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Triangulation to Protect Elite Interview Informants: Citing Documents Rather Than Interviews

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Abstract: For all its merits in research, elite interviewing may have an ethical problem in terms of the risk of exposing the identities of informants – the pool of informants is small, the danger of the revelation of their identities is big. Frequently used ways of informant protection – anonymizing interviewees and having their written consent – cannot protect informants completely. This paper suggests the use of triangulation between interviews and documents as a way of protecting informants. By citing documentary evidence that supports interview comments rather than citing interviews directly, the identities of informants can be protected more thoroughly without violating academic integrity.

Key words: Elite interviewing, informant protection, triangulation

Ⅰ. Introduction

In conducting interviews,[1)] a common dilemma is the trade-off between the delivering of information uncovered during the interviews and the protection of the identity of interviewees. This is especially true in the case of interviewing participants of the policymaking process. Compared with other kinds of interviews, elite interviewing targets a relatively small number of policy actors, whose identities can perhaps be surmised through analysis of their comments during interviews.

As a way of protecting interviewees, especially those who take part in elite interviews, I suggest triangulation between interviews and documents. Here, triangulation means cross-checking the evidence from interviews and documents. After conducting an interview, the researcher – i.e. the interviewer – looks for documents that support the comments of the interviewee and cites documents rather than interviews. Indeed, reliable documents are not always easy to find, especially in contexts where record-keeping technology is less developed and/or an authoritarian regime hinders proper record-keeping, which sets a limit to this method. At the same time, where documents are poorly recorded for political reasons, it is likely to be even more dangerous to expose informants' identities, so that the researcher should be even more wary of citing interviews.

In this paper, I will present the usage of triangulation between interviews and documents as a way of reconciling the merits of interviews and the protection of interviewees' identities. Then, I will seek to suggest potential ways to overcome the problems posed by this method.

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Ⅱ. Protecting informants: an ethical issue

Elite interviewing has merits in promoting a deep understanding of policy-making. In-depth interviewing enables a researcher to hear the raw voices of the persons relevant to the research, to access their experiences and their own interpretations of them (Seidman 2006: 9). Unlike a survey that requires respondents to answer given questions, in-depth interviewing enables a researcher to interact with interviewees with more flexibility (Bryman 2008: 438). Moreover, elite interviewing provides 'rich' information (McEvoy 2006: 189) by enabling the researcher to hear from the direct participants of the policy-making process, giving them access to 'behind the veil' anecdotes and the 'true intentions' interviewees had for the relevant policy. By contrast, published documents may intentionally omit or misrepresent sensitive issues (Davies 2001: 74–5). Interviewing can thus be useful for checking the validity of written documents.

However, elite interviewing is not only a substitute for document analysis: the former can also complement the latter. There can be a flood of reports, pamphlets, and newspaper articles, where the main arguments of policy actors are intermingled with clichés and 'politically correct' statements. Moreover, elite interviewing can help the researcher find documents which have been overlooked in previous research. Interviewing actual policy actors will help the researcher to sort through the mass of documentary materials and discover key documents in the massive archive.

Therefore, for my research on changes in pharmaceutical regulation, I conducted elite interviewing, as well as reviewing documents. I interviewed people from both the public and private sectors, who directly or indirectly participated in the policy-making process.

For all its methodological merits, however, elite interviewing has a serious ethical risk in that the identities of the interviewees are potentially easily revealed. Moreover, revelation of their identity may cause serious damage to informants. Elite interviewing is often concerned with politically sensitive issues. If interviewees are identified, it may damage their reputation and career, especially if the case is still salient in a political or legal sense.

Without even mentioning the recent emphasis on research ethics, a researcher has a duty to protect informants who have shown goodwill in helping with the research from any disadvantages and damage that the revelation of the informant's identity may cause. As anthropologists' research ethics guidelines put it, researchers' utmost obligation is 'to their research participants' and, 'when there is conflict, the interests and rights of those studied should come first' (Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth 1999).

The issues surrounding pharmaceutical regulation that I researched have been politically sensitive in the country in question. There was a series of massive collective action in relation to them, including strikes. Government officials and leaders of associations resigned because of the political conflicts resulting from the reforms. Therefore, revelation of the identities of my interviewees might damage their relationships with their colleagues in the government or private associations, as well as their future career prospects. I therefore needed

to find a clear way of protecting their identities. However, the conventional ways of protecting informants – most notably, anonymization and written consent – will not be sufficient to protect elite interviewees, as I explore below.

Anonymization?

Anonymization is a way of protecting informants by avoiding the direct revelation of their identity (Bryman 2008: 124; Richards and Schwartz 2002: 138; Wiles et al. 2006: 291). Anonymization goes beyond the simple replacement of the names of informants (Thomson et al. 2005): not only their names but also other indicators such as gender, religion, locations, companies, and even pseudonyms are to be removed or replaced.

However, especially in elite interviewing, even a sophisticated form of anonymization seems far from a perfect way of protecting the interviewee's identity. Elite interviewees are usually those who have directly participated in a certain policy process and played a particular role in regard to it. Therefore, the range of these persons is limited, and the number of these persons is likely to be small. Their roles, ideas, attitudes, knowledge of the process, and even verbal habits may already be known to other participants of the policy process and interested researchers. Therefore, even if a researcher hides their identities, interviewees may nevertheless be easily identifiable. For example, in my research on pharmaceutical regulation, I found that my interviewees had debated each other on regulatory issues in committees and the Parliament, so that their ideas on the issue, as well as their styles of talking, could be well known to each other.

Of course, readers' guesses with regard to the identities of informants are not always correct. However, this may cause another problem. An interviewee who has not actually made a problematic comment can be mistakenly identified and blamed by a reader. In order to protect the victim of such false guessing, the identity of the true informant may need to be revealed. Therefore, by citing an interview, an individual can be identified and blamed either correctly or falsely – both of which breach research ethics.

Considering these problems, attempting to ensure anonymity by codifying interviewees is a problematic way of protecting them, especially in elite interviewing.

Written consent?

Another popular way of respecting interview ethics is asking the interviewees for their written consent to the citing of their comments (Bryman 2008: 122–3; Richards and Schwartz 2002: 137–8). The Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) of the University of Oxford emphasizes the importance of written consent by participants in its guidelines on research ethics (Form CUREC 1. Section F (1) and (3); Form CUREC 2. Section 12 (C), 14 and 15). Through this consenting process, the interviewees have the chance to receive information on the objectives and content of interviews and to demand the researcher refrain from citing any comments they do not wish to be revealed. In the case of elite interviewing, the targets of interviewing are 'elites' who are expected to be able to calculate the risk of interviewing and take the responsibility for their decision to participate. During my research on pharmaceutical regulation, I collected

such written consent from interviewees.

However, written consent is not a perfect tool for the protection of the interviewee either. In a way, it is the researcher's abdication of his/her responsibility to protect interviewees. Even in elite interviewing, interviewees may not predict all of the controversies their comments may bring about. The damage done to elite interviewees due to unexpected controversies can be enormous, considering that they reveal 'insiders' information' on these unexpectedly sensitive issues. In a case where a cited comment causes trouble, the interviewee's written or recorded consent does nothing other than direct responsibility for the trouble away from the researcher to the interviewee. In this sense, written consent actually serves to protect the researcher rather than the interviewee.

Ⅲ. Triangulation: a way of finding alternative sources for citation

How, then, can we protect our interviewees from the possible revelation of their identities and the resultant problems? I suggest minimizing the direct citation of interviewees' comments by substituting sentences in documents for interview comments. The researcher thus utilizes interviews as gateways through which to find relevant documents, as well as ways to check the validity of written documents already found. Finding citations that are identical to, or at least support, the relevant interview comments, the researcher then cites those sentences in place of the comments given during the interview.

The idea of cross-checking evidence derived from different methodologies – triangulation – has been developed as a way of checking the validity of such evidence (Jick 1979: 602). Triangulation is applied not only to research using mixed methods of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell 2009; Jick 1979), but also qualitative research using different methods, such as interviewing and document analysis (Davies 2001; Seale 1999).

Triangulation has generally been discussed principally as a technique for proving the validity of evidence. However, it can also be utilized as a way of protecting interviewees. If an interview comment is supported by a document, the researcher can cite either. These forms of evidence contain identical information or, at the very least, support each other. The interview contents show that the citation in the document reflects the ideas or experiences of the interviewee who actually participated in the policy process. Similarly, the document proves that the interviewee's comment is not a mistaken reconstruction.

If the document and interview contain identical information, the researcher can cite the supporting document, instead of taking the possible risk of unveiling the informants' identities by directly citing interviews. For clarifying the use of elite interviewing in the research, it will be sufficient for the researcher to outline in the methodology section the ways of selecting interviewees, conducting interviews, and citing supporting documents in place of interviews for the purpose of protecting interviewees. The names of interviewees will be hidden behind the names of the associations or institutions that published the documents. Nevertheless, the information that has passed through the cross-checking process will be delivered in the researcher's work.

Of course, it is possible that the interviewee is the author of the document and therefore the interviewee's identity may be revealed in any case by citing that document. After all, published memoirs, autobiographies and articles written by relevant policy actors are often used as documents in qualitative research. Nevertheless, a person's identity as the author of a document is one thing and their identity as an interviewee is another. A published article or book, as well as the name of the author, is already open to the public, whereas an interview is conducted exclusively between the interviewer and the interviewee. The researcher's duty to protect the informant is thus applied to protect the 'interviewee' in the exclusive interview, rather than the 'author' of a published document.

Ⅳ. Possible problems and their solutions

It may well be argued that, even if the method I suggest contributes to protecting informants, this will be at the cost of learning fresh facts from direct participants of the policy process in question, which is an important merit of elite interviewing. Moreover, where reliable documentary evidence is not sufficient, triangulation itself may be unlikely. My method may therefore not be a complete alternative to citing elite interviews. Nevertheless, rather than hastily abandoning this method for protecting informants, we may well try to find alternative sources of documents, which can enable us to discover the 'true intentions' of policy actors, even in a severely authoritarian context.

By interviewing a direct participant, the researcher is expected to learn about the 'true' intentions of the interviewee or 'behind the scenes' anecdotes, which are not supposed to be disclosed in existing documents. Then, how can we possibly maximize the citing of documents even for the delivery of such 'behind the veil' stories? One of the ways is utilizing documents written by interviewees' policy opponents. A reason that a story remains 'behind the veil' could be because this story may cause trouble to the interviewees themselves, to their colleagues, or to their negotiation partners. Interviewees' opponents in the policy may well try to disclose the 'behind the veil' story as a way of reducing interviewees' influence in the relevant political game. Therefore, the researcher may well search documents written by opponents or the minutes recording debates between policy-makers and opponents as sources of published evidence.

Moreover, analyzing opponents' documents enables us to compare different views and interpretations in the research. Mere selection and presentation of documentary evidence that corroborates certain interviewees' statements distort the research. By presenting contrasting views, the researcher can look for the 'true story' in a dialectic way.

Another way is consulting newspaper or journal articles written around the time the policy event being researched was in progress. This method helps especially when interviewees' opponents and their documents are not easily found. Journalists may have revealed something the interviewee wanted to keep 'behind the veil'. Alternatively, a journalist may already have conducted an interview at that time with the policy-maker whom the researcher has interviewed recently. The interviewee may have 'leaked' the 'behind the

veil' story or a 'true intention' in the past. Indeed, at the time the policy event was in progress, there could have been more things for the interviewee to hide than now. On the other hand, however, the list of things for the interviewee to hide at that time could be different from the list as it presently stands. In this sense, the researcher may find a supporting document for the interviewee's comment on the 'behind the veil' story in old newspapers and journals.

In addition, the researcher may well try to conduct interviews with those opponents, journalists, and so on. By triangulating between alternative documents and alternative interviews, the researcher can check the trustworthiness of the anecdotes they reveal.[2)] Here as well, citing documents rather than interviews helps protect these alternative interviewees.

Actually, there is a critical limit in this method: without reliable documents triangulation is almost impossible. For instance, under a less developed and authoritarian state, neither government records nor newspaper articles are fully reliable, and political opposition is strictly oppressed. I concede that the triangulation method is more applicable in contexts where there is a certain level of political freedom, good record-keeping and clearly set roles of public and private actors in the policy process.

Nevertheless, even with all the possible difficulties, it may be worthwhile to keep seeking documentary evidence even for research on authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, under an authoritarian regime elite interviewing itself is not easy to conduct: both governing elites and oppositions may misrepresent their intentions or even avoid interviews. On the other, where political freedom is oppressed, the danger of the revelation of informants' identities is even greater. Therefore, we may well try to find alternative documents, such as those created by other governments, organizations, press companies or political exiles. We may be able to interview those foreigners or political exiles. Here as well, citing documents rather than interviews will help protect informants in overseas, such as political exiles.

Ⅴ. Conclusion

In conducting elite interviews, the researcher is obliged to do their best to protect interviewees. By searching for documentary evidence that supports interview statements (triangulation), and then citing the former rather than the latter, the researcher can not only improve the trustworthiness of evidence but also secure the anonymity of interviewees.

In this short article, I have suggested that we may still potentially unveil 'behind the scenes' information revealed through interviews by looking for documentary evidence by political opponents and journalists during the time of the policy process. Indeed, the triangulation method, which is only available when there are reliable documents, is not a perfect substitute for interviews, but persistent efforts to mine the documents and find relevant alternative interviewees can be a promising way of protecting the identities of interviewees.

[Notes]

1) Not all interviews are conducted to find fresh ideas, with some, especially structured interviews, being utilized as an alternative to surveys. In this article, I focus exclusively on elite interviews, which are generally semi-structured and conducted in order to hear from relevant policy actors about their ideas and experiences in regard to the policy event being researched.
2) Of course, the researcher should see to it that the identities of interviewees should not be revealed to each other during this cross-checking process.

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