postcolonial Bangladeshi elite, like Fanon argues, use the dominance of power to manipulate these weak institutions for personal gain and engage in "intense competition over economic and political resources" (Shehabuddin, 2016, p. 17). Through this "epistemic violence" the Bangladeshi elite maintain control over the state's resources and reinforce their roles and positions in socio-political and economic arenas. The persistence of a patron-client relationship between the Bangladeshi elite and most people has formed a neo-patrimonialism in contemporary Bangladesh (Kabeer, 1988).

In analysing the capabilities of the Bangladesh state, White (1999, p. 319) argues that successive governments "sought to penetrate society through reorganisation of local administration, but it did not last beyond the end of the regime." The state's inability to control social relationships and the failure to establish any independent "relationship between the executive and administrative arms" meant that Bangladesh emerged as a weak state within a strong society (White, 1999, p. 319). The power elite operates within a web of social relationships in such a strong society. That means that the power structure in Bangladesh is

what Foucault (1980) describes as multidimensional and is maintained through everyday practices in society.

In the research discussed in this paper, I attempt to understand how this unique socio-political context of local power structures shapes elite interviewing and how I, as a researcher, who's onto-epistemological as well as geopolitical positions originated from and have been influenced by both Global South and Global North contexts. I also sought to identify how I could negotiate or interplay with this distinctive power structure to gather information from policy elites to understand the processes of neoliberal policy formulation in postcolonial Bangladesh. My positionality in this context refers to the "spatial location of the researcher, specifically national location, and the positioning of that nation in respect of global geopolitics, including location within the Global North/Global South divide" (Lingard, 2009, p. 229). I was fortunate enough to have the chance to study and teach in Bangladesh, New Zealand, and Australia. I have therefore travelled across different eras and spaces intellectually and spatially as a result of my educational and professional experiences, and I have absorbed, challenged, and bargained with a wide range of discourses from both the Global South and North contexts (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021). My understanding of the processes under study has unavoidably been influenced, whether consciously or unknowingly, by certain discursive positions that this process has inadvertently ingrained in me. As I work to understand the challenges and difficulties in elite interviewing in higher education in Bangladesh, I have integrated my diverse identities to create what Bhabha (1994) calls "hybridity" in order to get around the complex tensions of doing so while simultaneously representing both the Global South and the Global North. My lived experiences of historical and political antecedents helped me frame my understanding of the power relations between the coloniser and colonised, the complexities of the power relations between policy elites and myself as a researcher and the influence of various interest groups in the development of higher education policies in Bangladesh. The interplay between colonisers (ideas from the Global North) and the colonised (the policy elites in Bangladesh) helped me build my own critical viewpoint, which in turn helped me become aware of the politicking of the policy elites (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021).

To achieve this understanding, I use Foucault's (1980) concept of a "capillary" form of power in my analysis of elite interviewing. For Foucault (1980, p. 39), sovereign power is no longer possible once a certain kind of power is being "exercised within the social body." Through the notion of "capillary power," Foucault (1980, p. 39) explores how the mechanism of power "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives." In this research, I identified "everyday social practices" as a form of "capillary" relation acting as a domination response to the social power structure to neutralise certain identities, positions, and experiences of the elite in the course of elite interviewing. The idea of "everyday social practice" refers to critically understanding how the power structure evolves within historical postcolonial agents and how the power elite operates, as White (1999) contends, within a web of social relationships such as those within the interview settings.

The Research

Theoretical Underpinning: A Critical Perspective

This article is drawn from my own experiences in a larger study (see Kabir, 2017). The philosophical underpinning of that study was a critical perspective applied to understanding the processes of neoliberal policy formulation in the higher education sector at the state level in Bangladesh. I attempted to understand processes related to why, how, and by whom neoliberal global ideas were shaped and developed in the higher education policies – a 20-year

Strategic Plan (SP) and the Private University Acts – between the 1990s and 2010s at the state-level in Bangladesh. These were the matters to which a critical approach was identified as the best among different philosophical underpinnings in the literature because it informed me about how I learned and what I learned about my inquiry into this issue (Creswell, 2013). The critical perspective taught me that facts are never isolated (Kincheloe et al., 2013) and the relationship between "concept" and "object" and between "signifier" and "signified" are not fixed but are mediated by social relations of "capitalist production" and "consumption" (Kincheloe, 2008). Steinberg (2012, p. ix) further argues that such policy-making processes are entirely enmeshed in the "middle of power and politics." In other words, they cannot be researched without being aware of what Steinberg (2012, p. ix) calls the "web of power, neoliberalism, patriarchy, western linear linking, and elitism." Therefore, I have to take a critical stance to understand how policy elites were influenced by hidden structures resulting from the market philosophy promoted by the International Financial Institutes (IFIs), and how they shaped and recontextualised neoliberalism as a dominant idea in higher education policies in Bangladesh.

A Qualitative Approach

I chose a qualitative methodology because the critical perspectives focus on political, issue-oriented, or change-oriented practices (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research investigates the rich details of why and how to deal with a specific event. In this way, it aims to unfold the complexity of historical situations and movements that have influenced the event investigated (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As my substantive interest in a specific event was to understand how and why higher education in Bangladesh has been reformed in a neoliberal way, the qualitative approach helped me provide a deeper understanding of how and why these policies have been adopted in the higher education sector. Through this approach, I was able to offer a comprehensive critical understanding of the processes of neoliberal policy formation in the higher education sector in Bangladesh.

Data Collection and Analysis

In qualitative research, a range of tools, including observation, analysing texts and documents, interviews and focus groups and audio, video and other visual recordings, are typically used (Silverman, 2011). Along with the policy documents, I conducted 28 interviews (24 in Bangla and four in English) as the policy actors preferred to speak in Bangla and English, respectively, from March to August 2013 for that study. All interviews were electronically recorded with the permission of the policy elites. I translated the transcripts into English, and a Bangladeshi postgraduate student at the Faculty of Education at Monash University acted as an "auditor" to ensure the views expressed by participants were not misinterpreted in translation. Consequently, the exact choice of English words was mine, but I endeavoured to stay true to the participants' intentions. Moreover, as that study was pursued through Monash University, I received ethical approval from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC). Consequently, I worked using the underlying principles and guidelines of MUHREC. For example, I informed participants about the research purposes, participant rights, dignity, privacy, and confidentiality. This helped to avoid unnecessary deception and minimised the risk to all participants. These processes helped us to show respect to each other, fulfilled the obligation to participants, and augmented the benefit of the research (Cassell & Jacobs, 1987 as cited in Glesne & Peshkin, 1993). I also used a consent form for them to indicate their participation agreement. In the consent form, the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose to stop participation at any point (Christians, 2013). I used thematic analysis to analyse policy elites' interviews.

Even though I adopted a critical qualitative methodological approach and was aware of two perceived difficulties in my larger study, namely, power relations between the researched and the researcher and the different nature of past and more recent policy formulation processes in Bangladesh (Halpin & Troyna, 1994; Walford, 1994), I experienced the local socio-political context that influenced some methodological aspects of elite interviewing. These methodological aspects of elite interviewing included sampling, access to the policy elites and conducting interviews with policy elites. In this paper, I envisage theorising my experiences in these three methodological aspects of elite interviewing in postcolonial Bangladesh. To develop themes from the data regarding methodological issues in elite interviewing, I sought similarities in views and behaviours relating to socio-cultural practices perpetuating power structures, which affected the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Three themes regarding this were identified: referrals of like-minded individuals (in snowball sampling); "sir": symbol of power and a way of neutralising position; and acknowledging "supremacy" and "power conflict": a process of understanding of micro-politics of global ideas formulation.

Findings

I now analyse how the power structure at the societal level influenced three key aspects of elite interviewing – sampling, access to the policy elites, and conducting interviews with policy elites– paying attention to how I interplayed with the power structure based on the idea of "everyday social practices" as a form of "capillary" relation of domination in these three key aspects of elite interviewing.

Referrals of Like-Minded Individuals (in Snowball Sampling)

Based on a combination of "generic purposeful" and "snowball" approaches I began to select participants for my study (Bryman, 2012). However, I experienced that referring other policy actors was dependent not only on how policy actors were related in terms of power and their positions but also on the degree to which the referrer and the referred were ideologically in harmony. For example, when I enquired about the identity of other policy actors of the University Grants Commission (UGC) involved in the formation processes of different policies, a policy administrator of the UGC suggested me talk to the UGC Chairman and Members. However, he was aware of his top officials' positions: "You might talk to our Member and Chairman [UGC], but don't tell them I provided their names." Similarly, the exercise of power between policy actors of different government bodies over the policy formulation process also became one of the dominant factors in whether someone should be referred for my study. In particular, the dominance of bureaucrats at the Ministry of Education on the issues of higher education often left policy actors of the UGC vulnerable in the policy-making process, resulting in policy actors of the UGC becoming silent about the activities of the MoE. For example, when I asked about whom I should interview from the Ministry of Education, the policy administrator of the UGC replied, "…I cannot tell you who could be better to tell you … because I need to look at documents [to identify] who were involved from the Ministry."

The nexus between power politics and bureaucrats often became a determining factor in who should be referred to as participants for my study among politicians. For example, a major change in the proposed Act 2009 happened when it was sent to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education (PSCE) for review, and therefore, I was particularly interested in who had played significant roles during the review of the proposed Act 2009. When I asked a policy administrator of the UGC if he could provide the names of political

parties and private sector representatives, he referred to a ruling party member thrice rather than other members, including the Chairman of the PSCE, who was from another political party but was part of the government. However, he needed to remember who represented the private sector in the policy formation process.

The importance of this harmony in power, position, and ideology in referring people for interview also worked across the non-bureaucrat policy elites. When I asked a private sector representative about who could be the potential participants involved in these policies' formulation processes, he referred to an academic who was a promoter of a private university rather than the President of their Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB). In the same way, when I asked an academic who contributed to these policy formulation processes, he suggested another academic from the same socio-political background.

The ways in which different policy elites referred to each other as participants for my study, using a "snowball" approach would have been complicated without understanding the local power structure context. In this situation, I applied my critical lens to understand how everyday social practice worked while someone was referred or not referred and the attitudes of a particular participant towards the policy formulation process. Firstly, I realised that policy elites were choosing ideologically harmonious participants, and because of this, the dissenting voices would not be heard. For example, when I asked a private sector representative for a referral, he referred me to talk to an academic rather than the President of APUB. As he said, "He was a former bureaucrat, and sometimes could not understand what we want." Secondly, referring to someone also depended on how they were involved in the circuit of power relations. For example, when the policy administrator of the UGC avoided providing any name from the UGC, I asked, "Ministry people might be so busy?" In response to my question, he commented, "Ministry was supposed to do the Act, but they did not do." Such a comment indicated how the patrimonial and hegemonic attitudes of the Ministry led the UGC to avoid referring me to policy elites from the Ministry.

"Sir": Symbol of Power and A Way of Neutralising Position

Although I adopted two key strategies – "trust of network" and "gaining access from below" - to get access to policy elites, these strategies did not ensure getting interviews done straightforwardly. Instead, like what Bhabha (1994) argues, consciously and unconsciously, policy elites' colonial behaviours and attitudes dominated their practices. Therefore, in most cases, policy elites kept me waiting a long time. Sometimes the interview did not take place during my first appointment. Not surprisingly, none of the policy elite from government bodies and politicians gave their interviews at their first appointments. For example, I had made an appointment to interview the education minister but had to wait almost five hours to meet him in his office.

The way in which many policy elites kept me waiting and rescheduled the appointments did not mean that they were suddenly busy during my appointments. Instead, it appeared that policy elites wanted to make sure I was aware of how significant their contributions to the policy formulation process were and their positions in the socio-political and bureaucratic structure in Bangladeshi society. For example, on an appointment with a bureaucrat at the Ministry of Education, I reached his office in the morning, an hour before the scheduled time, but had no chance to meet him until the afternoon. When I was called, I entered his office expecting to conduct the interview. Although I had introduced myself and the reason for conducting an interview with him for my study when I communicated with him earlier, I did so again while I was taking my seat. However, he showed no interest in my research; instead, he started speaking about himself, his long career in bureaucracy, and how much he was committed to efficiently completing his work. As he said, "I completed HSC from Dhaka

College and post-graduation in Law from Dhaka University. Then I joined the Bar-et-Law, where I faced adjustment problems. … Later, I joined the civil service and served for about eighteen years. While promoted as a District Commissioner, I was transferred to the Secretariat and entrusted with the responsibility of the university wing."

In this way, policy actors used "epistemic violence" to control the conversation, and I, as a researcher, often began feeling uncomfortable and challenged in redirecting them to the interview. For example, when this bureaucrat at the Ministry of Education talked about himself and how successful he was in his professional career rather than why I was there, he took control of the conversation. I struggled to regain my role in the conversation for half an hour.

In response to the policy elites' colonial attitudes and behaviours, I often used every day social practices that had emerged from historical colonial practices to neutralise their power and positions. For example, when the bureaucrat at the Ministry of Education continued his conversation at one point, I said, "Sir" [The colonial practice "Sir" is still used in Bangladeshi bureaucracy where bureaucrats often expect that they should be addressed in this way]. This approach helped me to give him a pause and bring him back to my topic. He said, "This was a really tough and sensitive job, but it is not so easy to explain." It sounded like he was talking with himself, encouraging me to lead the conversation. As such, I reiterated, "Sir, that is why this interview with you will be the most significant part of my research. I can come again anytime." It worked well, as he asked me to come back the following day.

Similarly, in response to the power structure that emerged in the contemporary political culture from the colonial past, I used "sir" as a way of neutralising the Minister's position. In the political culture in Bangladesh, alongside personal secretaries from the civil bureaucracy, politicians hire their own political activists as personal assistants (PAs) to keep day-to-day contact with their own constituencies. Political activists who have become the PAs of politicians or Ministers have often treated this process as a means of exercising power in a colonial way. For example, once I arrived at a Minister's office for an interview, I realised that the PA had yet to inform the Minister about the interview. Despite constant reminders about my appointment with the Minister, the only hope the Minister's PA had granted me was that I would be given a chance to meet the Minister, but with no certainty when that could happen. When I entered the Minister's office, he addressed me, "Sir [as my profession was teaching and in Bangladeshi culture, the teacher has widely been called "sir"], tell me what I can do for you." I did not expect that the Minister would call me "Sir," but I replied to him in a slightly different way, "*Respected* Sir, I had an appointment with you in the morning – I wanted to have an interview for my research." Calling the Minister "Respected Sir" neutralised his position, and therefore, the Minister felt sorry for keeping me waiting for a long time but provided another appointment.

Acknowledging "Supremacy" and "Power Conflict": A Process of Understanding of Micro-politics of Global Ideas' Formulation

Even though I had studied each participant's biography to understand policy elites' ideologies, political beliefs and perceptions and identify the policy area that the policy elites had contributed to, the interviews did not proceed as planned. Rather, some interviews began in very unexpected, colonial ways. For example, one academic who contributed to both SP and the Acts, puzzled me at the very beginning of the interview by asking, "What is the value of doing this kind of research?" He continued, "I have a career of 85 years … I did my Ph.D. in 1958 in Minnesota. Was your father born at that time? I am the first sociologist of Bangladesh and the third of Pakistan … my biography is everywhere."

I felt an immediate loss of agency but quickly learnt from my critical view not only how the market philosophy might influence the policy elite to adopt consumer market values

and ideologies in the policy formulation process (Giroux, 2004), but also how the "colonising mind" was still a predominant attitude that affected how elite participants would behave when dealing with someone who belongs to a lower stratum in terms of age and experience. This understanding helped me to move the conversation forward. I realised that although the interviewee seemed to be hostile to me and raised questions regarding my skills and right to know about his academic background and professional career, he had not failed to claim "knowledge supremacy" by highlighting significant achievements of his academic and professional life. Consequently, I worked on his colonial mind. I said, "Sir, you are the first sociologist in the country! I did both my bachelor's and master's degrees in Sociology, but I am so sorry that I knew a different story about this until today." Acknowledging his "knowledge supremacy" not only resulted in his voice taking on a "pedagogic" tone slowly but also meant he began to describe the process of developing different ideas in the higher education policies. He took more than one and a half hours to explain how he developed different ideas and the role of others in the policy formulation processes.

As elite interviewees were engaged in the circuits of power, they became engaged in policy glorification. The policy glorification involved both the "personalisation of policy" and "politicisation of policy" and justification was made as to how such changes were needed not only to improve higher education but also for the betterment of the country (Selwyn, 2013). In the "personalisation of policy," some of my policy elite interviewees highlighted their devotion and glorified their positions and contributions to the development of a particular idea. For example, a policy administrator from the UGC stated, "Wherever I worked, I tried first to see what the legal framework of this is… I was surprised to see that the first Private University Act contains 5/7 pages with huge loopholes … I drafted the whole new Act." Similarly, a founder of a private university claimed that he stopped the then Education Minister from enacting the new Act in 2005. As he said:

> They [the Ministry of Education] invited us to get our opinion on the draft. We brought the then Member of Parliament (MP) of the ruling party. At one stage of the meeting, we had a hot talk, and we stopped him from proceeding with the law.

In contrast, some policy elites, for example, politicians, engaged in the "politicisation of policy," where they justified their actions based on their political power, beliefs and affiliation. They identified ideas that had been adopted as essential for not only higher education but also the whole country and contended that was possible because they were in power. For example, the education minister commented, "While we [Awami League] came to power in 2009, …most of the universities were functioning without their own teaching staff … our government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina enacted a new act to improve the private universities."

Similarly, another education minister stated:

> Our party leader President Ziaur Rahman was deeply concerned about absorbing vast numbers of the population in the job market. … Later, when our party, BNP, was elected again in 1991 under the leadership of Begum Zia, we started to reinforce the leader's idea in the country's development by establishing private universities.

Policy elites' power, positions, political beliefs and affiliations influenced the glorification of policy. However, it also explained how and why different ideas were adopted in the policies. Getting credit for or downplaying others' contributions to the policy formulation

process related to how the power structure had emerged from the long history of colonial political culture. Therefore, "power conflicts" between policy elites influenced my approach during interviews. When policy elites firmly claimed that they had done the right things or someone had done the wrong things in the policy formulation process, they wanted to see me in colonial ways how I would react to what they were claiming. This was uncomfortable since it required me to show my willingness to allow what they claimed.

Nevertheless, this indication of political and ideological power conflicts in our everyday political culture helped me provide a more critical discussion about what they did, and how and why they did it in the policy formation process. For example, when a ruling party MP, claimed that the government had initiated the streamlining of private universities because the previous government had promoted business ventures and fundamentalist activities in the private universities, I showed interest in the things the previous government had done and how the current initiative could eliminate the "fundamentalist activities" in the private universities. He continued, "Some conditions of the Cabinet approved Act was so tight, we relaxed some of them so that our like-minded could be encouraged to invest in the private universities …I have the plan to establish a private university." He continued to detail the bureaucratic process, the government's political motive and power elites' personal interest in the policy formulation process. I was thus able to conceptualise how the development of the policy that was the final product was not only about bureaucratic processes but also the micro-politics involved in policy formulation.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, drawing on my own experiences, I offered a critical analysis of the challenges and difficulties involved in researching policy elites in postcolonial Bangladesh. In the elite interviewing literature, scholars have extensively emphasised the methodological aspects of individuals, personalities and the process. However, little attention has been given to how the context influences elite interviewing. There is relative silence in the literature regarding how the power structure that emerged from some nations' colonial history has influenced and shaped the settings for elite interviewing. Through analysis of interactions in the interviews, I sought to understand how the postcolonial local power structure influenced elite interviewing and how I, as a researcher, who's onto-epistemological as well as geopolitical positions originated from both Global South and Global North contexts, was positioned and then exercised agency to interplay with this power structure to understand the micro-politics of global ideas' formation in the higher education sector in Bangladesh. I drew on the idea that "everyday social practices" that had emerged from the colonial past, for example, the use of "sir" and acknowledging "supremacy" and "power conflict," could be harnessed as a form of "capillary" domination of relations in order to respond to the power structure at the societal level in elite interview settings. I identified postcolonial development as a point of departure in applying an elite interviewing method drawn from the Western context in a postcolonial space.

In this paper, based on postcolonial theories, in particular, like what Spivak (1988) argues, I have argued that through "epistemic violence", the power structure of Bangladesh has not only changed and transformed the "subaltern" mind but also manipulated state resources for personal gains and therefore, "subalterns" are not able to say what they want to say for themselves. The way in which the colonial past still dominates contemporary society has ensured the domination of the "military-bureaucracy oligarchy" over the state apparatuses. Consequently, the power elite seemed to be a composition of an unstable class alliance of underdeveloped industrial bourgeoisie, the military-bureaucracy, and NGO-based civil society groups (Kabeer, 1988).

Rather than focusing on a methodological process of elite interviewing described by Western scholars, in this paper, I have emphasised the need to understand the local power structure in the process of elite interviewing. In this regard, I used Foucault's idea of the "capillary" form of domination to understand how the sovereign power of policy elites could be minimised and how modern power could be promoted through everyday social practices. In this paper, I also considered that Bhabha's idea of "mimicry" could be useful to understand how and why policy elites *re*produced colonial practices, habits, and attitudes in the elite interviewing settings. This mimicry helped me use the everyday social practices developed from colonial practices as a form of "capillary" power response to subvert the power structure in elite interviewing.

In order to understand how these everyday social practices as a "capillary" form of power could be used to respond to the policy elites during elite interviewing, I showed that, based on colonial culture, policy elites, for example, wanted to influence me to choose their own like-minded people or to avoid referring anyone as a participant. In particular, despite adopting a combination of "generic purposeful" and "snowball" sampling techniques to represent participants from different categories of policy elites, for example, academics, bureaucrats, and politicians, in relevant policy formulation processes (see Gale, 2001; Selwyn, 2013), I experienced that policy elites often referred to the like-minded policy actor or to avoid someone who could have different stories in the policy development processes. In response to this colonial attitude, I used my own critical understanding of everyday social practices of the power structure to neutralise their power and positions. For example, by looking at their attitudes, I found that referring or not referring to someone as a participant depended on either the perceived harmonisation of voices or avoiding mention of the power relation between them in the policy formulation process.

Gaining access to participants is a significant concern in researching the powerful (Ball, 1994b; Ozga & Gewirtz, 1994; Selwyn, 2013; Walford, 2012). Indeed, several scholars have identified factors that could help gain access to elite settings, for example, trust of networking (McClure & McNaughtan, 2021) and individual links with powerful people (Grek, 2011), having affiliation with prestigious institutions (Selwyn, 2013), and being seen as a "harmless outsider" (Gewirtz & Ozga, 1994). Using ideas of trust of networking and "accessing from below" supported me in having an appointment with policy elites. However, such strategies often could not ensure to have an interview with policy elites straightaway. For example, despite appointments, elite interviewees kept me waiting for a long time, and sometimes, rescheduled the interview appointments. In many cases, in using everyday social practices, the power elite still showed they wanted to see others as docile, for example, by expecting others to call them "sir." Therefore, using this everyday colonial practice helped me to normalise their power, identities and positions in the elite interviewing settings.

I also reinforced the way policy elites felt their "knowledge supremacy" or perceived being involved in ideological or power conflicts to prompt more extensive discussion about the policy formulation processes. It is argued that the power imbalance between the researched and researcher could be a critical issue in elite interviews. Thus, many researchers often argued that the effect of the power imbalance issues could be reduced through triangulation in elite interviewing (see Boucher, 2017). However, in my research, I showed how acknowledging "knowledge supremacy" minimises the power imbalance between interviewee and interviewer in a pedagogic tone in elite interviewing. Moreover, the "personalisation of policy" and "politicisation of policy" would be seen as limitations or strengths of the data depending on how a researcher deals with this situation (Selwyn, 2013). Indeed, many contributors often argued that using the idea of a "balanced impression" could help remove policy elites' positions and their ideological and political stances in the policy formulation processes (see Lilleker, 2003). However, in this research, I showed that using the idea of "power conflict" between

policy elites could help to look at whether policy elites used policy development as part of the "personalisation of policy" or "politicisation of policy" in postcolonial Bangladesh.

This paper unpacks the difficulties and challenges involved in elite interviewing in postcolonial space in Bangladesh. However, one of the limitations of this research is to apply these ideas in other postcolonial spaces where the power structure was not consolidated between military-bureaucracy oligarchy, for example, India. Moreover, focusing on elite interviewing in the higher education policy formulations could be another potential limitation of this research. When higher education became commercialised in the post-1990s period through the establishment of private universities, many interest groups became involved in to gain benefits from the sector in Bangladesh (Kabir, 2010, 2011, 2016, 2020; Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021; Kabir & Webb, 2018). As I designed my research to understand the processes that led to developing higher education policies based on neoliberal ideas between 1990 and 2010 and concentrated explicitly on elite interviewing in higher education, there was inadequacy to widely cover other education policy fields, including primary and secondary education policies, and policy elites involved in these kinds of policy formulation processes. Thus, further research is needed to understand elite interviewing in other postcolonial spaces where education is shaped and reshaped by global policy networks (Ball, 2016), and pre-tertiary education policy development in Bangladesh and other contexts. This analysis will not only provide additional insight into the elite interviewing method but also contribute to the methodological aspect of comparative and international education.

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