Interviewing Elites in the Educational Field 🔒

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Summary and Keywords

Elites can be understood as a group of people in possession of the highest levels of economic, social, cultural, and political capital. For this reason, these groups are considered key actors in understanding social inequality, the configuration of social structures, and the distribution of power within societies.

In the field of education, elites tend to concentrate in a small, select group of schools and universities, forming a social context that is key to understanding processes of (social) mobility and the reproduction of social positions.

The indisputable relevance of education in both the formation and consecration of elites make it almost impossible not to focus in the educational system when one is called to problematize the power of elites.

Through a literature review surveying the available literature within the field as well as examples of previous research, principle epistemological, conceptual, and empirical frameworks necessary to address interviews with elites in the educational sphere can be observed. The chapter review three critical dimensions of the interview process: (a) design, analyzing aspects such as the potentialities and limitations of the different types of interviews, the issue of validity and, the question about the distance between interviewer and interviewee (b) contact and consent to participate, studding the identification, contact and pre-meeting stage and (c) the interview process, analyzing aspects such as the place of the interview, the cultural aspects involved in any interview, the objective and purpose of the interview, the knowledge and skills that the interviewer must display, and the dispute over the power and status that is displayed in this type of interaction. Researchers who study education and/or elite social classes and who want to deepen their understanding of a group of people might refer to this qualitative research process of studying elites in the educational field.

Keywords: interview, elites, education, qualitative research, social science

The Study of Elites in Qualitative Research

The researcher approaches the study of elite social classes with epistemological, conceptual, and methodological challenges. As Snook and Rakesh (2015) remind us, elites are not representative of the entire population; rather, they are defined as a group of individuals who possess the highest levels of capital and the greatest prestige within society (Savage et al., 2013), forming, according to nature and a more or less eclectic combination of these capitals, different types of elites: economic, political, social, cultural, or intellectual (Khan, 2012B). For this reason, the majority of the analytical methods used in the social sciences are not applicable to this group. For example, surveys are not often used to collect data about this group, because the "elites do not generally flock to fill out surveys" (Snook & Rakesh, 2015, p. 54). Regarding the interview process, studying elites also poses several challenges because it is difficult to achieve an ideal environment for data collection. Key components of this method such as availability, the cognitive and attitudinal openness of the interviewee, the disclosure of sensitive information, or detailed opinions, perceptions, or understandings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) are, in general, difficult to achieve with these subjects.

Despite these challenges, there is very little literature that deepens our understanding of the challenges that must be addressed when interviewing elites, along with methodological strategies to avoid the inevitable difficulties researchers will confront (Harvey, 2011), for three main reasons. First, an interview with economic, political, or social elites implies an ethical-political positioning of the researcher, who is in contact with a group who, by definition, possess a majority of the social, economic, and political resources and uses them to their advantage (Khan, 2012B), which—almost inevitably—carries with it a critique of concepts of evaluative neutrally or objectivity (Bourdieu, 1999), a problem that is underlined by canons of social research. Second, qualitative research on elite communities forces researchers to question the role and objective of the research process, above all in relation to the potentially performative results of the study as well their potential uses and implications for policy changes, a central question of any study (Weiss, 1980) but also potentially critical of the educational field. Finally, the development of interviews with elites, especially within the educational system, garner one additional challenge: they question the role of the investigator him- or herself within the social structure, through the recognition (at times more or less explicit) of his or her ambivalent position as a dominant or dominated actor (Bourdieu, 1988).

For all this, it is unsurprising that the development of interviews with elite communities frequently generates fears or ambivalent sentiments in researchers. As Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) documents in his journal, in the context of his study of the prestigious Weston college, personal and professional doubts and questions emerged from the first point of contact:

> I sit in the middle of the blue-gray carpeted square room, hesitant to enter this space, self-conscious and ambivalent about what I'm about to do. Where do I start? This is a space I'm rather unfamiliar with . . . I'm hungry, but mostly I'm

timid (and) unprepared: What will I ask? How will the students respond to me? "Hi, my name is Ru-BEN." How I will pronounce my name? (p. 5)

Therefore, delving into the theories and methods that allow researchers to confront this phenomenon is of special interest to contemporary qualitative research.

To contribute to this conversation, this article describes and synthesizes the available research addressing research strategies necessary to conduct interviews with different kinds of elites, with a particular focus on understanding how to conduct research within the educational sphere. To this end, the article is organized into four sections in addition to this introduction. In this way, and following the classic chapters for the development of an interview (Flick, 2014), this article presents discussions on (a) how to design interviews, (b) how to carry out the process of contacting and gaining consent to participate from the interviewee, and (c) how to conduct the interview process. Last, there is a section of final considerations in which we synthesize the relevance of this kind of research and highlight the primary research challenges for future research. In this way, we hope to make a contribution to researchers in the educational field and to those who study elites and work to deepen our understanding of this group, as defined by Khan (2012B) as the "motors of social inequality" (p. 362).

Design Process

The process of designing an interview involves multiple research decisions, from the definition of the objective and research questions that will guide the study to the methodological approach and decisions regarding the level of control over (or freedom in) the environment in which the interview is conducted (Flick, 2014). Different suggestions have been debated with respect to interviews with elites, the first stage in the research process.

The first question relates to the degree of openness (or closure) of the interview. In this sense, Harvey (2011) suggests the use of open-ended questions, for two main reasons. First, these kinds of questions appear more appropriate to preferences and abilities for the exposition, development, and articulation of thought (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002), which subjects with high levels of cultural capital, such as elites, can achieve more easily. Second, elites "resent being encased in the straightjacket of standardized questions" (Zuckerman, 1972, p. 167) as they are accustomed to being treated as unique individuals rather than as groups or social classes. In general, elites perceive themselves as subjects that occupy a position of privilege because they are the "best and most talented individuals within each society" (Khan, 2012A, p. 480), and in this sense employing interview tactics with a high degree of open-mindedness will allow for these subjects to recognize their individuality. In any case, a high degree of open-ended questions must be put in tension with other basic characteristics of any interview with elites: their short duration given the limited availability of these kind of interviews. In order to confront this

challenge, one option is to combine open-ended questions with closed-ended questions as Harvey (2011) suggests.

A second aspect relates to the questions of validity and reliability that these kinds of interviews raise. Although these criteria are critical aspects of any qualitative approach, in the case of interviewing elites they are especially relevant (Berry, 2002) for a few different reasons. First, Laurens (2007) writes about the need for researchers who study elites to double their epistemic observation (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991), accounting for the likelihood and the ability of the interviewees belonging to the top of the social hierarchies to explicitly or implicitly manipulate information, as Gené (2014) reminds us. In terms of validity, the dangers are associated with the cognitive distance that can exist between the research team and the interviewees. In general, both elites and academics operate in highly closed-off spaces with specific cultural and linguistic codes, where the smallest words, signs, and symbols can mean different things. Therefore, it is necessary to create translation processes that ensure understanding between actors, based on the assumption that there is a sociocultural difference between the interviewer and interviewee (Ganter, 2017). For Atria, Amenábar, Sánchez, Castillo and Cociña (2017), one plausible strategy in this respect is to use the most neutral concepts possible, working to reduce their ideological baggage, as a way of limiting the potential negative reactions or prejudices of the interviewee.

On the other hand and regarding reliability, there is an issue because the elites work to communicate a coherent narrative that is favorable to their position within social and institutional structures. Along the line of argument established by Ryan and Lewer (2012), elites are likely to communicate a favorable self-image, be extremely loyal to their colleagues and/or business, demonstrate a highly coherent ideology, or try to construct a collective discourse representative of social norms (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013) as a means of validating their status in social and cultural terms. Although this is a general issue with any interview, in the case of elites it is even more important as in the majority of cases they are conscious of the fact that they possess something (an understanding, information, know-how, a social position, a history) that few have and the researcher desires, a dynamic that "inverts" the prototypical power relations of an interview, an aspect considered more thoroughly later.

Finally, the design of the interview should address and take into account the problem of the distance between the interviewer and the interviewee, both in personal and institutional terms. As Cookson and Persell (2002) observe in an article about elite boarding schools in England and the United States, there is a high risk that researchers "will see themselves being coopted by school authorities" (p. 110) within the ability or possibility of questioning the official discourse. Within higher education, this problem is amplified, due to the concentration of educational credentials that exist in those spaces. Hence, for example, Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith, and Randell-Moon (2011) have identified the "surveillance" that interviewers employ of their own discourses in order to avoid questioning the culture of excellent of the institutions, which evidently creates problems that must be considered in the design of the interview itself. In synthesis, researchers who study elites

should always remember "that is not the obligation of a subject to be objective and to tell us the truth . . . subjects have a purpose in the interview too they have something they want to do" (Berry, 2002, p. 680).

For all of these reasons, the attitude of the researcher—from the very process of designing the interview—should emphasize the investigative independence and the differences in position (social and investigative) of each actor.

For example, Weinberg (1968) suggests that researchers from elite colleges be suspicious anytime they encounter total cooperation or even "friendly cooperation" from their directors (p. 152), whose identification with the members of the elites is not based on an objective belonging to that group (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009), but rather a subjective affiliation that translates into the indispensable incarnation of the values and interest of their scholastic clientele. Thus, any excessive collaboration with the interviewees on the part of the authorities of these establishments could, for example, mask an attempt "to use the sociologist for his own ends by encouraging the collection of certain kinds of data" (Weinberg, 1968, p. 150), therein compromising the quality of the research.

Researchers should be aware of this and employ tactics to avoid this obstacle. Some of the strategies suggested by Weinberg (1968) to address this issue are to maintain social distance from supervisors and authority figures, to avoid interviewing supervisors/managers as subjects, or, if this is impossible, to schedule their interview for the end of the data collections. Additionally, avoiding developing research practices based on previous social or familial contacts can reduce the risks that arise in this phase of the research process, although oftentimes longstanding social networks are the only form of access to elites (Atria et al., 2017). Quaresma (2014) suggests another strategy. When confronted with the significant availability and affective investment on the part of the educational elites within Portugal, Quaresma envisioned a methodological triangulation between the mechanism that allowed him to validate and amplify the conclusions gathered together with his colleagues along the same lines that Khan and Jerolmack (2013) recommend.

The Contact Challenge

Goldman and Swayze (2012) write that the process prior to the development of the interview involves three stages: (a) identifying potential subjects, (b) contacting them, and (c) getting them to participate. In each one of these stages interviewing elites in the educational sphere generates special challenges.

With respect to the phase of identifying potential interview subjects, this would seem to be fairly straightforward considering the public status of elites within the social, scientific, political, and artistic spheres (Vaughan, 2011). In this sense it is not difficult for the researchers to access different sources for investigation that arise from the work of the elites they wish to investigate: scientific publications or conferences, business lists or databases (Goldman & Swayze, 2012), old lists of alumni from prestigious schools or universities, or members of selective clubs are all potential sources for interview subjects

from the aristocracy or the bourgeoise (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 1991). Other sources include public lists of politicians or civil authorities (Alcántará-Sáez, 2006), social networks like LinkedIn or Facebook (Maramwidze-Merrison, 2016), or even personal contacts through which researchers can develop snowball sampling methods (Atria et al., 2017; Dexter, 2006).

In some cases, the collective use of various sources of information appears to be adequate, especially as in many cases lists of elites are not entirely transparent or complete (Atria et al., 2017). An example along these lines is a study carried out by Vieira (2003) who, in his study of the educational practices of the dominant classes in Lisbon, selected different portions of his target population (those in possession of a volume and breadth of economic capital, in positions of power/control within the business worlds, and members of the group who had inherited their status) through a combination of sources, such as studies of the main economic groups within the country, business newspapers and magazines, and directories of Portuguese nobility. Another strategy for identifying potential interview subjects was employed by Nogueira (2002), who, in his study on the academic trajectories of youths within elite communities, consulted his networks of personal and professional relationships in addition to a group of intermediaries from the business sphere as a gradual approach to his research subjects.

In contrast to the identification stage, the next stage—contacting the elites—presents major challenges, due to the difficulty in gaining access to this group. As opposed to what happens within other social groups, elites are deliberately protected by barriers (cultural, social, and in many cases also geographical, territorial, and physical) that separate them from the rest of society (Hertz & Imber, 1993). In general, domestic workers, personal assistants, and secretaries are among the most protective "organizational gatekeepers" (Borer, 2012, p. 90) of the elites, and it is their explicit goal to establish and maintain distance between the individual they work for and the rest of the social groups, which makes direct access for the interviewer difficult. For this reason, and in the case that the researcher cannot get in direct contact with the interviewee, the interviewer might have to use his or her powers of persuasion to convince these "guardians of the sanctuaries of the elites" (Aguiar, 2012, p. 4) that the relevance and need for the interview are worth disturbing established social hierarchies of access (Littig, 2009). In the educational field, the fieldwork of Vieira (2003) and Nogueira (2002) account for numerous attempts to make contact, always mediated by private secretaries and domestic employees, that proceeded the face-to-face meeting with the subject who had been selected to share their educational practices.

Regarding studies carried out within educational institutions, different authors have problematized the question of access to elites. One of the barriers is, or course, the private and closed nature of many of the selective educational establishments where this social group is educated, as is the case for the Swiss colleges of the bourgeoise (Jay, 2002), the specific colleges of the elite Portuguese (Quaresma, 2014), or the conservative Catholic institutions in Chile studied by Madrid (2016). Weinberg (1968) addresses the fear on the part of these colleges that the results of the research might bolster the argu-

ments of critics of the elite classes and of private education and warns that they might communicate among one another to coordinate their defenses against "invaders." In the case of secondary schools for elites, the "omnipotence" of the director makes him an unavoidable step in the process of gaining access to any potential interviews with other educational actors (teachers, students, professionals, parents), which makes access to the "right sponsorship" invaluable, that is, the search for (ideally institutional) research support. In order to obtain this support, the research team should have previous contact and good relations with the director or with one of the ex-students of the school, as was the case with Khan (2011). This is clear in the case of Gaztambide-Fernández (2009), who acknowledges that his previous work as a consultant for the School's Curriculum Review Committee facilitated his expedited access to the Weston School.

The problem is even more critical in the case of universities, as many institutions act as a site of reproduction for the social elite (Stich, 2012; Van Zanten, 2015) and because contacts and personal networks are even stronger and more frequent; therefore, institutional support is even more critical. It is, in short, important to recognize that elites, especially in closed educational spaces such as schools and universities, consist of what Moyser and Wagstaffe (1987) call "defensive elites," that is to say, "people or groups who are threatened by, have little to gain from or are reluctant to place themselves under scrutiny" (p. 300). As Maxwell and Aggleton (2015) have shown, in the case of elite schools, their ability to secure interview subjects and develop interviews was in large part determined by the perception that they did not pose a significant threat as they shared a social and cultural background with the student body and also because they were young academics (not academics with extensive histories).

There is ample evidence of previous research strategies addressing the most suitable methodological strategies to contact and secure interviews with elites within the educational sphere. In a study on the education of female elites in which the researchers interviewed students and faculty of four prestigious English schools, Maxwell and Aggleton (2015) analyzed their experiences in gaining access to this sphere and their interactions with the "gatekeepers" and the young adults interviewed. In what they refer to as access to the field, this was managed through the research team's personal knowledge about the staff in two of the colleges with whom the researchers had worked on previous research projects and with whom they had established empathetic relationships with shared interests, which facilitated better and faster contacts with the supervisors and the students within the establishments, as well as a greater rate of participation for the study. In contrast, the strategy adopted for three other schools of sending emails was unproductive. This corroborates the conclusions of Ryan and Lewer (2012) and Atria et al. (2017) who emphasize the ineffectiveness of impersonal methods of contacting potential elite interviewees. In addition to email, faxes, and letters, even telephone calls were considered "distant" methods of contact that reduce the potential participation of the interviewees. Finally, Maxwell and Aggleton (2015) emphasize the importance of developing moments of "different affective intensity," that are characterized by adherence to, rejection of, or tolerance of the interviewers (p. 1074). These moments "shed light on the ways in which elite and elite group members are able to organize their social encounters with others, in

ways that regulate distance and difference as key ingredients of cultural and social reproduction" (p. 1077) therefore making them crucial for the growth and thorough development of the research sample (especially, for example, in the case of interviews with classmates or colleagues).

Finally, regarding convincing potential interviewees to participate, it is likely that elites will want to set up a meeting prior to the interview in order to "get to know the researcher" and decide whether or not they want to participate in the research. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) describes this process, detailing how he was asked to present and discuss his research project in great detail before being granted an official interview. In many cases the first face-to-face interaction with a potential interviewee can determine if the interviewee will agree to collaborate with the project, a factor that merits some attention on the part of the researcher. As Vaughan (2011) indicates, even "what may seem like frivolous matters may have significance in elite interviewing beyond what would commonly be expected" (p. 111). Considering the importance attributed within this social group to social codes of good manners (Mension-Rigau, 2007), it is necessary that the researcher presents him- or herself very carefully, adjusting his or her appearance to the presumed *dress code* of the interviewee. It is also recommended that the interviewer adopt a good bodily hexes and be attentive to and comply with the rules of social and linguistic etiquette (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 1991). When working with interviewees who have always been socialized to respect social norms, as indicated by the elite students interviewed by Quaresma (2014), violations of codes of conduct are seen as inopportune and can result in uncomfortable situations for researchers. For example, lacking an indicator of civility as elementary as a personal card can elicit damaging social commentary, in the same way that showing up for an interview in jeans and worn boots can garner openly judgmental looks from the interviewee (Méndez, 2013).

These deviations from dominant aesthetic and civil codes can even earn reprimands, although delivered with an instructive tone, such as one Méndez (2013) received during an interview with an ex-students from a prestigious college in Buenos Aires. Along the same line, Weinberg (1968) recalls the power of a "departmental chairman's overcoat" (p. 145) to lend him status as he was visiting an elite college, to some extent equalizing the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Additionally, it is essential in the first contact that the interviewer adopt a position of transparency, providing the interviewee with information about his or her identity and academic background; the nature and funding of the research project being carried out; and how long the interview will last, the treatment and disclosure of data, and whether the interview will be anonymous. This last question is particularly relevant to the study of the elite sphere of education, in which there are schools that might have more to hide and less to gain from public scrutiny than others (Khan, 2011; Weinberg, 1968). However, as Nogueira (2002) indicates, guarantees of anonymity are not always effective when researching elites, as these individuals or family groups belong to a small sphere with an elevated level of intergroup knowledge, as happened with families from the elite business world of Brazil that Nogueira interviewed.

For all of these reasons, it is clear that the difficulties of accessing, contacting, and securing participation necessitate double the care from researchers in the planning and selection of interviewees and in the timely scheduling of the initial contact. As Mikecz (2012) recalls, it is a process that must be "carefully negotiated, which can take much longer time and higher costs than nonelite studies" (p. 483) and which moreover is likely not possible to repeat.

The Interview Process

When it comes time to actually interview elites, there are several different factors that must be taken into account. One of the first factors is the decision of where the interview will be conducted. Ideally, the selection of a location should account for factors such as the kind of interviewee, the power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, and the potential for fostering an organic conversation. However, these criteria do not necessarily lead to the same methodological decisions. For Dexter (2006), for example, it is preferable to carry out interviews in the interviewee's place of work, because the researcher feels it is a less disruptive setting than a domestic space. In contrast, Harvey (2010) questions the supposed advantages of conducting interviews in a professional space and considers a domestic environment to be a space better suited "to expand as well as to broach more confidential information" (p. 10). Regarding the option of conducting interviews in public spaces such as a cafe or bar, Harvey (2010) advises researchers to avoid places that are either too quiet or too loud—the first because they "may make respondents tentative about disclosing certain types of information" (p. 20), which is especially applicable in the case of elites, and the second because too loud a space can make it difficult to communicate and can diminish the intimacy or trust between interviewer and interviewee.

Punctuality is a second fundamental aspect. Although this aspect has been highlighted in studies on elites in general (Harvey, 2011), it is especially relevant to research projects on elites that are carried out within schools, which operate on a schedule of meticulously planned activities that should not be altered by the researchers for risk of compromising the continuity of the research or the possibility to conduct future research (Weinberg, 1968). This means that, for example, the schedule of interviews should always account for exam periods in order to cause the least possible disturbance to school operations. Additionally, researchers are encouraged to take advantage of the less busy times in the school year (generally, at the beginning or the end of the school year) and to conduct their most involved field work during those time periods. Finally, punctuality is essential in light of the central importance of time within schools (Pope, 2016) and the perception of time of some stakeholders such as directors, bosses or school authorities, who value and have a very sophisticated approach to time management, and therefore for whom even the slightest delay could potentially diminish the quality of the interview.

A third factor to consider at the beginning of the interview process is the cultural relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. When the researcher conducts the

interview in a cultural context that is not his or her own, as happens in research carried out in foreign countries, cultural shifts can generate significant challenges but can also be incredibly generative for research, as Ganter (2017) observed in a recent article about the meaning of cultural shifts on both material and ceremonial levels. When Ganter had to interview elites from South America, she observed that her status as a foreign researcher would be used strategically to her benefit to achieve her research objectives. For example, by convincing the interviewee that she was someone with "little expert knowledge regarding the studied context" (p. 950), she primed the interviewee to be more disposed to communicate information, clarify or rephrase questions, or even discuss "new topics through the constant negotiation of meaning and relevance of the questions posed" (p. 951). On a ceremonial level, the interviewees' curiosity about her nationality generated a pretext for suggesting questions that offered "the opportunity to create moments of identification and cultural bridges with which to break the ice and establish an interview situation in which both the interviewer and the interviewee enter into a positive communicative interaction" (p. 952), such as, for example, the language in which the interview was conducted, the reasons for choosing a specific country, or even greeting conventions within the country. Along these same lines, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) notes that his identification as Puerto Rican might have been important not just in getting the students of the Weston School to address and consider themes like diversity and ethnicity but also because students who were part of ethnic minorities felt comfortable talking with the researcher about themes they might not have addressed if the researcher had been White.

These potential benefits of cultural difference, however, can be altered by the value the interviewee places on the cultural background of the interviewer. If the interviewer is perceived to be outside what Anderson (2006) theorizes as the interviewee's "imagined community," it is likely that cultural difference will devalue them in the eyes of the interviewee, in accordance with a series of negative attributes and social prejudices. Following Bourdieu (1997), this would imply that cultural difference can be an asset or a limitation, depending on cultural, social, economic, political, moral, and religious characteristics of the interviewee's social sphere. This can be especially relevant in regions where tensions over immigration issues are high or are understood to be crucial and defining themes by elites, as has occurred in the least decades in the United States and western Europe. For this reason, in some cases it might be advisable for the interview to be conducted by more than one person, ideally from different (social and cultural) backgrounds, as a way of trying to counteract potential prejudices or negative associations.

Another aspect of the cultural relationship between interviewer and interviewee is the gender of the interviewer. Men are overrepresented among different elite communities, which, although less notable within the field of education than in the economic or political sphere, continues to be very relevant and can produce significant challenges for female researchers, especially if they are both female and young, as McEvoy (2006) reminds us. In an article about the political world of Northern Ireland, McEvoy accounts for the sexist/paternalistic *gender imbalance* enacted by her interviewees, including her being called "love," "dear," or "lass" (p. 185) throughout the interview, on one hand produc-

ing a significant symbolic difference between interviewer and interviewee and on the other hand irritating the interviewer in such a way that increased the likelihood of distracting the interviewer when it came time to assess and interpret the discourses of the interviewees. In these cases, maintaining the thread and rhythm of the interview or subtly reinforcing established forms of address can be effective strategies to address this issue.

A fourth aspect to consider in the process of the interview is related to the content and objective of the interview, from two perspectives. On one hand, Ryan and Lewer (2012) recall the importance of presenting the research objectives and how they arrived at these objectives in clear and simple terms, also warning about the importance of having the researchers available to explain all of this to the interviewee. In the case of the directors of elite colleges, Weinberg (1968) writes that these explanations should be provided through direct and quick answers that the researchers should already have prepared; otherwise the interview will be seen as forced. In this sense the researcher is expected to demonstrate the need for the interview and how it will contribute to the research process.

On the other hand, of equal importance, is the researcher's ability to demonstrate the eventual benefits that the interviewee could gain from participating in the interview process (Ryan & Lewer, 2012). This is not about demonstrating the academic relevance of the interview but rather of being able to convince the interviewee that this is a mutually beneficial interaction for both parties, as a way of diminishing "bourgeoise discretion" (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 1991), that is, the resistance on the part of the dominant classes to being scrutinized that can generate high levels of resistance to researchers. Speaking to this issue, Littig (2009) suggests that the researcher take measures to overcome this reticence, exploring the potentially applicable motivations for interviewees or the organizations they represent. In fact, Maxwell and Aggleton (2015) acknowledge that the acceptance of their project on the education of female elites was determined by "the extent to which findings were perceived relevant to the school's developing trajectory, either within the local education market or more generally" (p. 1073) and admit that other schools' decision not to participate in the study may have been a result of their fear that their position in the market would be negatively impacted after the publication of the study. The numerous requests for clarifications about the project from one school and its concern with their school's anonymity made the researchers feel as though they were being tested (Morris, 2009), therein confirming "something of the sensitivity associated with researching elite education" (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2015, p. 1070). In order to generate a sense of practical application, it may be necessary to point out the surplus value of the collaboration, alluding to the prestige of the institution the research team is a part of, or of the organization that is financing the project or evoking the contribution their participation will make to the development of the field (Delaney, 2007; Littig, 2009). The perception of the institution where the research team is based as an elite institution can, therefore, be key. In this sense, it is not unusual that Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) accounts for how his status as a student at Harvard University, identified as one of the most prestigious and respected institutions in the United States (Karabel, 2005), granted him access to the elite school where his research project was welcomed by the

management and the teachers as an opportunity to learn more about their school and to develop even more work between the two institutions.

A fifth aspect, connected to the previous ones, is related to the specific knowledge and skills the interviewer should have at the time of the interview. In contrast to exploratory interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), it is very likely that in interviews with elites, the interviewee will test the knowledge of the interviewer on the theme, as happened with Méndez (2013). For this reason, it is advisable for the interviewer to do his or her "homework"(Harvey, 2011) and to study the research theme with particular emphasis on knowing the (personal, social, academic, political) trajectory of the interviewee, as Gené (2014) reminds us in the work she developed together with political elites in Argentina. The goal of this process of understanding is not necessarily to critically question or interrogate the interviewees but rather to earn their respect and trust (Harvey, 2011) and in this way to demonstrate that their "time is being spent with someone who is taking the meeting seriously" (Gené, 2014). Likewise, a theoretical and practical command over the research topic positions the researcher as an "elite-lite interviewings" (Vaughan, 2011, p. 114) as, for example, one academic talking with another, thereby diminishing the supremacy of the information and the power of the interviewee.

Finally, and perhaps one of the most important aspects, is the necessity of understanding that the process of interviewing elites is a status and power struggle between interviewer and interviewee. In effect, one of the many "challenges, anxieties, and difficulties" (Aguiar, 2012, p. 1) of those who research elites is the fact that, contrary to the usual (Flick, 2014), the researcher is not in a position of supremacy with respect to the interviewee, which can result in significant confusion throughout their exchanges regarding their respective roles in the process (Atria et al., 2017). The latter may even emphasize their social distance from the researcher through small gestures. Along this line, Méndez (2013) recalls several significant examples. For example, she was once directed by her interviewee to the service elevator, which the domestic employees used, while the interviewee used a different elevator. Another time, during a lunch, she was effectively removed from the conversation when her interviewee, knowing full well she hardly spoke French, began speaking only in French. This marked Méndez's first incursion into a highly closed off and essentially Francophile sphere. Along these same lines, Gatzambide-Fernández (2009) writes about feeling like an "outsider" as a result of these interviews, despite having been the student of a selective elite college (albeit in the less privileged context of Puerto Rico).

The tension over status and power between interviewer and interviewee manifests itself at several points of the interview. Maxwell and Aggleton (2015) write about a recurring feeling of subordination which made it "hard to discern just who was investigating who—feeling ourselves to be as much the subjects of investigation, and critically—judgement—by others" (p. 1077). During research on the educational practices of elites, Vieira (2003) also experienced those clear moments of role reversal, when the interviewee questioned her scientific competence and the relevance of her research, effectively subjecting her to a "true trial by fire" (p. 286). In the case of interviewing children or adolescents, this dif-

ficulty is minimized by the adult status of the researcher and the "authority this grants him/her" (Gatzambide-Fernández, 2009, p. 222), making it possible to reduce the traditional asymmetrical power dynamic between both parties and the tension generated therein. For Weinberg (1968), this tension is produced because the interviewees (especially in the educational sphere) are accustomed to leading and directing a conversation. Thus, for example, in the case of school directors, the research should be aware that they "are very sophisticated in spotting a leading question or in discovering the trend of the researcher's investigation which he might be trying to hide" (p. 143) and that they are skilled manipulators, an ability acquired from their work with students, parents, and teachers, which they exercise with great subtlety, requiring researchers to practice significant tact and diplomacy. Likewise, Vaughan (2011) notes that elites being interviewed possess a power that can be intimidating to the interviewer, due to the multiple forms of capital the former possess (Pinçon & Pinçon-Charlot, 1991), their familiarity with the exercise of authority (Mikecz, 2012), or the degree of experience that they have with a subject (Vaughan, 2011). Be that as it may, accounting for these factors in epistemological, theoretical, and practical terms is, perhaps, the greatest challenge of interviewing elites.

Final Remarks

Within the educational sphere, elites tend to concentrate themselves into a selective, limited, and closed group of schools and universities, whose principle objective is to reproduce those privileges and limit the mechanisms of social exclusion (Bourdieu, 1997). As we have shown throughout this article, the development of studies that use interviews as a research method to understand these kinds of spaces is critical for three main reasons. First, elite institutions use a series of codes, symbols, and signs (cultural, political, and social) that transform them into an ideal space for thick description (Geertz, 1973), that is to say, a deep understanding of the behavior of subjects and the context in which that behavior unfolds, making the interview a key method for understanding those places. Second, the interview facilitates the deconstruction of—in the Derridean sense of the term (Derrida, 2001)—the opinions, perceptions, and justifications of one of the most privileged groups within society given their position within the social structure. The interview is a fundamental tool for unpacking the way in which social research can contribute to conversations about education, social mobility, and social reproduction, especially within a context in which social inequality seems to grow every day (Picketty, 2014). Finally, interviewing educational elites provokes reflection on the part of the researcher him- or herself regarding his or her own role and status, forcing him or her to rethink established axiological ideas about objectivity and neutrality, and fostering a conversation about the privileged position of researchers (and in this case those being researched) within society (Bourdieu, 1988).

For these reasons, expanding our knowledge and understanding of the impact interviews with educational elites can have has been central to educational research within the past decades. Obviously, the development of these kinds of studies is not complete but rather is in process and under debate, generating new conversations and further research. A

few examples are (a) carrying out interviews focused on the life histories of the interviewees, which allows for an understanding of the educational trajectories of elites; (b) expanding interviews of economic, political, intellectual, and social elites, inquiring specifically about the role of the educational system in the process of structuring elite spheres; (c) studying the meaning and significance that academic elites (senior researchers, academic intellectuals, or ideological leaders) ascribe to their status within the educational sphere; (d) analyzing the perspectives and discourses of the elite educational institutions that have global and transnational dimensions (e.g., the so-called international schools), dimensions with increasing relevance in these past decades; or (e) working to understand the processes of differentiation that develop within elite schools and universities and which lead to the creation of distinctive educational niches in terms of pedagogy, politics and ideology. These, among others, are challenges for the future of this field of research.

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