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Enlisting the Gatekeeper: Chain-Referral and Elite Access in Foreign Policy Analysis

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Abstract

How can ordinary journalistic and academic researchers, young doctoral candidates in particular, get past the gatekeepers and access the exclusive world of elite policy makers and top executives for purposes of interviewing? This is the question this case study will address. The author found that non-random "snowball sampling" or chain-referral can begin with the gatekeepers, who themselves give access to elite interviewees. In the context of a process-tracing study, this is a potent methodology. In short, the key to getting "snowball access" rolling is the interpersonal relationships that the researcher should establish with the first few persons who grant an interview.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand three important aspects of elite interviewing methodology
    - Why elites shun interviews
    - How referral sampling is indispensable for both data collection and data triangulation
    - How the researcher can win elite trust
- Design and execute a plan for gaining access to elites for collecting primary data through interviewing

Project Overview and Context

The present case study originates with the author's research on Plan Colombia, the joint *démarche* in United States–Colombia relations that rendered aid to prevent state failure. The research aim was to find out the role and extent of the smaller state's agency in this international affair. In the ambivalent academic literature and on record in government documents was too little reliable information and none at all on some issues. Once it had transpired that the answers to all the interesting questions were held by the policy makers in Washington and Bogotá who had made all the decisions, it was clear that unless these elites could be interviewed, the research project would add little value.

This study presents the author's research on Plan Colombia and experience with elite interviews. It highlights two methodological difficulties: (1) non-random sampling, how it can substitute in a credible way for the logic of random sampling in qualitative research, and (2) referral sampling as a means of not so much conventional sampling as winning trust and then access in a population of inaccessible, publicity-shy interviewees.

A single method solved both problems, and aided the author to interview more than half of the decision makers known to have had a hand in the making of Plan Colombia, including the ex-President of Colombia and the highest ranking career diplomat in the U.S. State Department (Mendez, 2017). In brief, using chain-

referral sampling (*aka.* "snowball sampling") to *access* elites for interviews was the effectual method in the context of causal process-tracing. The author found by experience that this method was practically the only way of getting access to the elites in question and that such "referral access," when carried to the point of saturation of both data and theory, got better results than classical sampling could have dreamed of.

Research Design—The Case for Snowballing nto Elite Interviews

Modern social science sampling methods rest on a precept known as the "democratization of opinion" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 4), which assumes anyone may have valid, reliable data. Thus, the random survey was born. But, however, like atavism to the *status quo ante* elite interviewing might seem nowadays, random sampling is hit-or-miss if "the causal processes of interest are very specific episodes of decision-making at the elite level, where a limited set of actors are involved in deliberations, decisions, and actions regarding a particular political outcome" (Tansey, 2007, p. 769). Thus, it is that more and more methodology theorists are acknowledging the validity of non-probability sampling of prospective elite interviewees.

Novices at methodology, however, are prone to fall in step with what Everybody Is Doing, to the neglect of their own special needs, which spring from their study's aim. Sampling is one example. Political scientists defend their scientific credentials by approaching data validity and reliability through the looking-glass of the random sample. But Coleman (1958) notes that random sampling "never includ[ed] (except by accident) two persons who were friends" (p. 28) but treats everybody in the aggregate, reducing issues to *intra*-personal ones and giving no thought to *inter*-personal relations. Snowball sampling better fits the "shift to groups as the units of analysis, or to networks of relations among individuals" (Coleman, 1958, p. 28) in that the chain of referrals is a first approximation to such networks.

"Snowball sampling occurs probably most frequently, in which a researcher asks an interviewee who they should talk to next" (Phillips, 2014, p. 542). The first interviewees are known as "seeds," who when asked give "referrals" to other, prospective interviewees. The method assumes that if a population is special or sparse, its members will know each other. It "is recommended for use only in populations for which this assumption holds true" (Sudman & Kalton, 1986). It is especially apt for researching sensitive issues and "hidden populations" like drug addicts and illegal aliens, when no sampling frame exists, and size and boundaries are unknown (Wejnert & Heckathorn, 2011). But chain-referral had also been used to reach an inaccessible network of policy makers whereby "the researcher collects data on the few members of the target population he or she can [access], then asks those individuals to provide the [help] needed to [access] other members of that population whom they happen to know" (Babbie, 2014, pp. 200–201). It is thus recommended in international relations, as in sociological research, as it "allows for sampling of natural interactional units" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). The author relied on analysis of the interactional units of the United States and Colombian Executive branches; his project became an object-lesson in how advantageously snowball sampling can be used in foreign policy analysis.

Foreign policy analysts investigate persons, decisions, and events in and for their specificity, in the first

instance. Small-state agency in foreign affairs is considered a unicorn, to analyze it is not to generalize about small states in the aggregate but to understand what *these* leaders did in *this* case, because that still is the main unknown. The author had reason to believe that elite informants would know things that *he could not know that he did not know*. In such circumstances, you do not need a "sample" at all, in the sense of a representative sub-population as in statistical surveys, because it cannot yield the data of interest. Moreover, decision-making processes are usually opaque in the apex institutions of the state. Success depended on questioning, not equal, random anybodies, but precisely identified "key informants" (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p. 105), as well as a format that allowed "much more leeway for following up whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewer" (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286), so as to elicit their key information. The best solution was found to be the unstructured interview. By not making the informant choose between ready-made answers, they may discover "it depends" qualifiers, or multiple or conflicting attitudes on the same issue. It even allows the informant to take the lead: "unstructured interviewers … provide a general sense of direction and allow respondents to tell their stories" (Marvasti, 2004, p. 21).

In the case of Plan Colombia, scholars in the field assumed because of the power asymmetry that Colombians release public information strategically to avoid U.S. wrath. This prejudice the author could rebut only with inside information from those present at the creation. In circumstances like these, elite interviewing is the most fruitful (and may be the only) data collection method. Elite interviewing also dovetails with the process-tracing method that the author found necessary for causal analysis:

> [E]lite interviewing is highly relevant for process tracing approaches to case study research … [which] frequently involves the analysis of political developments at the highest level of government. […] Such interviews can allow the researcher to collect first-hand testimony from direct participants and witnesses regarding critical events and processes. They provide the researcher with a means to probe beyond official accounts and narratives and ask theoretically guided questions about issues that are highly specific to the research objectives… . When interviewees have been significant players, when their memories are strong, and when they are willing to disclose their knowledge of events in an impartial manner, elite interviews will arguably be the most important instrument in the process tracer's data collection toolkit. (Tansey, 2007, p. 766)

This methodological combination is being applied more and more to qualitative studies in political science and international relations (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Alles, Guilband, & Lagrange, 2018; Berry, 2003; George & Bennett, 2005; Goldstein, 2002; Lamont, 2015; Lilleker, 2003; Richards, 1996; Tansey, 2007).

Interviews, structured or unstructured, elite or general, pose at least three methodological hurdles: (1) inaccessibility of interviewees, (2) subjectivity of both the data source *and* the data collector, and (3) lack of resources, man-hours above all, adequate to the task. All three are interrelated, but this case study focuses on the first. It is a home truth that "the value of good contacts and pushing past gatekeepers should not be underestimated" (Harrison & Callan, 2013, p. 75). The necessity yet severe difficulty of getting at elite acts is recognized by foreign policy analysts. To record "live" political actors behind the scenes discussing anything like foreign policy in their "natural habitat," then do conversation analysis on the recording transcripts is highly

unlikely! “The institutional established policy unit meetings would have been the only [authentic] interactions that were available to me. Although I managed to record three such meetings, the data set is too small for analysis” (Futaák-Campbell, 2018, p. 34).

The author found out that enlisting gatekeepers rather than pushing past them was the key that unlocked the combinatory value of chain-referral sampling in elite interviewing. He needed only to identify and get at some or maybe just one of the participants or of the elites networked-in with them, who would know others unknown or inaccessible to the author, to get the “snowball” rolling that was to finesse his many methodological difficulties.

Research Practicalities—Referral Access and Saturation

Ideally, you want access to every significant actor, not knowing how influential or just unique one person’s input might be, regardless of how many other elites/special persons have been interviewed. The value of chain-referral or snowball sampling, once it gets going, is that you can contact and access a limitless number of prospects, in principle. Circumstances may constrain you to the second-best data of a sample, but in decision analysis, you cannot rest content with that. The point of “snowballing” is for your access to ramify as far as it can go; the term “chain-referral access” should perhaps supplement “chain-referral sampling.”

No formula exists for determining the size of a non-random sample, but chain-referral lets it expand step-wise to any size deemed necessary or convenient (Tansey, 2007), while giving scope to the reiterative analysis of the results to date in the Bayesian manner. A convenient, fitting, and reliable criterion to use in qualitative sample-sizing is called *saturation* in the Grounded Theory literature; it is the point at which nothing new of value or interest, either of data or “theory” (i.e., viewpoints), is emerging from further interviews (Onwuegbuzie, Leechand, & Collins, 2011). At that point, further data collection is unnecessary (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Data saturation is also called “saturation sampling” (Coleman, 1958, p. 29). So as long as new facts are coming to light, the *data* are not saturated; when the marginal interview produces no new opinions or interpretations, theory saturation has been reached (Wejnert & Heckathorn, 2011). In the event, the author’s interview data evidenced Colombian agency so uniformly that theory saturation was soon reached.

Method in Action—The Crucial Importance of Elite Interviewees

Elite interviewing turned the tide in the evidentiary analysis of Plan Colombia. The author believed he could discern small state agency where it had been assumed none existed. Yet, agency is an elusive, essentially contested concept and phenomenon. Of all proxies for it that ever occurred to the author, none were unambiguously indicative. For example, the literature had received as conclusive evidence of Plan Colombia’s origin in Washington that its earliest known draft was in English (Stokes, 2005). The author discovered *from interviewing the man who wrote it* that he wrote in English to appeal directly to the Americans,

forestalling any delay or miscommunication due to the language barrier. Colombian origin was corroborated by a native speaker of English, who identified many idiomatic and stylistic howlers inconceivable in a U.S. State Department memorandum (Mendez, 2017).

It was also widely assumed in academe that Washington was dictating terms to the hapless Colombians, but the data available from secondary sources did not suffice to settle the matter definitively. The author found it to be false *after interviewing the most part of the Executive branch personnel in both countries who developed the Plan* (Mendez, 2017). It is hard to imagine another data source that could have yielded so convincing, yet so counterintuitive (or politically incorrect), a result. But there was called-for not just confirmation, but explanation, ideally joined-up and in depth ("who did all of what, when, where and why?"), not mere non-falsification of a few hypothetical generalities. The exploratory, potentially explanatory power of the unstructured interview format perfected the author's analytical study of Plan Colombia precisely because the pre-existing data were anything but valid and reliable.

Building Trust Through Chain-Referral

Political and executive elites make decisions that affect millions of people. Plan Colombia was no exception; it profoundly altered life for millions of Colombians. Elites must live with the harsh reality that however they decide, they will disaffect one constituency or another. Controversy dogs them, from hostile media coverage to intellectual elite censure. They are inured to suspect journalistic and academic investigators. Elite interviews are seldom easy and may seem unattainable.

Where social trust is high, elites may be contrastingly more affable:

> [S]cores of stereotypically rushed and busy Americans, often in high places, stopped to give a stranger two hours or more of their time to answer questions that entered into quite deep areas of their life histories, experiences and states of mind … [despite leading them] into a process of self-examination, which was new, arousing, and disturbing … There was … an implicit understanding of the usefulness and importance of participating in research, an automatic acceptance of the good faith of the pledge of confidence, a notable degree of candor, a free and interesting yielding to the spirit of inquiry. (Isaacs, 2015, p. 30)

But in countries and cultures where the social stratification is high and social trust scarce, elite interviews are notoriously difficult to negotiate. Refusal to interview is itself a fact from which useful inferences may be drawn: "the circumstances of the refusal, the way in which it is done, the excuses given, the reaction to the interviewer, may provide valuable data or, at least, hypotheses about the situation" (Dexter, 1970/2013, p. 37). If they are (1) too busy at the appointed time, or too disorganized, or (2) ring-fenced by gatekeepers, or (3) dreading their inability to give smart enough answers; or if you, the interviewer, (4) present an intimidating or untrustworthy demeanor, or (5) come with an overexplained (incomprehensible) or threatening project description (Dexter, 1970/2013, p. 36), then some foreknowledge of these causes of failure can help you obviate them. Rejections can sometimes be reversed by the intervention of trusted third parties too (Dexter,

1970/2013, pp. 38–39). Clearly, one should never give up hope!

As a rule of thumb, political elites who played the more important roles in controversial events are particularly likely to suspect the motives of interloping investigators. How, then, is it possible to pass the gatekeepers of this socially remote, inaccessible population? Among the foremost advantages of chain-referral sampling is how it can *build* trust based on shared prior insider membership (Babbie, 2014), which the author availed himself of in researching Plan Colombia. This case study is meant to aid novice researchers top gain access to elites by the method of enlisting the gatekeepers themselves to help build trust with them.

How to Get the Snowball Rolling—From Zero to First Interview

When doing elite interviews *via* chain-referral sampling, the most important persons in the chain are the first ones. These are the gatekeepers who can either give you access to or shut you out of the population you are trying to research. To get into his or her rolodex, you must convince this person that your research interest is genuine. This is fair because he or she is putting his or her reputation on the line by referring you through to prospective interviewees as someone whose business is to search for the truth. When seeking *entrée*, it is important to clearly articulate and justify your research aims so that you will not be perceived as seeking access for self-interest.

- *The magic open-sesame is to flip the gatekeeper from your adversary to your ally. This is not as hard as it sounds; the sincerity of the author's interest in the truth for its own sake proved attractive to both gatekeepers and those they shielded. Never exploit an interview as occasion to pitch your services or seek funding. Elites may be well-connected and rich, but they shun such impositions like the plague. You will garner no referrals if you do this, and rightly so.*

The author began the process of research without access to any of the elite Colombians he needed to interview, *namely*, policy makers in the Administration of President Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002). His first port of call was the local Embassy of Colombia in London. Through a personal contact in the Embassy, he was introduced to the Ambassador, whom the author had researched in advance, and knew had already been a policy maker and a former Presidential candidate, and whose grandfather and father had been Presidents of Colombia. Thus, he would be an effectual person to turn to. The author prepared himself well in advance of the meeting, knowing the importance of conveying that his desired access to certain people was research-related, not for personal gain.

- *The hardest phase is the first, when you are straining to enlist the gatekeepers and coax your first interview. This is the time to go for broke in bringing every possible contact or angle to bear on that one goal. Once you have it, to make that first interview a resounding success, make a little research project out of the interviewee.*

The meeting went extremely well. The author laid out logically the importance of getting these policy makers on record. He stressed how much he desired to get the story right, not favors to advance his career. The

Ambassador was impressed and the meeting, which had been scheduled for 1 hr, ended up lasting 3 hr. He had been a PhD candidate at Columbia University and understood the value of research interviewing, and he perceived the value of the author's research for future generations.

- *The ideal gatekeeper, like the ideal first interviewee, is one who can appreciate the value of research for its own sake.*

A few days later, the Ambassador rang the author to set up a meeting with Pastrana's foreign press secretary, who was residing in London. The author's meeting with her also proved crucial, as she took a keen interest in his research. He had managed to recruit two strong allies who would be very helpful from then on. Both conspired to set up an interview with President Pastrana's ex-Foreign Minister, who happened to be stationed in the Netherlands as Colombian Ambassador to The Hague. The author easily traveled to interview him. From the moment the author walked in the door, he felt a sense of comfort and familiarity, having been recommended by two people the interviewee knew well, who graciously dedicated the entire morning to the interview and gave copies of original documents related to his research to boot. He had also arranged for his chief of staff to attend, who provided vital information of his own.

- *The inflection-point in chain-referral access, when you can tell the ball is starting to roll on its own, is here—where the interviewees take pains to join forces with you to advance your research as if it were their own.*

Soon afterward, the author had access to anyone he wanted to interview who had been part of Pastrana's inner circle (including Pastrana himself), which took him to New York, Washington, and Bogotá. The interview with Colombia's Deputy Ambassador in Washington was a bonanza, as it occasioned being introduced to key U.S. State Department personnel who had worked under President Clinton on Plan Colombia. This proved pivotal later, when they offered the key access the author needed to reach top U.S. officials, including the third-ranking career diplomat in the State Department, all of whom were hesitant to speak on the record about their time in government.

- *Once the snowball has acquired its own momentum, the pace can get hectic. This may force you to work harder than you ever have before, but you must let no fair opportunity slip by, no matter how inconvenient it may become to pursue it. The ultimate outcome will be well worth the toil* (for additional tips, see Harvey, 2011).

Practical Lessons Learned—The Cruciality of Access

Some practical lessons are simple and straightforward; it is just that researchers seldom give the subject-matter any thought, little realizing how much impact little things can make on the success of their best laid, most complex plans. Here are some "pointers" that every novice should take note of before venturing into the field to enlist gatekeepers to gain you access:

1. If you need *entrée* to foreign elites for interviews, contact your local embassy from their country. Ambassadors and consuls, especially if you cultivate them personally (taking the somewhat higher degree of formality into account), can be more helpful than you would think. Indeed, enlisting these gatekeepers to be your ushers is likely the most conducive *entrée* of all.
2. Befriend all of your contacts and interviewees, establish a personal rapport with them, especially the first ones. Invite them to coffee. As the relationship ripens, you will end up taking them to dinner, and *vice versa*. If you get to know them privately, you may well find genuine lifelong friends. It certainly inures to the benefit of your present and future research programs if you take an actual interest in your referrers and your informants. (Do consult your institution's and/or funder's ethical rules, as they are sometimes very severe on this point.)
3. It helps a lot if you have learned how to "network" in your own social life; chain-referral works in essentially the same way if pursued in any political elite milieu. This tip is without prejudice to information you may have to the contrary about radically different classes; for example, the squatter or drug-user subcultures may be too suspicious of outsiders for a *bonhomie* approach to succeed.
4. Ideological militancy can be a networking killer. If you cut an ideologue's figure, you may get more access in some quarters, but only among co-ideologues. Do not mistake the cozy relations you enjoy with your academic peers for acceptability to the rest of humankind. If your population is one that you have undertaken to antagonize, even if out of impersonal or idealistic motives, do not think that no one will notice or care. Your reputation will precede you.
5. Behave yourself professionally and politely in interviews, without being cold, and observe the proper etiquette with foreigners. *Never* affect the manners of pop culture ("Hey, what's up, dude?"), even if you are committed to this style in your private life. If you are in fact still young, bend every effort toward knowing how to appear more mature than your age.
6. Institutional affiliation matters, the most prestigious names, of course, making the best impression. Potential interviewees in foreign countries, even among the governing classes, have been observed to stand in awe of the Ivy League and the Russell Group. So, if you have got it, flaunt it, but take care to do so delicately with no hint of arrogance. A gentler way of signaling your status would be to use your institution's email address or letterhead in all correspondence.
7. Having any academic position at all, such as a teaching post (above Teaching Assistant), can reassure a target group that you are to be taken seriously. Having an academic article or two published or accepted for publication also helps establish your *bona fides*. (Its content can evidence whether you are a "safe" interviewer or not, a prime consideration for public figures who have good reason to misgive "trouble-makers.") Mention your best accomplishments in casual conversation or in a covering letter. Without bragging, you want to come across as "the heavyweight," not as "the kid."
8. Pay especial attention to logistics. Arrive early to the interview and be equipped with the

wherewithal to make notes. It has become routine to ask permission to record the interview on your phone or a recorder, but bear in mind that elites may have various reasons to disapprove being recorded, which you must respect. Secure all permissions ahead of time, lest you put the interviewee ill at ease by asking on the spot. It is not uncommon nowadays to do telephone or Skype interviews, but remember that elites are far likelier to trust you in person. Absence of "the person conducting an interview would create an environment of caution for the elite interviewee. Using the telephone [or Skype] does not allow the interviewee to know who is listening, and therefore who [else] they may be talking to" (Dexter, 1970/2013, p. 7).

Conclusion

The methodology outlined above enabled the author to get unique access to key elite policy makers to achieve a better understanding of their intentions, statements, and acts inside the foreign policy establishments of the United States and Colombia. The quality of data needed to make the author's research valid and relevant necessitated this approach, on the premise that theories are only approximations of reality, not reality itself. It was his fieldwork that furnished the constructive materials that the author otherwise would have lacked for bridging the gap between theory and practice.

The techniques presented in this study imply that elite interviews may be the method of choice, if the researcher has real opportunities for access or can contrive his own opportunities. But you must also take account of the possibility that the conditions necessary for this methodology remain out of reach, in which case elite interviewing will be difficult to bring off.

In the case of Plan Colombia, the author's fieldwork was hard to manage, and he expended a lot of time and resources to get the desired outcome. The author had to step out of his comfort zone constantly and travel exhaustively to reach all of those who graciously made themselves available. They will not come to you. These are the challenges you must face when designing your research project. Snowball sampling/chain-referral access may end up being the best friend of one pursuing a doctorate, as it makes room for redeveloping the project step by revisionary step. Two rules of thumb by way of conclusion should be that (1) you "must know as much as possible about the context, stance, and past behavior of the interview subject before beginning the conversation … One does not want to waste the respondent's time, and one wants to get as complete, honest, and nuanced a story as possible from the respondent" (Hochschild, 2009, pp. 125–126), and (2) you must properly triangulate all the information furnished by your interviewees to assure that it is valid, reliable, and consistent with the truth.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. How would you operationalize a research project that requires you to access policy makers that you believe are out of reach?

2. What would be the first step you need to take in the current context of your research?
3. How would you go about finding the “gatekeeper” who would be your first access point?
4. What two essential functions does chain-referral simultaneously accomplish?
5. What is the criterion for sizing the snowball sample?

Further Readings

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