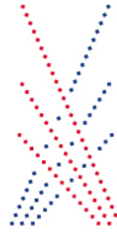

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Sensemaking, Sensegiving and Sense-becoming in Conducting Elite Interviews in China

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Abstract

This article examines challenges and strategies for conducting elite interviews in the corporate context of China. It draws on a cohort of 40 elite leaders across small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to large organizations. This article provides insights into addressing the relational and dynamic process of interviewing elite leaders for novice researchers in management and organization studies. The process is intertwined with sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by interviewers and interviewees in an iterative and reciprocal fashion, wherefrom the novices accrue sense in strategizing the subsequent interviews: a process we term 'sense-becoming' and 'co-positionality'.

Keywords

Elite leaders, interviewing, sensemaking, sensegiving, sense-becoming, co-positionality, China

Introduction

This articles examines methodological challenges and strategies in the process of interviewing elite leaders in China. Social scientists have paid growing attention to elite interviews (Beaverstock, 2005; Maclean et al., 2012; Mavin et al., 2014; Mills, 1957). Given the imbalance of power relations between the interviewers and interviewees (McDowell, 1998). elite interviews represent unique methodological challenges in comparison with non-elite interviews (Mikecz, 2012), which is arguably more salient for novice researchers. As the world's second largest economy, China represents an increasingly important research context. A higher power-distance orientation in Chinese culture (Hofstede 1980) execrates the challenges than that in the West. Despite some significant research addressing elite interviewing (Dexter, 1970; Harvey, 2011; Ostrander, 1993), it defies transplanting the findings derived in the western context into Chinese context because of cultural differences in values, beliefs, communications and norms (Mikecz, 2012).

This article draws on the first author's reflection on experiencing 40 elite interviews over five years in China. Despite some common methodological challenges between the West and China, we focus on the particularities of interviewing Chinese elite leaders such as gaining access and building trust through guanxi (personal network). Furthermore, the aim of this article is not to simply provide guidelines as explicated by the existing research (cf. Harvey, 2011; McDowell, 1998), but to adopt a processual perspective to elucidate how novice researchers continuously make sense of the relational and dynamic interviewing process and evolve sense of doing it better, which we conceptualize as 'co-positionality'. To put it in a nutshell, we aim to inform them of 'fishing' skills rather than provide 'fish'.

Gaining access, building trust and guanxi

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word 'elite' refers to 'those people or organizations that are considered the best or most powerful compared to others of a similar type.' Previously, political power constitutes an essential element of elite. Mills (1957) elaborates on 'power elite' including political, economic, and military leaders who represent small groups but dominate decision-making. Zuckerman (1972:160) employs 'ultra elites' to describe a 'subset of particularly powerful or prestigious influentials'. Later on elite is extended to include highly-skilled and competent professionals such as 'professional elites' (McDowell, 1998) in the City of London. The other stream expands elite in international context such as 'hybrid elites' referring to hybridized networks of elite figures in international trade (Parry, 1998) and 'transnational managerial elite' (Beaverstock, 2005; Castell, 2000; Doyle and Nathan, 2001), referring to the brain circulation of cross-border highly-skilled inter-company transferees. Another stream relates elite to job titles, for example, Maclean et al. (2011:18) use 'business elite' to describe those who have successful careers over an extended period and hold top job titles as 'multipositional actors within the field of power' (Bourdieu, 1996). Similarly, Mavin et al. (2014:440) use 'elite leaders' to mean those (women) who 'hold significant positions of power and influence at the top of organizations'. In this article, we also use the term 'elite leaders' to refer to the figureheads or leaders who hold hierarchical positions and have influential impact on decision-making in organizations.

It is more challenging, time-consuming and costly to gain access to elites than non-elites (Mikecz, 2012). As a special group, elites appear more visible but might be less accessible (Laurila, 1997). They are located in a privileged position to erect barriers (Shenton and Hayter, 2004) and manipulate access through gatekeepers (Shenton and Hayter, 2004). No access, no

research (Cochrane, 1998). Recommendation of interviewees has been regarded as a useful network to gain more access (Harvey, 2011; Liu, 2018). Collection of high quality data relies on gaining trust (Harvey, 2011) and creating rapport which can be even harder (Thuesen, 2011; Welch et al., 2002).

Despite the significance of Chinese corporate context, gaining access is especially hard, where researchers do 'not have bargaining power in negotiating research access with business organizations' (Cooke, 2002:23). In particular, SME leaders are reluctant to participate in academic research (Heneman et al., 2000) though SME leadership is an emerging and important research topic given the importance of SME growth. As noted, guanxi as a proxy of Chinese social networks is particularly prevalent in gaining access and build trust (Liu, 2018). It means an informal, particularistic personal connections mainly between two individuals who are bounded by mutual obligation and trust (Chen and Chen, 2004). The guanxi base might arise from family kinship, the same hometown, classmates or alumni, colleagues, etc. For example, Liu (2018) suggests that her previous work experience contributes to the connection with interviewees, who even proactively recommended further access to her.

This study comprised a PhD project and a post-doc project of the first author. The former one focused on Shanghai logistics SMEs, where the cohort of interviewees (entrepreneurial leaders) were introduced by the first author's husband, who had a good guanxi with the important gatekeeper - vice chairman of Shanghai Logistics Entrepreneurship Committee (SLEC). Thus he went the extra miles to request the members of SLEC to support the research, and then provided the name list and contacts to the first author. The post-doc project was an in-depth case study on an elite financial services company. The access was introduced by the CEO's cousin, who was the first author's colleague and good friend. Given his cousin was an academic scholar at a prestigious university in the UK, it not only helped with gaining access, but also build up trust and respectability. In terms of this case study, the CEO was overtly the crucial gatekeeper. There was certainly no possibility to gain access without his permission. At the initial stage, he emailed all the management team to engage in this study; at the next stage, he emailed all the staff to provide support. He even designated a marketing staff as a coordinator to fully support the first author, including providing confidential documents such as board committee memos, scheduling interviews, etc. It is the unique guanxi that mobilized research access so that the first author could complete her PhD and postdoc projects with good quality.

Central to elite interviewing: co-positionality

Appropriate positionality of the interviewer is important for any interviews, and is particularly pivotal to gain access and establish rapport with elite interviewees (Mikecz, 2012), where self-presentation (McDowell, 1998) is vital. For example, while interviewing industrial and commercial elites, McDowell (1998, p.2138) draw on the observations of interviewees, and skilfully shifted her role ranging from 'playing dumb' with senior patriarchal figures, 'brusquely efficient' with tough older women, 'sisterly' with women of the similar age and positions to 'superfast and well-informed' with younger men. It is important to 'gauge early the atmosphere of the interview and adjust their behaviour, speaking voice and mannerisms accordingly' (Harvey, 2011, p.434). Where the power imbalance and dynamics are not managed with skills and subtlety, it can present a problem between the interviewer and interviewees (Hunter, 1995; Thomas, 1995; Welch et al., 2002) between. This might be more challenging for the novice researchers

Elite interviewing is arguably more challenging for inexperienced researchers, which has drawn some attention. Drawing on his doctoral and post-doctoral experiences of interviewing one hundred elite leaders, Harvey (2011) delineates guidelines and challenges for conducting elite interviews, including trust building, techniques of presenting oneself and posing questions, length of an interview, issue of recording, dealing with challenging scenarios and engaging with interviewees. His major motivation aims to help early research scholars to 'avoid some of these pitfalls' (Harvey, 2011:431) in interviewing elites. Reflecting on her experience of interviewing elite workers, McDowell (1998) elaborates on interviewing process, including using connections to gain access, appropriate self-presentation, location of interview, how to start an interview, validity and how to listen to tapes and write-up. Mikecz (2012, p.492) highlights positionality as a 'key determinant' of successful research is central to the effectiveness of elite interviews. It is reliant on the interviewers' knowledgeability of the interviewees' portfolio and research topic. Self-promotion is also crucial (Okumus, Atinay and Roper, 2007) where interviewers indicate the prestige of their academic and professional credentials and institutions. It can help enhance the credibility of the research and reduce the imbalance of power or knowledge imbalance.

Despite the explication and useful strategies in the existing work (cf. Harvey, 2011; Mikecz, 2012), it primarily focused on the 'what' (i.e., what are methodological challenges), but the

‘how’ (i.e., how to self-present and evolve interviewing techniques) remains under-explored. Mikecz (2012) stressed that positionality is dynamic, evolving over the course of research, and reciprocal involving both the interviewers and interviewees. Given the particularities and idiosyncrasies of individual elite leaders, it invites the researchers to be in tune with the situated scenarios, reflect on the relational dynamics, continuously craft the plausible sense and re-shape the subsequent efforts, where ‘co-positionality’ is critical. This paves the way to invite a processual perspective to make sense of the challenges in conducting elite leaders’ interviews. As an unexperienced researcher in doing the PhD project, the first author followed the call of Dawson (1997, p.392) to immerse herself in the interviewing process and to ‘get my hands dirty’ and to ‘experience and discover new skills and understanding by engaging in the practice of data collection and drawing close to the subject’.

Sensemaking, sensegiving and sense-becoming

Confronted with ambiguity and opacity of elite interviewees, it is important for researchers to engage sensemaking to ‘clarify what is going on by extracting and interpreting cues from the environment’ (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014:58). Sensemaking refers to ‘the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing’ (Weick et al., 2005:414). By attending to Campbell’s evolutionary epistemology to social life (1965, 1997), Weick et al. (2005) propose conceptualizing organizational change as a reciprocal process constitutive of three stages: enactment, selection and retention (ESR). Enactment begins by being aware of contextual change through ‘noticing and bracketing’ available data (Weick et al., 2005:411). This is followed by selection when retrospective attention and mental models are combined to create a ‘plausible story’, which remains tentative and provisional. The next stage is retention, where a plausible story becomes more substantive and action-oriented. Weick et al. (2005:414) further suggest: ‘The beauty of making ESR the microfoundations of organizing and sensemaking is that it makes it easier to work with other meso- and macro-level formulations.’

Sensemaking is incomplete without its variant of sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Following the authors, sensegiving refers to the ‘process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition’ of others (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991:442). In this article, we examine how interviewers make sense of signals from the interviewees (sensegiving), and in parallel, how interviewers interpret (sensemaking) interviewees’ self-presentation (sensegiving), which operate in an interative and

reciprocal manner. Drawing on the interactions of sensemaking and sensegiving, the novice researchers are encouraged to craft and re-craft sense about how to strategize and engage with the prospective interviews, which is an endless state of 'everyday becoming' (Chia and Holt, 2007:513): a process we term 'sense-becoming'.

Make sense of elite interviewing in China

Interviews were conducted by the first author in the corporate context of China. This article draws upon her experiences of interviewing 40 elite leaders during her doctoral and post-doctoral research, including Board chairman (n=1), Board Directors (n=3), CEOs (n=14), Deputy General Managers (n=4) and Directors (n=18). We find elite interviewing is a relational and dynamic process constitutive of sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by both the interviewers and interviewees through three stages: sensemaking, sensegiving and sense-becoming.

Sensemaking

Drawing on the interviewing process, we find it is important to establish initial contact by texts, do one's homework, create rapport through guanxi and impression management of dress codes, and self-promotion at the initial stage of elite interviewing.

As aforementioned, the vice chairman of SLEC gave the member list to the first author including their phone numbers and email addresses. Initially, the first author contacted them by phone call: she intended to make a brief introduction about herself and research, and to confirm whether they would like to arrange face-to-face interviews. The way turned out to be very ineffective: the potential interviewees might be frequently bothered by fraudulent or commercial advertisement calls. Their responses were: 1) switched off the call directly; 2) before the first author was able to finish her self-introduction, they began to shout: 'you must be a fraudulent call – please don't call me again!'; 3) occasionally, they might be in the middle of something and was inconvenient to talk. Drawing on this, the first author contacted them by both texts and emails, of which texts appeared more effective, as over half of them did not check emails. Most of them agreed to accept interviews, because of their guanxi with the vice chairman.

The existing literature refers to the significance of 'doing homework' (Harvey, 2011) such as reviewing the organizational web-pages and searching the interviewees' media coverage. Adding to which, preparatory work in China also included using social media WeChat to establish rapport and bringing business cards. Chinese people like using WeChat, which serves as a useful tool to establish rapport and guanxi. For example, before doing the field work for the postdoc project, the first author had maintained regular communication with the CEO for three months, which not only helped with building up a good guanxi, but also kept her updated about the status of financial industry and this company. They even had video chat such that they had 'seen' each other though virtually. Establishment of this rapport at the initial stage was certainly helpful to remove potential barriers prior to their first physical meeting.

In China, people tend to have an informal conversation to create rapport almost on any occasion. Thus the first author always began by a 'hands-on' informal conversation rather than commencing academic conversation immediately. It is common for Chinese people to ask 'where you are originally from?' at their first meeting, which might appeared too personal in the West. For example, when one interviewee asked about it, coincidentally, his wife and the first author happened to be from the same province. This guanxi immediately reduced the otherwise 'distant relationship' between the interviewer and interviewee, as Chinese people value the guanxi of town fellowship. The other interviewer asked the first author: 'where did you do your studies in China before you went to the UK?' Interestingly, they were alumni, which again instantly helped building rapport. He even introduced some other elites alumni to her. For another example, an interviewer mentioned his daughter was doing MSc in Canada. Following this, the first author talked about overseas studying experience which worked nicely as a warming-up. There are discursive ways to establish guanxi and rapport by making sense of the specific situations.

It is also helpful to create rapport through the impression management of dress codes, as Dawson (1997, p.392) suggests that they can 'significantly influence the development of research rapport in the field.' However, the appropriateness of dressing is a relational concept. In the case of her PhD project, given Chinese logistics companies were low-ended mainly comprising truck drivers and workers, the first author put on quite plain clothing to cultivate identification with interviewees, particularly while conducting interviews at micro and small firms. It proved to be useful as a number of them wore their uniforms or in a casual way because they might need to support some loading work ad hoc. While conducting interviews at medium

firms, she put on more polished and formal dressing. Indeed, half of the elites appeared quite formal. Their firms were quite sizable such that they did not need to involve the front-line jobs. However, while doing her post-doc project at the elite company, the first author paid special attention to her dressing, which aligned with the requirements of dress codes of the decent office building and the company. As an 'expensive' company, most of the staff were well-paid, so they tended to dress smartly. Her appropriate dress codes proved to be a good technique, especially in case of interviewing women elites. For several times, they mentioned: 'I like your beautiful dresses. I feel it might be brand X? I also like this brand.' It helps creating rapport with them.

Given the importance of self-promotion to gain access and foster rapport (Okumus, Altinay and Roper, 2007), it shall be employed in a relational sense and located in the specific context. In case of the PhD project, logistics industry in China was featured by poor quality operations, where elites and staff tended to have low-level education background. In the process of doing her homework prior to the study, the first author noticed that more than half of the interviewees did not have decent education, a couple of who even only finished high school. In light of this, she carefully avoided talking about her PhD studies or the prestigious background of her co-authors. However, in the case of her post-doc project in an elite company where majority of the staff had very decent education, she skilfully used self-promotion to enhance credibility and reduce power imbalance. She provided detailed introduction about herself, and particularly stressed the title and background her co-author (also her PhD supervisor), who was associate dean and completed his PhD at Cambridge University and post-doc at Oxford University. She also highlighted the top ranking of her institution. The CEO spread this introduction within his company, which proved extremely effective.

Sensegiving

Based on the first author's reflection and our collective discussion, we find the importance of sensegiving signals demonstrated by pilot studies, interviewees' responses to keep flexibility in time and venue, way of asking questions, and aesthetic representations.

As a novice researcher, the first author conducted both preliminary research and pilot studies as a way of sensegivng which enabled her to develop initial sense about how to strategize the subsequent interviews. For example, when the first author played back her video of the pilot interviews, she was aware that she had spent excessive time taking notes during the pilot

interviews so that she did not make best use of the limited time. She also realized that she occasionally jumped to the talk before the interviewee finished his/her talk. Moreover, she also used the pilot study to test the Interview Guide Questions (IGQ). For example, the PhD project looked at how elites explore and exploit knowledge in the spirit of Daoist Wu Wei. Neither of the interviewees claimed they followed Wu Wei thought their narration strongly suggested the opposite. Informed by the pilot study, the first author revised the relevant question for the major interviews.

We also find the importance of maintaining flexibility in terms of interview time and venue, asking open or close questions, which drawing from clues of interviewees' responses. Among all interviews, three appeared particularly impressive. One board director suggested he could do telephone interview for approximately 40 minutes while he was transferring at Frankfurt airport. The other board director suggested he would only be available to support a phone interview for less than 30 minutes at 9:00 am next morning while driving. Although we repeatedly expressed we were fine to wait, he insisted that would be the only availability. In case of a CEO, he claimed that he had to deal with too many issues ad hoc such that he could only inform us of the interview date and time one day in advance. It was not unexpected that he was having biscuits as lunch when the first author entered his office as scheduled. Despite the importance of establishing rapport by informal talk as discussed, these three scenarios strongly signalize us to ask structured questions in an efficient manner. Otherwise it might be hard to get their buy-in.

Furthermore, Chinese people tend to be attached to aesthetic representations, particularly to colours and pictures (Nie et al., 2009). Indeed, artefacts or objects can 'play a functional and symbolic role' (Hawkins, 2015:953) to disseminate sensegiving explicitly or passively. Thus the first author tended to pay closer attention to visual representations, and used them as sensegiving prompts (Kosslyn et al., 1995) to engage the interviewees. For example, one interviewee was quite reserved, almost only provided brief answers such as 'yes' or 'no'. Even though the first author repeatedly endeavoured to elicit examples or more evidence, he still appeared unwilling to elaborate on his answers. In the middle of the interview, he happened to leave his office for a lengthy mobile call. The first author took this opportunity to observe his office settings carefully, and 'noticed' (Weick et al., 2005) a strong Daoist element such as its brick wall and Daoist pictures in his desk calendar. Thereby, upon his returning, she asked, 'your office appears quite different such as the wall and photo patterns of the calendar. Why

does it look like that?' Unexpectedly, he responded with a long narration, linking to his hometown. And in the latter part of interview, he was much more engaged.

Sense-becoming

Guanxi (personal relationships) are crucial for conducting research in China, as it is challenging to gain research access without good guanxi (Ding et al., 2006; Zheng et al., 2006; Cunningham and Rowley, 2008). Where possible, we encourage researchers to take a top-down approach, which can mobilise 'buy-in' from the interviewees. For example, in the process of conducting an in-depth case study in a fund management company, the CEO stated explicitly:

> If you were not introduced by my cousin, I would certainly not support your research at all. To give him face (*mianzi*), I am happy to fully support you. I have sent out an email to all the employees, asking them to support your interviews. Otherwise I don't think they would be engaged, as they are busy and also snobbish.

As the research topic looked at leadership, identity and reputation, we hoped to include interviews on external stakeholders. In this regard, despite several rounds of negotiations, the CEO still firmly rejected us. Our experience informs us that self-presentation of researchers' diligence and earnestness as sensegiving is of particular prevalence to enlist support in conducting research such as case studies or ethnographic research in China. For example, the first author scheduled interviews starting from 9:30am till 17:00. At the end of each day she was frequently invited by the CEO for an informal chat. Due to the intensity of interviews, she had some problems in her throat and could not help coughing for a few seconds once she was talking with the CEO. Despite the fleeting moments, it was 'bracketed' (Weick et al., 2005) by him. He immediately brought a bottle of mineral water, *opened it up* and gave it to her, and said: 'you wouldn't need to work so hard.' It was common to provide water, but it was rare for the CEO to open it up for the researcher given the high-level of power distance in China (Hofstede, 1984). In particular, he had worked for government authorities for decades, where the leaders tended to appear arrogant and even hierarchical. However, after the 'coughing' incident which served as sensegiving of the researcher's diligence and earnest, the CEO proactively agreed us to interview external stakeholders. It endorses that guanxi is not simply a given, but an ongoing relationship wherein impressions are subject to change: it depends on

the researchers' self-presentation, as Goffman (1969:25) states, 'few impressions could survive if those who received the impression did not exert tact in their reception of it.'

Conclusions

Elite interviewing is essentially a relational and dynamic process, which involves sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by interviewers and interviewees (Weick et al., 2005). To address the challenges of interviewing elite leaders in China, it invites the researchers to do their homework (Mikecz, 2012) prior to the interviews. In particular, guanxi, social media (i.e., WeChat) and visual representations are instrumental in establishing rapport or serve as sensegiving prompts to engage the interviewees. Reflections from the first stage function as sensegiving that enables the researchers to better strategize the subsequent interviews such as through knowledgeability. Where the researchers proactively engage the ongoing sensemaking of interviews, they gradually evolve sense about how to perform better, alternatively, leading to everyday sense-becoming, where 'co-positionality' is more salient.

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