

## *The Profession*

# Elite Interviewing in a Divided Society: Lessons from Northern Ireland

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This article explores the particular challenges facing researchers interviewing political elites in a divided society. With evidence from interviews with former ministers in the Northern Ireland power-sharing government from 1999 to 2002, I demonstrate that researchers must consider a number of concerns relating to identity, bias and the polarised positions of politicians in a divided society. The researcher needs to consider how their identity may have an impact on the respondents, whether the researcher brings bias to the interviews and how they might seek to probe beyond ethnic party positions based on mistrust of the other side.

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Interviewing is a key data collection technique used in political science research to access the views and interpretations of subjects under investigation. While there is an abundance of literature on interviewing techniques and some on interviewing political elites (Ball, 1994; Lilleker, 2003; Pridham, 1987; Puwar, 1997; Sarikakis, 2003), the dynamics of interviewing politicians in a divided society are less fully addressed. Given the extensive research interest on ethnic conflict and conflict resolution, it is important that researchers address methodological concerns in this area. Thus, this article explores the challenges of interviewing political elites based on doctoral research on the Northern Ireland Executive Committee 1999–2002 under the Good Friday Agreement.

The article argues that researchers need to take account of particular concerns when interviewing politicians within an ethnic party system. Firstly, the ethnic identity of the researcher and that of the interviewee can present an important dynamic in the interview and may have a bearing upon data collection. The interviewee may make assumptions about the researcher's identity and tailor responses accordingly and the researcher may bring a degree of bias to the interview, influencing the questions posed and language used. I argue that the mutual impact of identity between researcher and respondent matters because the data may vary from an interview where the respondent assumes the researcher is on their 'side', to one where the researcher is assumed to be from the opposing ethnic group. Secondly, the researcher must recognise that politicians in a divided society are often reluctant to expand beyond the party line due to the zero-sum nature of politics; the researcher must therefore seek ways to get round respondents' stereotypical references towards their ethnic rivals.

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## Elite interviewing preparation

The series of 20 semi-structured interviews discussed in this article was undertaken over a period of six months with former ministers from the nationalist and unionist parties as well as politicians from parties not in the power-sharing government.<sup>1</sup> The interviews were semi-structured to investigate their opinions on the difficulties associated with the power-sharing executive and to give them the freedom to expand on areas, thus providing 'rich' information. The literature on elite interviewing recommends a number of strategies for effective data collection. For instance, Peabody et al. (1990) provide advice on drafting an interview schedule, obtaining access and recording interviews. Both Kenneth Goldstein (2002) and Darren Lilleker (2003) emphasise the importance of explaining the project fully to target respondents, why the researcher wishes to interview the politician and what is likely to be covered. Beth Leech (2002) suggests the interview schedule should move from 'non-threatening' to 'threatening' questions and Geoffrey Pridham (1987) suggests a 'funnel' method with general questions at the beginning before the more substantive aspects of the interview. I found this literature to be useful in practice and I adopted the approach of posing less challenging questions at the beginning of the interview in an effort to establish some degree of trust before dealing with issues that the politicians would probably see as more controversial. I would want to add, however, that the nature of antagonistic politics in a divided society can mean that seemingly straightforward questions can provoke adversarial, sectarian responses from politicians. The structure of the interview schedule, and especially the references and language used to refer to ethnic divisions, requires special attention.

## Managing identity issues

In elite interviewing there is an obvious power differential between the interviewer and the interviewee. In my case, the power dynamic was first brought into focus by the respective age, gender and status of interviewer and interviewees. The respondents are all experienced politicians, former ministers in the power-sharing government and/or senior members of their respective parties while I am a young researcher at the point of embarking on an academic career. As a young female I was aware of the 'male space' of politics (Mackay, 2004, p. 112) and that my gender would probably have an effect on the attitude of the respondent, given that the majority of respondents are male and middle-aged. A wealth of literature, of course, looks at gender relations (Connell, 1987; Pilcher and Coffey, 1996) and some (Gill and Maclean, 2002; Sarikakis, 2003) explores the challenges for women interviewing men. My own concern about the issue of age and gender was vindicated in a number of interviews. One politician provided commentary on the power-sharing government in terms of what he would tell his 'daughter' while others referred to me as 'love', 'dear' or 'lass'. I found these approaches quite patronising and irritating and was conscious they could have an impact on the data. When it came to data analysis, I therefore had to account for my negative feelings so as not to discredit the value of these responses.

While considerations of age and gender appear in all fieldwork, the potential impact of ethnic identity is clearly a particular concern for researchers in a divided

society. Indeed, the (over-simplified) Catholic/nationalist and Protestant/unionist dichotomy forced me to think about how to manage my identity as a young Catholic female. Facing the 'to tell, or not to tell' quandary in terms of being explicit about my identity, I decided to construct a role for myself as a 'neutral' researcher and to avoid disclosing my identity. While not denying that I have my own opinions on the subject, I was keen not to give these away by verbal or nonverbal support or disapproval. On reflection, however, I noted that in a number of cases my identity on the nationalist/unionist divide had been assumed by some respondents. I was, therefore, alerted to the possibility that my identity had an impact and had to analyse carefully the responses: what the interviewees may have said, or may not have said.

These issues are explored by John Brewer (1991) with regard to a young Catholic female researcher undertaking ethnography of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and as Tamar Hermann (2001, p. 90) notes, 'some of the negative influences of the researcher's identity cannot be remedied, but an awareness of them might mitigate their effects'. Indeed, it is generally accepted that one's identity can be ascertained in Northern Ireland with the subtle use of indicators such as name, place of birth, school, all part of the 'telling' discussed by Andrew Finlay (2001). A number of the interviewees inquired where I came from and several made a point of saying that my background was not important. On one occasion, a respondent paused after making a strong statement on the Northern Ireland constitutional issue and seemed to be expecting me to take a position on his political stance. Such situations led me to consider if my data had been distorted depending on whether or not the respondent assumed me to be of the same ethnic identity. Paul Arthur (1987) notes the success of his interviews with Dublin politicians because they trusted him due to his background; similarly, I had some successful interviews with nationalist politicians who may have been so relaxed because they had assumed me to be from the same community.

Having accepted that respondents may make assumptions about the researcher's background, it is important for the researcher in turn to think about whether they bring any bias to the project. As Arthur (1987, p. 205) notes, researchers on Northern Ireland 'are conscious that they carry their ethnic and emotional baggage with them'. He argues that the researcher's biographical data are important:

'One approaches an interviewee with certain pre-conceptions. One assumes that the interviewee is aware of one's ethnic background and reacts accordingly ... His instinct advises him who are friends and who are enemies, who will be accessible and who will procrastinate. In all of these assumptions he may be mistaken, but they are part of the psychological baggage he takes with him into an interview' (ibid., p. 209).

Arthur suggests that the researcher might choose to be open about their prejudice, 'but should be conscious that it is open to conversion' or manipulation by the politicians interviewed. To counter being used to convey the prejudices of those under investigation, he recommends interviewing 'as widely and as frequently as possible' (ibid., p. 215). Frequent and extensive interviewing, subject to the limitations of the target population to be studied, might well enable the researcher to analyse critically both his/her own bias and that of the respondents.

Interestingly, the term 'bias' has been subject to some debate, following Howard Becker's 1967 article 'Whose Side are We On?', which argues that researchers cannot avoid taking sides but should try to counter potential distortion by adhering to scholarly standards. Becker (1967, p. 246) suggests that 'by using our theories and techniques impartially, we ought to be able to study all the things that need to be studied in such a way as to get all the facts we require, even though some of the questions that will be raised and some of the facts that will be produced run counter to our prejudices'. Martyn Hammersley and Roger Gomm (1997a, p. 1.7) discuss the different meanings of bias, the relevant one for researchers in a divided society being the 'tendency on the part of researchers to collect data, and/or interpret and present them, in such a way as to favour false results that are in line with their judgements and political or practical commitments'.<sup>2</sup> Hammersley (2000, p. 12) sees bias as a threat to social research and argues that researchers 'should be as neutral as they can towards other values and interests in their work, in an attempt to maximise the chances of producing sound knowledge of the social world'. I suggest that in the context of elite interviewing, researchers can use techniques impartially and be as neutral as possible by carefully framing the interview schedule, keeping to the same themes with the different respondents and using neutral language.

Just as researchers who live in the region need to think about their bias, so too do researchers from abroad. Hermann (2001) writes of the researcher as 'insider' or 'outsider'; the 'insider' is someone who originates from or resides in the region and identifies with one or other community whereas the 'outsider' is from outside the region. It is important that both can have preconceived attitudes towards the conflict depending on their political sympathies and experiences. Just as the 'insider' encounters issues relating to identity, so too does the 'outsider' as he/she may have an Irish/British cultural heritage. Identity issues are thus a particularly important consideration for all researchers interviewing in a divided society such as Northern Ireland, not just those from the region.

On the related issues of identity and bias I argue that they can have a mutual impact on the researcher and the respondent in the interview situation. In addition to thinking about the prejudices of the respondents towards the researcher, they must reflect on how the totality and intersection of their personal characteristics (gender, age and ethnicity) may have a bearing on data collection and analysis. As Katharine Sarikakis (2003, p. 424) writes, 'traits with socially assigned connotations such as gender, age and ethnicity rarely remain neutral in the process'. It is therefore crucial for the researcher to try to limit any potential distortion arising from bias by employing the research method in an impartial manner.

## **Probing beyond ethnic party positions**

The literature on elite interviewing provides some insights into how to deal with the style of speech used by politicians which is useful in a divided society. Nirmal Puwar (1997, p. 1.1) notes the habit of politicians to employ 'monologues of speech, highly defensive off-hand behaviour, to a delivery of pre-scripted official speech' and Stephen Ball (1994, pp. 97–98) points to the difficulty of managing interviews where the respondents seek 'to present themselves in a good light, not

to be indiscreet, to convey a particular interpretation of events, to get arguments and points of view across, to deride or displace other interpretations and points of view'. While these difficulties may occur in societies not experiencing conflict, they are particularly pertinent in a divided society as it is hugely difficult to probe beyond ethnic party positions.<sup>3</sup> The problem of monologues certainly occurred during my interviews with some quite forceful politicians determined to advocate their well-known position. While monologues can prevent the researcher from asking questions, I felt they brought some unexpected rewards as a number of politicians 'branched off' into interesting and relevant areas which I had not fully considered. As Pridham (1987, p. 81) suggests, politicians giving lengthy responses can be of benefit, 'so long as such a response fell within the scope and direction of the questionnaire it did not matter too much, and there are even advantages in seeing how a respondent links analytically the different aspects of the subject'.

The literature on elite interviewing does not, however, deal with the particular challenge of getting beyond the party position whereby politicians often use stereotypical references due to the mistrust of their inter- and intra-bloc rivals/opponents.<sup>4</sup> The mistrust between parties in Northern Ireland is explored by Cathy Gormley-Heenan and Gillian Robinson (2003), and Duncan Morrow (2005) who, with reference to Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia, explores how political leaders often opt to maintain ethnic antagonism over accommodation and reconciliation. To counter the polarised positions of politicians symptomatic of this mistrust, I endeavoured to employ the technique of 'probing' to challenge stereotypes and get beyond the party line. Jeffrey Berry (2002, p. 681) suggests probing when the interviewer needs to gather more depth and to steer a respondent from talking about something else. Probing was particularly necessary in my interviews as the politicians praised the former ministers from their own party and criticised those from the other governing parties who were supposed to be their coalition 'colleagues'. It perhaps should be expected that, in a coalition, individual parties would be keen to 'talk up' the contribution made by their own members over others,<sup>5</sup> but this appeared designed to denigrate the performance of ministers from the other parties and certainly those from the other bloc and can, to some extent, be explained by the institutional requirement for inclusivity.<sup>6</sup> Probing thus involved asking additional questions to explore official party speak, pointing to perceptions of the other side and recalling how the event was presented in the media. Framing criticisms by reference to media reports was a particularly effective tactic as it suggested the interpretation was not necessarily my own opinion and encouraged politicians to respond to the opposing viewpoint.

As the literature on interviewing does not explore these issues, researchers might look to the literature on conflict management/resolution for techniques used to challenge politicians' adversarial narratives. For instance, the advice to a third-party mediator to challenge polarised positions by identifying areas of concern shared with their opponents (Tillett, 1999) may have benefits for researchers. While the researcher's position is, of course, entirely different to a conflict resolution mediator, the roles nevertheless appear to share attributes such as interpersonal communication skills and a concern to build rapport as well as skills in analysis, facilitation and option development (*ibid.*, p. 51). Researchers and mediators in conflict resolution also appear to share similar objectives of encouraging politicians to respond

to the perceptions of the other side. The conflict management training explored by Mohammed Abu-Nimer (1999) and Jay Rothman (1992) with regard to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict suggests that the facilitator should encourage participants to explore areas of possible consensus with the other side. Similarly, I hoped both to explore the common ground that exists between the four former governing parties by pointing to support for a devolved administration with local ministers and to enable discussion on the various proposals for power sharing.

Researchers interviewing politicians involved in a ‘peace process’ must be alert to the competing narratives of the conflict and the fact that politicians’ views on past events can also be clouded by what is happening contemporaneously. This occurred in my interviews in trying to access politicians’ views on power sharing almost three years after the final suspension of the institutions.<sup>7</sup> The political environment has moved on considerably from 1999–2002, especially in the wake of electoral swings from the more moderate UUP and SDLP to, respectively, the DUP and Sinn Féin. It was thus a challenge to uncover how the elites felt about the process back in 1998 as their recollection is often filtered by more recent developments. For instance, a number of respondents, when asked to elucidate how they felt about the requirement for an inclusive executive in 1999, replied with scepticism about future inclusivity given recent allegations of Irish Republican Army (IRA) criminality.<sup>8</sup> The researcher must therefore consider the opposing narratives and how negative developments in a ‘peace process’ can obscure the respondents’ interpretations of previous, more accommodative interactions between the political parties.

## Conclusions

Despite the difficulties involved, elite interviewing is a crucial methodological tool for accessing the views of politicians as other techniques may not allow the researcher to uncover the ‘rich’ information required for the particular project. Elite interviewing in a divided society, does, however, raise a number of specific challenges. The researcher must consider whether the identity and potential bias of both the researcher and the researched may have a bearing on the data. Even if the identity of the researcher is not disclosed, it is likely that the interviewee may have made an assumption and edited their answers accordingly. The method should therefore be used as part of the triangulation of research methods (Davies, 2001), with interviewing ‘as a complement to the published material as one tries to build up as accurate and objective a picture as possible’ (Arthur, 1987, p. 215).

It is also important to bear in mind that inter-party mistrust in a divided society makes it difficult to probe beyond the ethnic party position. The technique of probing may enable the researcher to challenge stereotypes and to explore the potential common ground between the opposing ethnic groups. The researcher should also take into account politicians’ competing narratives and consider how recent political developments may cloud their interpretations of past events. It would certainly have been helpful before embarking on the data collection if the literature had dealt with the challenges of interviewing political elites in a divided society. This article will hopefully have gone some way to help bridge the gap.

## Notes

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- 1 The Executive Committee November 1999 was made up of 10 ministers: 3 UUP; 3 SDLP; 2 DUP and 2 Sinn Fein as well as a UUP First Minister and a SDLP Deputy First Minister. This was the first time power was devolved to the region in 25 years and the devolved government significantly included not just nationalist and unionist representatives, as in 1973–1974, but also republicans with two Sinn Fein ministers. The aim of the interviews was to provide an account of the respective politicians' views on mandatory power sharing, their opinions on the structure of the executive, their evaluation of its operation and their beliefs on how the institution might be more stable in the future.
- 2 See Hammersley and Gomm (1997a; 1997b) and Romm (1997) for debate on the meaning of 'bias'.
- 3 The majority of my interviews were with nationalist and unionist politicians who adhere to the ethnic party line on the constitutional question. I also interviewed elites from the cross-community Alliance party who provided yet another perspective from outside the executive and who were critical of the design of the power-sharing executive and decisions taken by the governing parties.
- 4 Mistrust was evident in the Northern Ireland Executive Committee as it included four antagonistic parties, one of which, the DUP, was opposed to the Agreement and whose ministers refused to attend executive meetings due to the inclusion of Sinn Fein. Some politicians from the other parties chose to play down the DUP strategy, saying it was 'purely a PR exercise' with no real effect while others relayed serious difficulties in that DUP non-attendance was 'a continuing sore' and had the executive 'over a barrel'.
- 5 Inter-party fractiousness is a concern for all coalitions. For example, see Gallagher and Michael (1993) for the difficulties experienced in the Republic of Ireland Fianna Fail–Progressive Democrat coalition 1989–1992 and Garry (1995) for the problems of the Fianna Fail–Labour coalition 1992–1994. The point in relation to coalition government in Northern Ireland is that differences over wider political issues to do with the conflict inform elites' responses rather than the stuff of 'normal' politics.
- 6 Parties with sufficient strength in the assembly had automatic membership under the d'Hondt procedure of executive formation and did not have to reach accommodation on a policy platform before government formation which meant a contrived coalition and a lack of collective responsibility. Living up to a charge of departments as 'fiefdoms', ministers were able to act unilaterally if they so chose; the most cited example is the decision of the Sinn Fein health minister Bairbre de Brún to locate Belfast maternity services in opposition to her departmental committee. The volatility of the administration was also demonstrated by assembly members of governing parties voting against executive decisions and the attempt made in June 2000 by the DUP to exclude Sinn Fein from the executive which failed to attract the necessary cross-community support in the assembly. The lack of executive cohesion was further evident in February 2001 when a fairly bitter public spat arose between the executive and the DUP over the ownership of free public transport for the elderly: while the Office of First and Deputy First Minister announced the initiative as an executive policy, the DUP were adamant that it had first been proposed by them.
- 7 The devolved institutions were suspended in October 2002 amid allegations of an IRA spy ring at Stormont. The assembly elections of November 2003 saw Sinn Fein and the DUP overtake the SDLP and the UUP as the major parties within the nationalist and unionist blocs. Talks aimed at restoring power sharing led to British and Irish governments' 'Comprehensive Agreement' proposals in December 2004 but failed to restore devolution, reportedly over the decommissioning issue. In 2006 the British Government legislated for a new Assembly and set a deadline for the restoration of the devolved institutions by 24 November.
- 8 The Independent Monitoring Commission report in February 2005 said Sinn Fein members were involved in sanctioning the Northern Bank robbery a month earlier. The IMC report in May 2005 stated that the IRA had been involved in the murder of Robert McCartney and that the organisation was still recruiting, training and gathering intelligence as well as fuel smuggling and money laundering. See [independentmonitoringcommission.org](http://independentmonitoringcommission.org)

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