Dealing with Opposition: uncomfortable moments in research

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to contribute to methodological discussions on elite interviewing. The point of departure is that elite interviewing constitutes/represents continuous challenges for researchers. This may be due to several reasons; one of these concerns the possible critical incidents that may occur in the course of the interview. The article applies a reflexive perspective, and so draws on two critical incidents of elite interviewing experienced in different research contexts. The theoretical assumptions reflect on the literature on the use of power and the changing power relations in the interview. Then, through thoughts on the dialogical nature of the interview, the article moves to practical reflections and approaches. Through the case analysis the article illuminates moments of difficulty in interviewing, and it calls attention to the necessity of deploying and employing possible strategies for the successful management of the interview. Finally the article not only presents the research and policy relation constellation in a given context, but highlights the fact that reflexivity contributes to the accountability of the researcher and of the research.

Introduction
This article departs from the more conventional considerations of access and context in interviewing to focus on the problems presented by researchers investigating policy when their informants choose to exercise their power and status, causing difficulties in the course of the interview situation. More precisely, it builds on elite interviews within the frame of the European research project KNOWandPOL. The comparative research analysed sector-based policies in respect of two sectors: education and health. The multinational project created the context in which to perceive the diversity of traditions across Europe, while through the analyses of public actions and knowledge-based regulatory instruments (in this case, the education sector in relation to PISA and national regulatory instruments), it also reflected the impact of the Europeanization of education. Thus the findings of the research relate to the growing attention paid not only to European institutions but to international organizations, and the effects of these on national governments, knowledge-policy relations and policy development. The European dimension in education research refers to the processes of construction according to the logics of incorporation of norms and ways of doing things defined and consolidated by EU actors (Vink, 2003), where, through incorporation, domestic discourses, identities, structures and social processes are changed. The growth of interests in Europeanization of education implies methodological dilemmas as well, strengthening the move from traditional comparative research to interpretations with a post-comparative perspective (Mangez, 2010). These new developments constitute the context in which the interview situation and behaviours are determined and shaped.
We argue that researchers engaged in European national comparative projects should embrace methodological issues as crucial. A good knowledge of the different methodological contexts of each country is central to strengthening the value of the empirical findings, as well as contributing to a better understanding of the European research processes and comparative methodologies. Finally, revealing the methodological differences among European teams and the complexities of each country is a heuristic process that brings with it enormous advantages; within the richness offered by the diversity, it creates unity and identity - perhaps even a European identity.

Drawing on the project’s methodology and experiences of data collection, in this article we pay special attention to methodological issues relating to preparation and the management of interviews. The point of departure was the problems that researchers from the Portuguese and Romanian research teams faced in conducting fieldwork. We discuss two critical incidents that occurred during the interviews made within the European project: the first, in Romania, was with an inspector who was uncooperative and resistant; the second was with an international elite policy broker, who obliged the Portuguese researchers to prove their determination and interest by waiting patiently, showing persistence and gradually persuading him to collaborate.

In order for our readers to better understand the cases, we present briefly below the national political and knowledge context in which the KNOWandPOL research was realized.

In the case of Romania, researchers have commented on the unfavourable conditions for education research and policy-making in that context (Rostas et al, 2009) at the national level. From the various aspects that structure education, the most important are probably (1) the functioning of a centralized and bureaucratic education system that is – after a twenty-year process of transition - just beginning to show substantive attempts to move towards decentralization. Thus, policy decisions are generally centralized; however, the preparation of decisions is increasingly becoming a multi-actor process. Even so, independent and professional bodies are not really determinants of decision-making; nor do they play determining roles in it. Furthermore, (2) education policymaking is significantly determined by the pressures for modernization; according to this, in the EU pre-accession process (2000-2007), special attention was paid to, and funds were directed towards, applied research in education. The diagnoses made in this period are intended to be used by decision-makers to ground policies. However, the use of knowledge produced by domestic or international measurements and evaluation tools is limited, sometimes formal, superficial and selective. In addition, there is the scientific, academic production of knowledge on issues of education. This is considered less in relation to policy decisions, which is a reflection of (3) the limited legitimacy of sociology and consequently of research belonging to the sub-field of the sociology of education. This lack of acknowledgement results in a gap/distance/asymmetry between researchers and policy actors, not only in their discourse or rhetoric, but also in ways of thinking and acting, and in their role and position within power relations. This will be discussed further below.

In the case of Portugal, the interview with an international actor discussed here was part of a study on PISA, and was concerned with the regulatory relationship between the OECD and member countries in Europe. The Portuguese team coordinated the research into the production of the OECD’s ‘Programme for International Student Assessment’ (PISA). It was conducted within the framework of ‘KNOWandPOL Orientation 3 – on the Supranational Production and Diffusion of Knowledge-based Regulation Tools in the Education Sector’. Focused on knowledge as a regulation instrument, we aimed to observe the use of knowledge within the context of the production and dissemination of public action regulation instruments, and to capture the ways they are appropriated in national contexts. The case study was concerned with how the policy regulation instrument was constructed, and what kind of relation it established with the field of the knowledge and the field of politics. More specifically, it was intended to study how PISA evolved over time (the history of the instrument), focusing on its organizational features, its processes and products. Hence, the interview with the supranational actor was of major importance in order to gain his perspectives about the history of PISA and about the roles and relations of the various actors, throughout the construction of PISA surveys and reports, as well as his perceptions about the maintenance, change and circulation of ideas (and knowledge).

The incidents, as well as illuminating some aspects of context, raise questions about how to prepare for interviews with powerful people, especially where there is a large status 'gap'; how to
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create rapport with an informant (Foddy, 1993, Rosemblum, 1987); and how to persuade the informant that you understand their position despite its complexity (Ball, 1994; Walford, 1994).

The ‘scenario’ of both incidents illustrates uncomfortable moments, moments of difficulty in the scene of interaction. Because the face-to-face situation constitutes the core of an interview, through these critical incidents the article seeks to add some methodological reflections to the issue of preparing for an elite interview, so as to include arranging oneself (in a personal sense) in a way to overcome the feeling of powerlessness in relation to the elite member, and exploiting the seemingly powerless situation in order to become powerful (for example, retaining calmness instead of becoming upset, working with the situation intelligently). Furthermore, besides the methodological implications, the article intends to draw attention to the need for awareness and assessment in qualitative research (Gilgun, 2010), and for this reason the analysis puts the emphasis on reflexivity, and on using a reflexive perspective.

Two Stories from Elite Interviewing

Between Obstruction and Hostility

I undertook the task to make the interview with one of the inspectors from the County School Inspectorate (who had been working earlier in the Ministry of Education). I didn’t know much about this person, I was only told that ‘he is not an easy case’. I didn’t know for sure what that meant, but I already had a suspicion that doing this interview won’t be an easy job. But I decided to do the best I can.

The discussion started without any problem, I was asking him about past events, what his institution did work on, and so on. The critical moment came when I tried to focus the questions on his personal position, status, asking him to locate himself (together with the others) within the decision making process, within the whole mechanism of taking decisions. At this point he suddenly became angry, saying that ‘this is not so simple, you won’t understand it. You can’t understand it. But I think I wouldn’t tell you even if you could understand it’.

This was an ugly reaction (I felt the situation to be uncomfortable for a moment – and I was wondering what kind of experience this person could have, what could be so confidential). But the two moments of silence we had ‘woke me up’ and I said him: ‘O.K. If you won’t tell me, I can accept that. I still have three more question, may we continue?’ And we just quickly went through the other questions and finished the conversation. (Romanian researcher)

Being Patient and Persuasive

The Portuguese team decided to conduct an in-depth interview with an important actor (let’s call him Mr. X). He was central to our research, someone very important in the international educational arena. We tried to connect to him through some academics who had worked with him already. But we did not succeed. Getting in touch with him was not easy. Finally we got in touch with a researcher who opened the doors to us through a friend of his. On behalf of that person we managed to contact Mr. X. At this stage the contact happened via e-mail to his advisers. They informed us about the day and time of the interview, which took place two months later, in a European city. They settled for two hours for the interview. That seemed excellent for us. Carefully we prepared the script. Two months later, after a flight of two and a half hours we were there.

Once arrived at his workplace we were subjected to many security procedures, and we waited about 20 minutes. Then, friendly officers welcomed us and led us through the endless labyrinthine corridors to the office of our famous interviewee, Mr. X. He was cordial. However, when we were starting the interview we were told that he only could meet us for about 20m. Twenty minutes! We were petrified. What could we do in such a situation? This would endanger the interview! We looked at each other and decided to stay and proceed with caution.

The interview progressed, the twenty minutes passed, and it seemed to go well. Meanwhile we tried to maximize the little time that remained. When we reached forty minutes, he told us the interview had to end because he had a commitment. However, something had changed and suddenly he kindly said:
If you want to wait about two hours, I can give you about 10 more minutes.

We did not hesitate: – Sure, we will wait for those 10 minutes!

During the two hours we reviewed the script and studied the best way to compensate for the lack of time given to us. Two hours later we returned to the office and Mr. X gave us twenty minutes more.

This is how two hours of interview became a one-hour interview, which for a moment risked being only twenty minutes. (Portuguese researchers)

Both critical incidents show some obstacles researchers faced in doing their work within the fieldwork of a research project on knowledge and policy. They present the difficulties policymakers, brokers and/or other elite actors may ‘cause’ during the interview, making the art of interviewing harder. Before analyzing the incidents, it seems necessary to reflect briefly on the contexts of social knowledge these incidents are part of, because this highlights some aspects of gaining entry into the interviewee’s world and of the politics of interviewing.

To understand the first critical incident, it is necessary to mention some further ‘national characteristics’ of the relationship between researchers and decision-makers. In Romania the dialogue or communication between researchers and policy makers is quite uneven and deficient, mostly because of unequal power relations. Consequently, the interactions between these parties are still very similar to what the literature defines as one-way relationships and one-time interactions (Kezar, 2003). In practice, this often means that researchers are not welcome. This raises the question of mutual trust (Kezar, 2003, p. 400) and credibility, and even problems of sensibility and discretion. In addition, however, the logics and the language policy makers and researchers have and use define the interview situation (Choi et al, 2005). The ‘gap’ between normative statements in policy rhetoric (discourse) and inadequate policy achievements at national level (Kiss et al, 2009) contributes not only to the risk of raising topics that it is not advisable to talk about, but also to the fact that researchers are, or appear as, critical of policy makers merely by asking questions about policy. In the critical incident reported above, the opposition of the interviewee should be interpreted through the lens of these national conditions.

To understand the second critical incident, it is necessary to explain the exploratory work carried out by the Portuguese team prior to the interview and emphasize some ‘national characteristics’ regarding the participation of Portugal in the supranational structures of PISA: (1) Portuguese actors involved at the supranational level offered an image of reserved and convergent participation; (2) Portugal is without expertise and tradition in the field of student performance assessment, particularly regarding psychometrics, and this explains the absence of Portuguese actors (collective and individual) in PISA expert structures (Carvalho, with Costa, 2009, p. 91). Beyond the fact that the interviewee was an international elite actor, the political and scientific weaknesses of Portugal regarding the participation in the OECD’s supranational structures could be anticipated as a problem in the context of the interview. After all, we were dealing with knowledge policy relations – namely, with the existence of an active relationship between policymakers and knowledge.

In addition, the interview must be seen in an international context, as the researchers travelled from Portugal with the sole purpose of conducting it. The space where it occurred was the interviewee’s workplace. It was he who decided whether, when and where the interview could occur. This related to the professional context and the exercise of power: Mr. X knew the interview was inserted in a large-scale inquiry focused on the core of his work, and he probably was reticent and apprehensive about that visibility. Clearly, in this episode we see the international actor within the international ‘scene’ expressing who is in command. His resistance and unpredictability are acts of communication, revealing who he is and his apprehension about what the researchers might want out of the interview. Here, the power is heightened essentially because of symbolic issues such as international status and the worldwide recognition of the interviewee as a bearer of knowledge.
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Theorizing These Scenarios

In considering these events in a wider framework, we draw on two main sources of ideas: (i) those that link to the nature of power relations in research (England, 1994) – namely, raising the questions of power and context in elite interviews (Rosenblum, 1987; Schoenberger, 1992; Puwar, 1997; Desmond, 2004; Smith, 2006; Bygnes, 2008); and (ii) those about the dialogical nature of research as an integral part of the research setting, raising such questions as positionality, language, seduction, negotiation (Reinharz, 1992; Ball 1994; Walford 1994; McDowell, 1998).

We discuss both of these sets of ideas in turn.

Power Relations and Context in Elite Interviews

The literature often discusses the asymmetrical relation of interviewer-interviewee in elite interviews (Schoenberger, 1992; Desmond, 2004), stressing that the social dynamics established in these situations point to the ‘multiplicity of status relations activated in interviews’ (Bygnes, 2008, p. 1). Situational circumstances and personal agency (Puwar, 1997; Smith, 2006) are said to be of most importance; these have to do with the identity and power of the parties, with the power relations emerging between them, and with social dynamics and the changing nature of these relations. In these critical incidents interviewers and interviewees came from different social and cognitive worlds, all taking part in a unique circumstance (the interviews). Who holds the power in this relationship? What kinds of dynamics are embedded in these relationships? We assume the volatility of the power differential between these interlocutors as well as their complexity and instability (Pile, 1991, p. 464).

So, the power relation depends not only on a set of psychological, cultural, historical and institutional contexts, as it is constantly changing in the course of the interview. Desmond argues (2004, p. 265) that the relationship between interviewer and interviewed is inevitably asymmetrical regardless of the research strategies deployed. The situation is basically this: two strangers are face to face, ‘for the sole purpose of one party responding to topically-restricted questions formulated by the other’ (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 388). Rosenblum goes on: ‘The interviewer is the one who brings the formal agenda and who has the authority to organize the event itself’ (p. 389). However, when tackling elite people about some more personal, hidden issues, it is usual that they wish to exercise control over which questions they answer, how detailed their answers are, and how much time they spend with the researcher. Consequently, who is holding the power may be subject to change during the interview. Implicitly, there is always negotiation and struggle in any elite interview. In fact, it is the case not only that the power relation might change within the course of the interview, and also be highly different between interviews, but also that the cognitive-emotional aspects might become heightened (the parties might feel themselves disempowered or powerful, or feel their relations to be confidential or mistrustful, for example). These two empirical aspects - the inevitability of unequal power relations in the interview, and the cognitive-emotional elements - should make the researcher be more reflexive about the ‘event’, looking to the encounter as being structured by both the interviewer and the informant, both being at risk of feeling exposed and vulnerable. Ultimately, we are talking about a situation of mutual interaction where knowledge and policy meet (mixing different values, visions, interests and identities), making the interlocutors co-constructors of the process.

Dealing with the issues of social relations, and those of power, context and identity (Schoenberger, 1992, p. 218), the social science interview stands as both a personal and an impersonal event (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 389): it happens between strangers, aiming to access undisclosed and hidden information. Additionally, as both interlocutors ‘are called upon to attend to the topic’ (Rosenblum, 1987, p. 389) and to demonstrate their expertise, the interview calls upon professionalism and sociability. This sets high standards for the interviewer in starting the interaction and the processes of exchange, negotiation and seduction that are similar to other social interactions in society. Hence, both interlocutors seem to ‘possess power’ and both may become ‘disempowered’, feeling vulnerable, exposed, in danger, and so on. All these largely depend on the person who is exerting influence in the different moments of that particular context. Furthermore, in the course of the interview the power is fluctuating between the interlocutors.
The KnowandPol research experiences that constitute the basis of this article alert us to another issue – namely, that of so-called young researchers, sometimes known as junior researchers (to avoid referring to age, but to identify the professional experience of the interviewer) in the particular case of doing elite interviews. This may be an aspect of the power relations; however, there are fewer approaches or reflections on this issue in the literature. On the basis of the critical incidents, we assume that it is possible and even probable that even more of the asymmetric relations could be illustrated (Smith, 2006) that might have a more direct message on who holds and exercises power. Furthermore, the critical incidents point to another question - to the issue of expectations. Since researchers in this case have complex and difficult research topics, such as ‘knowledge’ and the different aspects of knowledge, and seek explanations of policy makers’ understanding or uses of different kinds of knowledge, a critical moment may arrive very quickly if an answer or a reaction does not match the expectations of the parties involved. Consequently, understanding the incidents in their complexity and being reflexive on them starts a learning process, through which the experience-based knowledge of the junior researcher contributes to the construction and establishment of the researcher’s accountability (Gilgun, 2010).

The last point connects us with the second source of ideas - the dialogic nature of the research. Thus, the following section moves from the theoretical assumptions to more practical reflections, highlighting the necessity for technical and tactical preparation in elite interviews. These practical reflections - which are not exhaustive - come from the experience of critical incidents we faced in the elite interview situations.

The Dialogical Nature of Research

Gaining access: the importance of having good connections. To gain access to a key actor, it is crucial to know how to get to him - that is, you need to know who can make contact, following as many different avenues as possible in a polite, however determined and opportunistic, way (Yeung, 1995). The most obvious solution is not always the best one. Walford (1994, pp. 222-223) recommends informal and personal contacts and considers that ‘the more sponsorship that can be obtained, the better, be it institutional or personal’. You must be well connected and well informed – that is, you must know exactly how to get in touch with the right person(s) to enable access. This is the very first section of the ‘dialogue’. Ultimately, gaining access to these elite persons depends mainly on fortune, accident and social networks, as well as on the particular circumstances at the time (McDowell, 1998, p. 2135). In the next sections we identify some key aspects of the interviewer in relation to skills and preparation, perseverance and persuasion.

The interviewer: socially skilled and well prepared. The interviewer must have a detailed knowledge of the interviewee (Peabody et al, 1990); as these interviewees are elite members, it is easier to acquire information beforehand than it would be for an ‘ordinary’ person. As Kezar (2003) suggests, the techniques of preparation for an elite interview include extensively researching the background of the person to be interviewed, finding ways to make them as comfortable as possible, and obtaining information that is not necessarily public knowledge. The script should be flexible, and the researcher should be very familiar with the interview questions, having in mind the order of the questions (Harvey, 2009, p. 9), so as to avoid repetition or hesitation. Also, in order to have the subject open up, the researcher should be really well informed about the interviewee’s work and the topic of the interview. In particular, it is important to be aware of the language to use and to be sensitive about the tone of the questions, especially those that the interviewer anticipates will not be easy to answer. Finally, the interviewer should be open to the critical moments or incidents that may occur, in order to manage the situation intelligently. If a critical moment or incident comes into the dialogue, this may be the point where a ‘plan B’ should be used. It is part of the preparation for an elite interview that the interviewer tries to prepare in his/her mind alternative scenarios or plans for such moments in order to continue the dialogue. This is a matter of professionalism; the more practice a researcher has, the more alternatives he/she can find in response to a critical incident.

The elite interview is regarded as a dialogue (Schoenberger, 1991; Clark, 1997), but a demanding dialogue, because elites are highly demanding conversation partners who prefer ‘to
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articulate their views’ without being asked closed questions (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, p. 674). Therefore, the researcher is advised not only to be well prepared, well informed and socially skilled, but also to be able to offer interesting and open-ended interview questions to meet the interviewee’s requirements for a credible conversation partner (see Hertz & Imber, 1995). Promoting a conversational flow is essential, a ‘fresh talk’ (Goffman, 1981, p. 394) that makes conversation that does not feel pre-scripted. Perhaps we should also mention language here. It is important to be careful about the meaning of words; the choice of words may change the meaning of questions. Even when the words seem to hold a shared meaning, there can be problems arising from the absence of a common understanding (Foddy, 1993, p. 44). Also, it can be very useful to say things like, ‘Please correct me if I am wrong’, ‘I was wondering if…’, ‘I don’t understand, could you explain it?’ In a dialogue, these utterances provide a sense of understanding and they express a particular position of one of the interlocutors to which the other interlocutor may react (Oinas, 1999, p. 354). As Rosenblum (1987, p. 390) argues, ‘when an interviewer produces brief exclamations, asides, or encouraging sub vocalizations, s/he moves the interaction somewhat away from a purely professional model, while still encouraging the respondent’s production of utterances’.

Standing firm and being able to seduce: a strategy to gain their confidence. Holding an interview with elite people is an exercise in endurance. They are always testing you, trying to defeat you: access to them is not easy, the time they make you wait before and during the interview is not an accident, and you must be prepared for the contingencies they ‘create’ as a subterfuge if they dislike your questions, your aspect, your verbal communication, and so on. It is crucial for the researcher to be ready to establish commitment with them and, not infrequently, to seduce them to get their confidence. Making one’s position ‘known’ and ‘visible’ is very important, as well as providing the interlocutor with the aims of the research. At the same time, it is good to be modest and very non-aggressive, showing eagerness to learn what they know. Empathy is another important characteristic that requires being able to listen and learn from the elite people (Kezar, 2003, p. 402). In Bloom’s words, it ‘involves trying to move beyond one’s own assumptions and experience and placing oneself in the interviewee’s position as much as possible’ (Bloom, 1998). Therefore, the interviewer must learn to communicate. In the course of the interview, s/he needs to be aware of the importance of verbal and visual clues, playing as many different roles as needed: being charming, efficient, innocent, or sisterly (Reinharz, 1992; McDowell, 1998, p. 2138), depending on the informant. It is important to pay attention to the issue of positionality, behaving as a ‘transparently knowable agent whose motivations can be fully known’ (Rose, 1997, p. 309). The researcher must know how to navigate the issues s/he needs for the inquiry without making the interviewees feel threatened; s/he needs to understand elite people’s reactions and reassure them that s/he is trustworthy. This requires detailed learning about their careers, their character and temperament. Ultimately, the critical incidents call upon the different interconnected factors and aspects that have to be taken into consideration while preparing for an elite interview; consequently, it is very important for the interviewer to do his or her homework!

Conclusions

The comparative research methodology allows us to explain similarities and differences across six European countries and to make an integrated analysis of the different case studies. Still, we believe the benefits of doing comparative cross-national European research go far beyond the fact of taking account of socio-cultural settings and comprise the need for a deeper understanding of each country’s research methods and processes. Methodologically, cross-national work such as the KnowandPol project sheds light on the difficulties faced by the teams and on the interplay of historical, cultural, social and personal factors that distinguish the inquiries of the different teams. The difficulty faced by the teams in using the same guidelines in their fieldwork, guidelines which are not always in accord with their own methodological traditions, and, indeed, that are sometimes in conflict with national traditions, shows how important it may be to be able to negotiate and achieve workable compromises in research.
Conducting elite interviews within the framework of a European project on knowledge and policy is a major task not only because of the nature of those interviewed, but also because any interview situation is highly dependent on the socio-spatio-historical settings where it takes place. The interviews are dialogical processes which are structured by the interviewer and the interviewee, and by the power relation that changes in the interaction between them. Elite actors are unpredictable and suspicious; consequently, the researcher should be prepared at any time to change the direction of the interview, and be flexible enough to adapt it to more favourable conditions. The experiences documented in this article undoubtedly have an impact on the researcher’s learning, and they also draw attention to different strategies for managing difficulty or opposition when confronted with hostile or obstructive interviewees. Showing endurance and empathy, standing firm and entering into actions of seduction in order to get the interviewee’s confidence are just some of the most important skills of positionality. Furthermore, these examples also draw attention to the importance of understanding social processes in specific contexts, and to the status differences and their effects in researching the powerful. This process of understanding and meaning-making represents the reflexivity of the researcher and thus, through self-awareness and assessment, establishes the accountability of the research(er).

There are uncomfortable moments in research, but as Schoenberger says, ‘the task, then, is not to do away with these things, but to know them and to learn from them’ (Schoenberger, 1992, p. 218). It is important to understand that through these social learning processes of interviewing the researchers are involved in processes of construction, in processes of knowledge production. Consequently, by all these methodological reflections we are contributing to the ‘production of research knowledge’ (Ozga, 2010); meanwhile, the critical incidents express/represent the range of very different conditions of the production of research knowledge.

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