

## **Researching the Powerful**

To cite this reference: Walford, G. (2011) Researching the powerful, British Educational Research Association on-line resource. Available on-line at [INSERT WEB PAGE ADDRESS HERE] Last accessed \_[insert date here] \_

Geoffrey Walford, University of Oxford  
April 2011.

### **Contents**

Summary  
Introduction  
Access  
Interviewing  
Interpretation of interviews  
Ethical issues  
Conclusions

### **Summary**

This resource provides an introduction to some of the issues involved in researching the powerful in education. It focuses on problems of access, different types of interviewing, interpretation of data generated through interviews and ethical issues.

### **Introduction**

Where once educational research mainly focussed on children and teachers, there is now an increasing interest in researching those who have more power to initiate and sustain change within educational systems. Increased contestation within education has led to a desire to understand the processes and politics of change through studies of politicians, government officials and pressure group members at the local, national and international levels. Such policy research is also sometimes known as elite research, or 'studying-up', in contrast to the more common forms of research where the researcher usually has more power than the researched. It is often argued that such research presents particular difficulties for the researcher in terms of: access to research sites and respondents; the interview techniques that are needed; the interpretation of the data generated; and ethical issues.

### **Access**

Almost by definition, those who are powerful have considerable ability to stop research being conducted on their activities. Access to any research site is rarely easy, but it is argued that trying to gain an interview with the Secretary of State for Education, for example, presents particular problems. Access is likely to be particularly difficult where a policy initiative is controversial and fiercely contested. Several reports of research (e.g. Whitty and Edwards, 1994; Walford, 1991) show that those promoting or implementing the initiative may resist scrutiny.

One obvious way of easing access is exploiting pre-existing links with those in power. Fitz and Halpin (1994) were able to make use of a former member of the research community who had moved to what was then the Department of Education and Science; Kogan (1994) had himself been a private secretary to Edward Boyle, one of his first powerful people to be interviewed. Cassell (1988: 95) argues that the researcher of the powerful needs many of the characteristics of the social climber: 'everyone who might possibly know someone, must be contacted and asked if they will give introductions, vouch for one, and otherwise help one's enterprise'. Generally, the more sponsorship that can be claimed, the better. This may be in terms of 'institutional' or 'personal' sponsorship (Winkler, 1987). Where personal contacts cannot be made, having the research sponsored by a respectable funding agency is another way of smoothing access. But sponsorship by the 'wrong' people (those perceived as being against the policy change) may hinder access.

Gewirtz and Ozga (1994) have argued that access is more likely to be granted if the interviewees seem 'perfectly harmless'. In our still sexist society, where most of the powerful positions are still held by men, female researchers may be at an advantage in being perceived as 'harmless', especially if they are relatively young and not in a senior position within their own organization. Many researchers have noted (e.g. Easterday et al., 1977; Klatch, 1988) that being female is a great advantage in presenting a non-threatening image. However, others have argued (e.g. Neal, 1995) that being female may also lead to not being taken as seriously as a male researcher.

Kogan (1994) and Gewirtz and Ozga (1994) have all argued that it is easier to obtain access to the retired powerful than to those who currently hold power. These people may also be more willing to divulge information not generally known. However, the downside is that they may be attempting to 'write themselves into history' and to ascribe an importance to their own actions that is unjustified.

## **Interviewing**

Most policy studies have relied on semi-structured interviews and documents. Hertz and Imber (1995) provide a good collection on appropriate qualitative interview techniques. Moyser and Wagstaffe's (1987) more general book is also of value. The most important demand for successful interviews is that the interviewers have 'done their homework' (Hunter, 1993) and really prepared well for the interview (Phillips, 1998). Those with power will assume that the interviewer has

already read the published material on the policy - they will generally not be prepared to supply information that the researcher could have already obtained elsewhere. Those with power are the experts in the field (Moyser, 1988) and are likely to question why particular questions are being asked.

Their familiarity with being listened to means that some may 'just talk' and not answer the questions asked. As Ostrander (1993) argues, this is not simply self-centredness, but an accurate reflection of their position of power. Researchers need to be sure that they are not intimidated by those they are interviewing, and make sure that their agenda is followed rather than that of the interviewee. Mickelson (1994) believes too great a concern with rapport may lead to bland answers that are insufficiently challenged. She advocates a more confrontational style where evasive answers are challenged and blunt questions asked. In contrast Priyadharshini (2003) recommends a more inquisitorial rather than adversarial process. Several authors have advocated various feminist approaches to interviewing (e.g. Kezar, 2003; Marshall, 1984; Conti and O'Neil, 2007).

Another possible way of avoiding bland answers is to have a pair of interviewers rather than one. Fitz and Halpin (1994) and Gewirtz and Ozga (1994) used two interviewers when conducting their research as this allows one of the team to think carefully about the answers rather than trying to maintain a logical flow of questions. This 'listener' can intervene to ask clarification and expansion questions.

### **Interpretation of interviews**

Interpretation of data generated from interviews is always problematic, but it has been argued that interviews with the powerful are even more difficult to interpret than most. Political interviews are themselves highly political, and Ball (1994a) illustrates the 'game-like' nature of some of these interviews. He argues that, in interviews with powerful policy-makers, researchers need to recognise and explore more fully the interview as the 'play of power' rather than see it as separate from it. Those with power have vested interests that they wish to protect and are skilled interviewees.

Fitz and Halpin (1994) found that the Ministers and civil servants they interviewed were seldom alone. Ministers would refer to civil servants when they were unsure of the 'correct' reply. It is thus unclear as to what extent it is the interviewee's response or one that is communally produced. They also found themselves partly seduced by the coherence of the arguments and views put forward by various of their interviewees.

Ball (1994b) and Ozga and Gewirtz (1994) provide two good discussions of aspects of the interpretation problem.

## **Ethical issues**

All research brings ethical decisions, but those ethical decisions are particularly difficult if the researcher has political, ideological or religious views that are in opposition to those being studied (Klatch, 1988). One of the most difficult decisions is the degree to which the researcher should make clear his or her own views. Mickelson (1994) believes that one should be confrontational and challenge differing viewpoints, but the usual belief is that it is best to not be too explicit. Walford (1994), for example, writes about interviewing a right-wing fundamentalist Christian minister. In that interview he felt it necessary to partly challenge what had been said, but allowed the interviewee to misinterpret his beliefs in order to maintain rapport in the interview. While such techniques may lead to 'good' data, they raise severe ethical issues.

A major difference between researching the powerful and most other research is that the interviewees are chosen specifically because of who they are and the positions they hold. They are often people who are public figures. It is thus difficult to offer anonymity to such people for it is not only what is said that is important but also who said it. The fact that the interview is with a particular named person is often central to policy studies research (Walford, 2005) contrasts with most other forms of educational research where the respondents are chosen to be representative in some way of a wider population.

The fact that the named people involved are powerful can also lead to self-censorship. There can be real and perceived threats of libel which can lead to the researcher being ultra-careful about what is written where there is any doubt about interpretation. While it is ethical to take extreme care with interpretation, there may be a conflict with another ethical duty to report what has been said.

Practical matters, such as the need to retain good relations for future research, may also lead to self-censorship. The researcher who has disclosed hidden information in one piece of research is unlikely to be given access to that research site again. Exclusion from the Department of Education, for example, would have a major impact. Publishing material that is critical can also have a bad effect on future researchers as that may also be excluded if they are attached to the same university or seem to have links with the first researcher.

## **Conclusions**

Many researchers would now question whether the problems of researching the powerful are actually substantially different from those involved in any research. Back in 1994 Gewirtz and Ozga argued that the problems of access and interviewing of powerful people were actually fewer than with less powerful people such as parents. That the powerful are used to having their views

listened to, and understand the purposes of academic work much more than most other potential interviewees, is also a considerable advantage.

Similarly, in all types of interview, we always face the fundamental problem of 'how do you know if the informant is telling the truth?' (Dean and Whyte, 1958). Interviews with the powerful in education are not necessarily more difficult to interpret than other interviews. Indeed, as much is known about the informant and his or her past activities and statements, it may actually be easier to interpret and understand such interviews. Whether we are interviewing powerful people or young children, it is always necessary to recognise that there is never one objective reality to be uncovered, but a range of competing perspectives that interact and intersect with each other. Understanding these relationships is part of understanding the ways in which those with power are able to achieve their objectives.

## References

Ball, S.J. (1994a) Political interviews and the politics of interviewing. In Walford, G. (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. London, UCL Press.

Ball, S.J. (1994b) 'Researching inside the state: Issues in the interpretation of elite interviews.' In Halpin, D. and Troyna, B. (eds.) *Researching Education Policy: Ethical and methodological issues*. London, Falmer Press.

Batteson, C. and Ball, S. J. (1995) Autobiographies and interviews as means of 'access' to elite policy making in education, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 43, 2, 201-216.

Cassell, J. (1988) The relationship of observer to observed when studying up, *Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, 1, 89-108.

Conti, J.A. and O'Neil, M. (2007) Studying power: qualitative methods and the global elite, *Qualitative Research*, 7, 1, 63-82.

Dean, J.P. and Whyte, W.F. (1958) How do you know if the informant is telling the truth? *Human Organization*, 17, 2, 34-38.

Easterday, L., Papademas, D., Shore, L., and Valentine, C. (1977) The making of a female researcher: role problems in fieldwork. *Urban Life*, 6, 3, pp. 333-348.

Fitz, J. and Halpin, D. (1994) Ministers and mandarins: educational research in elite settings. In Walford, G. (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. London, UCL Press.

Gewirtz, S. and Ozga, J. (1994) Interviewing the education policy elite. In Walford, G. (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. London, UCL Press.

Hertz, R. and Imber, J. B. (1995) (eds.) *Studying Elites Using Qualitative Methods*, London, Sage.

Hunter, A. (1993) 'Local knowledge and local power. Notes on the ethnography of local community elites. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22, 1, pp. 36-58.

Kezar, A. (2003) Transformational elite interviews: principles and problems, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9, 3, 395-415.

Klatch, R. E. (1988) The methodological problems of studying a politically resistant, *Community Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, 1, 73 88.

Kogan, M. (1994) Researching the powerful in education and elsewhere. In Walford, G. (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. London, UCL Press.

Marshall, C. (1984) Elites, bureaucrats, ostriches, and pussycats: Managing research in policy settings. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 15, 3, pp. 235-251.

Mickelson, R. A. (1994) A feminist approach to researching the powerful in education. In Walford, G. (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. London, UCL Press.

Moyser, G. (1988) Non standardized interviewing in elite research, *Studies in Qualitative Methodology*, 1, 109 136.

Moyser, G. and Wagstaffe, M. (1987) (eds.) *Research Methods for Elite Studies*, London, Allen and Unwin.

Neal, S. (1995) Researching powerful people from a feminist and anti-racist perspective: a note on gender, collusion and marginality *British Educational Research Journal*, 21, 4, 517-531.

Ostrander, S. A. (1993) Surely you're not in this just to be helpful: access, rapport, and interviews in three studies of elites, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22, 1, 7 27.

Ozga, J. and Gewirtz, S. (1994) 'Sex, lies and audiotape: Interviewing the education policy elite. In Halpin, D. and Troyna, B. (eds.) *Researching Education Policy: Ethical and methodological issues*. London, Falmer Press.

Phillips, R. (1998) The politics of history: some methodological and ethical dilemmas in elite-based



research, *British Educational Research Journal*, 24, 1, 5-19.

Pruyadharshini, E. (2003) Coming unstuck: Thinking otherwise about “studying up”. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 34, 4, pp 420-437.

Walford, G. (1991) *Researching the City Technology College, Kingshurst*. In Walford, G. (ed.) *Doing Educational Research*, London, Routledge, pp. 82-100.

Walford, G. (2005) Research ethical guidelines and anonymity. *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 28, 1, pp. 83-93.

Walford, G. (1994) Ethics and power in a study of pressure group politics. In Walford, G. (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. London, UCL Press.

Whitty, G. and Edwards, T. (1994) *Researching Thatcherite educational policy*. In Walford, G. (ed.) *Researching the Powerful in Education*. London, UCL Press.

Winkler, J. (1987) The fly on the wall in the inner sanctum: Observing company directors at work. In Moyser, G. and Wagstaffe, M. (eds.) *Research Methods for Elite Studies*, London, Allen and Unwin.