Top business executives—"important people in big companies"—are both visible and inaccessible. This situation poses unique challenges for the sociologist interested in learning about what executives think and do. To go beyond caricature or public relations imagery, researchers must devise creative strategies for getting access and data. This article offers some reflections on the barriers to access and data and how they can be surmounted, with specific attention focused on the importance of preparation—of both the researcher and the people being researched.

# INTERVIEWING IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN BIG COMPANIES

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LIKE MANY PEOPLE, I enjoyed the satire in *Roger and Me*, the semidocumentary film about General Motors and its CEO. By contrasting the imposing physical and economic presence of the company with the inaccessibility of its leader, Michael Moore, the writer/director, plucked a populist chord: Important people in big companies have tremendous power but little apparent accountability to the ordinary worker and citizen. In the absence of the real Roger Smith, Moore created Roger the celluloid image: someone who was, by turns, the villain of a matinee drama and a bumbling clown, whose words (through careful editing) appeared both callous and ridiculous.

Yet what if Moore had cornered Roger Smith? What would he (and we) have learned? Would we really expect a version of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*—where the CEO of one of the world's largest corporations is struck dumb by guilt and recrimination? Chances are, if Roger had agreed to an on-camera interview, Moore would not have had a film. He would have had a confrontation that tested Smith's ability to manage the situation but provided little insight about Roger, the executive elite of General Motors, or the nature of important people in big companies.

The questions unanswered by *Roger and Me* have been addressed by sociologists. Indeed, some of the best known

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sociological analyses gained notoriety precisely because they sought to reveal what elites think and do (e.g., Veblen 1923; Mills 1956; Domhoff 1967; Hirsch 1986; Jackall 1988; Kanter 1977; Dalton 1959; Whyte 1956; Useem 1979). Yet there is a real paucity of literature available on how sociologists study elites, especially corporate elites. What, if any, special problems do we encounter in the effort to do research on important people in big companies? If our goal is to interview the corporate "Rogers" and, perhaps more important, to get beyond caricature or public relations imagery, how do we go about getting access to people and data?

In this article, I offer some reflections on the barriers to getting access and data and make some suggestions as to how those barriers can be circumvented or at least lowered. I focus specific attention on methods for studying corporate elites—specifically the men and women in the executive ranks—but I will also try to indicate where I think those methods can be applied beyond "mahogany row."

## VISIBLE BUT NOT ACCESSIBLE

Unlike other segments of the social and economic elite, top corporate executives tend to be relatively easy to identify and even to locate. Most of the major companies in the United States are shareholder owned and are required by law to name their top officers. A trip to the public library is all that is required to get a reasonably complete list of the people "in charge" in a given company or industry. A toll-free call to directory assistance and a conversation with the corporate switchboard operator is all it takes to learn where to find a company's CEO.

Unfortunately, visibility is not the same as accessibility—and it is here that the problems begin to mount. Gaining access can be a tough proposition, even when the point of getting in is innocuous, well-intentioned, or attractive to key people in the organization itself.[1] One reason is that business elites are quite good at insulating themselves from unwanted disturbance. When they do venture out of the corporate suite it is to address important issues and constituencies, such as stockholders, other business leaders, financial analysts, government officials, customer organizations, and community groups (especially charities). The value of time is used to explain amenities like chauffeured limousines (so they can work while they ride), private jets (so they can avoid airport delays), and tightly controlled schedules (so they are not interrupted unnecessarily). As a top executive once told me, "I'm not paid $2 million a year to answer the phone."

Moreover, most businesses, no matter how small, have gatekeepers who keep an eye on the comings and goings of strangers. Large corporations, especially ones with trade secrets to hide, have gates, guards, and security devices. Penetrating the social life of a neighborhood can be difficult, but it usually does not take as focused a form as it does in a large company.[2] You cannot just walk into an office suite and expect to strike up a conversation or hang out and observe the scene—the courtesies a letter carrier or a drugstore clerk might extend to a stranger in the neighborhood are generally not extended by executive secretaries to intruders who obviously "don't belong." Even welcome visitors encounter inner lines of defense: public relations departments, "official spokespeople," and whole levels of management trained in how to represent the company to the outside world.

Unless you have some sort of leverage with which to get their attention, chances are you will get it for only half the time you think you need.[3] Journalists I know are pleased to get an hour with an executive; but journalists have a source of leverage most sociologists do not. A staff writer for the *Wall Street Journal* or *Fortune* magazine can at least imply that he won't say nice things—or he won't say anything at all (which can be worse)—if he does not get access to the executive he wishes to interview.[4] Even then, if you do get the 30 minutes, you may find that an emergency or someone more important bumps you off the schedule. If you get in the door, you will be in foreign territory: Few executives allow themselves to be interviewed on someone else's turf. After you get in, you may find that the executive does not intend to answer your questions or has a script of her own that she'd like to repeat. All of this can happen (and has happened to me) after you've spent several months and hundreds of dollars to get to the executive's office in the first place.[5]

There are few economies of scale in this enterprise. The problems are quite often the same whether you focus on executives in one organization or intend to gather data from a cross section. My experience has largely been in the latter approach: trying to secure access to a broader group of executives in a fairly large number of organizations. The process has been an incredibly difficult one for me—often accompanied by considerable frustration, expense, and lost time. In one case, it took me nearly 2 years of phone calls, screening meetings with executive assistants, and networking to interview two executives in a major manufacturing company.

These problems can be reason enough to avoid direct contact with business elites—but there are ways to circumvent, or at least lower, some of these barriers. Four central tasks warrant closer attention: getting ready, getting access, getting data, and getting more data.[6]

## GETTING READY

The difficulties associated with getting access and data ought to serve as a caution to the aspiring student of business elites: You have to have a reason for going to all the trouble. These may be "important people," but first and foremost, they must be important to you, the researcher. The point may seem obvious, but adequate preparation is an essential ingredient in this kind of research. Part of that preparation involves asking difficult questions of yourself; it means being certain that you cannot be satisfied by collecting data through other means. For example, if your goal is to get an official statement or answer to a particular question, it may not be worth your time and energy to try and talk with those at the top.

If it is not essential to interview or observe directly, there are alternative ways to collect data about corporate elites. For example, questions can be submitted in letter form and, while they will most likely be dealt with by subordinates, they will be vetted through the corporate hierarchy and rendered fit for public consumption. Alternatively, secondary sources may be more appropriate (see Zelditch 1962). Most university libraries subscribe to extensive data bases (e.g., Lexis, Nexis, etc.) that can provide up-to-date information on the identity, backgrounds, and salaries of most major business executives.[7] Business and professional periodicals, trade association reports, investor newsletters, business school cases, and *Who's Who*, to name a few, can be easily tapped. Equally important, most business school faculty (even the sociologists among them) have considerable contact with business elites by way of research, consulting, site visits, and executive education programs. Consultants or industry analysts represent another potential source of data and even entrée to business elites.

Even if secondary sources are insufficient, they should still be consulted in the interest of exploiting the little time you are likely to be allotted in the event that you do get access. That is, it is important to know as much as you can before going into the interview.[8] Certainly in this respect the amount of publicly available information about companies and their top executives makes the process of preparing to interview corporate elites easier than it might be in other settings. Equally important, potential interviewees (or their staff) may test your qualifications to do the interview before granting you access, such as asking you to submit sample questions for their perusal; under those circumstances, it can be advantageous to indicate in the wording of your questions some level of prior knowledge.[9]

Finally, there is the issue of self—yours and that of the people you intend to interview. As in other forms of qualitative research, studies of elites raise questions about the researcher's identity, self-concept, and status (see Warren 1988; Adler and Adler 1991; Punch 1986). Given that the opportunities for data collection are limited and not easily repeated, it is important for the researcher to feel at ease with who he or she is in relation to the interview subject and the interview setting (see Davis 1973; Kleinman 1991; Shaffir 1991; Gurney 1991). At minimum, it helps to have clothes appropriate to the situation and to be comfortable enough in them, as well as in that kind of environment, to not be distracted from your principal goal.[10]

Of course, limits to access also tend to make the opportunity precious or special—even to make the researcher feel like a supplicant granted audience with a dignitary. I must admit to having felt "honored" to be granted time with a well-known executive and to be tempted to be less assertive than I might have been with someone less newsworthy. And, as I go on to note in the next section, it is easy to be drawn in by the articulateness and, in some cases, by the charm of top executives without realizing it. There are few formal devices I know of to counteract these particular halo effects; I can only offer my solution: to recall in my mind people whom I came to respect as a result of what I learned from them, not as a result of their press clippings, their formal titles, or their oratorical skills.[11] Given the pervasiveness of the economic definitions of success and the profusion of indicators that corporate elites are indeed successful (e.g., plush offices, expensive clothes, chauffeured limousines, etc.), it might be best to try and acquaint yourself with the habits, styles of dress, and rituals of interaction that one is likely to encounter among business elites—if only to maintain a measure of detachment.[12]

The other side of self is the persona of the people you intend to interview. Unlike members of other social or professional elites, top corporate executives are often expected to speak on behalf of a formal organization—even to speak as if they were the organization. Because researchers can get "official" views through other means, a critical part of the preparation is deciding which personae you want to interview. If for example, we wanted to better understand what Roger Smith as Roger Smith thought about or did, it would have been essential to construct questions and an interview context that made clear that it was the individual, not the office, we were interviewing. Questions can be addressed to the different personae embedded in the individual—for example, Smith as an individual, Smith as CEO, and CEO as a representative of the organization—but it is essential to make clear which personae you are addressing and when you are switching personae.

## GETTING ACCESS

If you do not happen to have a relative or a family friend who is a member of the business elite, it is still possible to avoid the frustration of "cold calling."[13] Most important, it helps to combine a recognizable affiliation with some sort of personal contact. My status as a faculty member in a management school (most recently, with a grant from NSF, too) has helped solve the problem of how to represent myself to business executives whom I do not know and who do not know of me. However, while pursuing an earlier line of research (Thomas 1989), I learned that it was not necessary to actually be on the faculty of a business school to use it as a point of entry into the network of corporate executives; it was possible to tap into that network by tapping into the business school itself.[14] For example, in an average week, at least two executives visit the business school of most any university. Some may be lecturing in classes, but quite often they are giving public lectures or even participating in executive education programs. By attending these lectures and mentioning your interest in an individual or a topic to faculty colleagues, it is possible to get introductions, if not to actually get time with a visiting executive.[15]

Personal contact is obviously more difficult. However, it is possible to "work your way to the top" by getting to know people who already have contact or for whom contact would serve certain interests. For example, MBA students and managers on sabbatical to universities quite often have contacts they would be willing to share; some can even sponsor you in your quest to gain access.[16] Managers below the executive ranks are not only more accessible but if they have an interest in a topic you are pursuing (or a common interest can be negotiated) they may very well be willing to do the networking for you.

Still, recognizable affiliations and personal contacts can only be qualifiers. They are not likely to open doors unless accompanied by a compelling reason as to why someone should see you. In that regard, it is essential to have a problem or a question lead the way—something that suggests that the person with whom you want to speak is uniquely qualified in some way.

Otherwise, you will find yourself limited to talking with someone on that executive's staff.[17]

I generally phrase the problem in terms that personalize it: For example, in my last project (Thomas forthcoming), I told would-be interviewees that I wanted "to get a better understanding of how it is that you and your company think about new technology. How does technology development and change fit into your business strategy? How do you go about evaluating alternative solutions to problems?" By framing the questions that way, I introduced three important hooks. First, I was interested in what they thought and did; that is, rather than give them reason to shunt me off to someone else, I tried to indicate that their insights were the ones I was after. Second, I wanted to learn from them; I offered the flattery of a role reversal, one that would give the executive the opportunity (as well as the responsibility) to teach the Ph.D.[18] Third, I was interested in how they and their organization dealt with real problems, not vague ones; in this respect, it is important to recognize that a problem that is real to you may not be especially real or compelling to someone else.[19]

Finally, you should be prepared to meet interviewees at a time and in a place convenient to them. This is more than just a matter of courtesy; executives jealously guard their time (even if only for outward appearances). You may have it in mind to meet them at a neutral spot (e.g., to avoid distractions or to exercise some control over the interview itself), but that may raise problems that you will only be obliquely aware of (e.g., physical security for the CEO). Of course, as I noted earlier, it may cost too much to be too accommodating. Careful advance planning can provide a solution: Executives tend to be far more generous with their schedules when you suggest a date a month or so away; travel reservations booked far enough ahead tend to cost less, too. When my funds are tight (i.e., most of the time), I often suggest that the interview take place the next time the interviewee is in my city or in my part of the country. To be even more accommodating, I have agreed to do interviews on the phone or via video conference, as well as in company limousines, taxicabs, airport waiting lounges, restaurants, and bars.[20]

## GETTING DATA

Assuming that you have been granted an interview, it is essential to make the most of the event. Excellent guides to doing interviews are readily available, and I will try to avoid repeating their recommendations here.[21] Rather, I intend to focus on issues I have found to be distinctive to the study of corporate elites.

First, it is important to be clear about which personae you want to interview: the individual, the position, or the organization. As I noted earlier, the first two are likely to be of greatest interest to the researcher. However, it is important to recognize that in the absence of clarity, the third is likely to be chosen as the default option by the interviewee. The last person to have interviewed the executive is likely to have been a journalist, that is, someone attuned to recent events in the organization's history, even in the individual's history. For the sociologist or anthropologist with a different (perhaps broader or less immediate) set of concerns, it is important to "recalibrate" the interviewee, that is, set the stage for a different kind of question prior to or at the outset of the interview itself.[22]

Second, it helps to clarify the ground rules for the interview. You should not assume that they are understood. Most executives are familiar with journalistic conventions in interview situations and unfamiliar with social science conventions. The reverse tends to be true of social scientists. To avoid the awkward—and occasionally distressful—situation in which an interviewee tells you in passing at the end that everything he said was "for background only" or the situation in which she obviously (and painfully) chooses words carefully in order to avoid having something untoward attributed to her, it makes sense to clarify how you intend to use your notes, tapes, and so forth at the outset. This need not be an occasion for handwringing or mincing of words: Less than 1% of the executives I have interviewed have ever refused to be tape recorded, and most are quite willing to be quoted directly; most also appreciate having the ground rules clarified in advance.[23]

Third, there is the issue of control—specifically, who is in charge of the interview. While there is ongoing debate as to the merits of semistructured versus unstructured interviewing,[24] I tend to favor the former as part of a strategy for tipping the balance of power in my direction. I do so in part for reasons of efficiency: I would rather have the opportunity to decide when to intervene to cut off a line of response than to have the interviewee free to chart his or her own agenda. I also do so because talk is the stock in trade of corporate executives. That is, they are paid to think and talk and, more pointedly, to talk to a wide variety of audiences. Their public or organizational persona is formed through training in public speaking, in dealing with the press, and even in how to be interviewed. Some have speechwriters, and in virtually every case when they are asked to speak publicly, their speeches are cleared by, for example, the legal, financial, public relations, and/or CEO's office. Thus it is quite common to watch an executive mentally "rewinding the tape" in search of an appropriate phrase or monologue that appears to accord to a particular question. This may be unavoidable (even unintentional), but the effect is the same: He will launch into a speech if the question allows or if the question does not challenge the appropriateness of a speech.[25] If someone is intent on giving a speech, it may be impossible to stop them; under those circumstances I counsel, first, patience and, at the first opportunity, a rephrasing of the question to invite a response from the persona I am most interested in. For example, when an opening arises I will intervene with "Uh huh, but I'm curious . . . how did *you* feel about it?" If that fails, I shift to an entirely different line of questioning to break the flow.

Fourth, the interview can and ought to be supplemented by other forms of data collection. Specifically, I make it a point to ask people in advance and at the time of the interview to provide me with any supporting data they can. This has been a surprisingly successful strategy and one that makes a great deal of sense; however, it is one that few researchers I know routinely pursue. Some tell me that they are happy enough to get access and don't want to push their luck in asking for too much. Others worry about what to do in situations where the data they are given is proprietary and therefore limited in its use value for social science purposes. My view is that anything I receive is better than nothing; I may grind my teeth at not being able to report some data, but I would much rather know what I cannot say than to not know and then be forced to speculate.[26] Requests for data may not always be honored, but the request itself tends not to be dishonored, especially among executives who consider themselves to be "fact driven."

Finally, the formal close of an interview need not signal the end of the interaction. At minimum, it helps to make a practice of asking for the opportunity to follow up with questions of clarification after you have had a chance to review your notes. Although this is not a suggestion applicable only to corporate elites, it is different in the sense that executives are accustomed to interacting with people by way of paper. On a number of occasions I have been advised that letters and memos have a longer half-life than telephone or hallway conversations. In this respect, a letter of thanks can also be an opportunity to remind the person of things she promised or offered to do during the interview (e.g., sending reports, making additional contacts for you, etc.).

## GETTING MORE DATA

As I hinted in the preceding section, there are a variety of means for enhancing and enlarging the amount you can learn from an interview with important people in big companies. Here I offer some additional suggestions that may be a bit less structured.

• Corporate executives, as Domhoff (1967) has shown so creatively, are deeply enmeshed in social, political, economic, religious, and even family networks made up of other corporate executives. It makes sense, therefore, to use every interview as an opportunity to employ those networks to your advantage. Ask for the names of people whom your interviewees think you ought to interview and who they think would like to be interviewed about your topic.

• Interviews need not be limited to the amount of time negotiated if you are careful in the way you set them up. For example, I try whenever possible (or appropriate) to schedule interviews for the time immediately preceding lunch. That way I increase the chances of extending the interview into lunch or, alternatively, use the lunch to be introduced to others in the organization. Lunchtime conversation tends to be less formal and therefore more free flowing; if the interviewee had been unwilling to come out from behind her organizational persona, lunch can be a vehicle for lowering inhibitions.

• Because control over the interview may be of vital concern, it is wise to quickly take in the surroundings when being ushered into an executive's office. If you can do so without being impolite, it may be more effective to locate a nonobvious place to conduct the interview, such as at a sofa and adjacent armchair or at a conference table, rather than sit in chairs on opposite sides of his desk.

• Do not hesitate to send an abbreviated transcript of your interview or a summary constructed from your notes as a way to both get clarification and prompt additional data. This can be laborious, but it has the advantage of keeping lines of communication open.

## CONCLUSION

Movies like *Roger and Me* are entertaining and, in many ways, quite instructive. But, they often forfeit much of their depth and their persuasive potential by not giving speaking roles to the people whose behavior they seek to explain. *Roger and Me* would, of course, have been a much different movie had Roger been on screen for more than a few fleeting minutes—and quite a different enterprise if director Moore had had it in mind to wrestle with the multiple personae embedded in Roger and other important people in big companies.

In this respect, sociologists interested in studying and explaining the behavior of corporate elites have a major chore on their hands. To avoid caricature, they must cultivate an awareness of multiple personae that make up the reality of important people in big companies. To provide insight, as well as build a firm foundation for sociological analysis, they must separate out the person from the role and the role from the formal context within which it is acted out. Such awareness, however, is often difficult to achieve and sustain for ideological as well as methodological reasons. The setting, the person, and the organization can overwhelm the researcher—both positively (in the sense of impressing him or her and encouraging a form of identification with the people being interviewed) and negatively (repelling him or her and encouraging a level of detachment that can lead to equally partial or one-sided analyses). In both cases, researchers can find themselves focusing on one persona to the exclusion and detriment of the others.

However, awareness can be enhanced through careful preparation—much of which involves the researcher asking difficult questions of him or herself—and through recognition of the responsibility that researchers have to multiple audiences: readers, each other, and, yes, the elite itself.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Buchanan, Boddy, and McCalman (1988) and Van Maanen (1991).

2. The rule of thumb I've observed is that the bigger the company, the more elaborate the security system—independent of how important security is. Identification badges can be a source of great insight in and of themselves: For example, at one large aircraft company where I've spent a lot of time, badges had (until quite recently) a color code so that you could identify which division ("budget line") a person belonged to, a budget number so you could see what department their time was charged to, a magnetic strip so it could be scanned by security personnel as well as deployed like a credit card to get access to private areas, the person's "hire in" date so you could tell how long someone had been around, and a small black-and-white photograph taken of the person at the time he or she was hired. The last "identifier" was often the most interesting: Because many of the people I met with had joined the company in the mid- to late 1960s, it was quite a revelation to compare their current "executive" demeanor

(clean shaven, short hair) with the long sideburns, mustaches, and collar-length haircuts of the '60s.

3. Executives do, on average, spend very long hours at work with their time tightly scheduled (Mintzberg 1973); however, this is not the same as saying that all that time is spent working. In this respect, I would say that Walker's (1985) chronicle of life in the executive suite of the large-scale corporation is not altogether inaccurate.

4. Few executives know what sociologists or anthropologists do in general and much less about what they might do in a particular study. Thus they have little reason to treat you as something other than an unimportant journalist.

5. A coach-class ticket from Boston to Detroit (same-day roundtrip with no Saturday stayover) costs approximately $700. Add in a rental car ($35), parking at the airport ($10), a skimpy meal ($5), depreciation on the suit or dress you bought to interview important people ($10), and the cost of your own time (heavily discounted at $40), and you've spent $800. After one of my own $800 interviews was rescheduled, I mentioned it through clenched teeth to a senior colleague; he tried to console me by noting that the cost of that hour interview was roughly equivalent to the hourly wage of the executive in question.

6. This characterization of tasks is based largely on my own experience supplemented by conversations I have had with colleagues about "how they do it."

7. I am sometimes amazed at just how ignorant we are of data sources—not to mention research reports and articles—developed and written by colleagues in professional schools.

8. You may have to sit through recitation of ideas or information with which you are already acquainted, but, if done carefully, it is possible to short-circuit "speeches" that have been delivered elsewhere. In some cases, of course, that may be impossible: For example, I have visited four different Toyota Corporation installations and had to sit through basically the same presentations about the company, its history, and its philosophy as a prelude to broaching a discussion of questions I wanted answered. In each case, I have prefaced my visit with letters indicating (politely) that I am not a stranger and that I have read extensively about the company. This has not, however, circumvented the ritual.

9. In fact, for reasons that I will go on to describe, it may be to your advantage to offer to submit questions in advance. For example, it increases the odds that your questions will structure the interview, that the interviewee will be better prepared to discuss what you are interested in, and, perhaps most important, that he or she will provide you with additional documentation or recommendations for people to speak with as part of their preparation.

10. It is an open question whether executives would refuse to speak with someone if they showed up in clothes incongruent with organizational norms. My rule of thumb has been, however, to avoid drawing excessive attention to myself in order to focus attention on my questions. Graduate students who have worked with me routinely complain about this, of course. On the other hand, it is possible to err in the other direction, too. For example, I routinely don a conservative (navy) suit; however, in a computer company I found that I stood out like a sore thumb by comparison to the pullover sweaters and slacks that were the norm. Being far from home, I did not have much alternative to my suits, and several times over the course of the next week people chided me for dressing too much like a consultant—a comment that was tantamount to an insult.

11. Most vivid in my mind are a chrome-plating machine operator who stood up to his supervisors in an effort to correct a health danger on the job, a *lechugero* (lettuce worker) who supported a family of eight on subminimum wages, an equipment designer whose unorthodox ideas were shunned for years until finally implemented, and a woman who held down three jobs in order to send her kids to college.

12. Actually, some of the best (and least obtrusive) observation can be done via movies about business. For example, recent works—dramas and comedies alike—such as *Wall Street*, *The Secret of My Success*, and *Other People's Money*, as well as classics like *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and *Fountainhead*, can provide valuable insights as to the nuances of life on "mahogany row."

13. See Buchanan, Boddy, and McCalman (1988) and Pettigrew (1985).

14. A small tip from Japanese business: have business cards printed up that display your college or university's insignia featured prominently. Your name and departmental affiliation should be much smaller because you want to attract attention to the institution. If you feel it important to avoid being associated with a particular department or discipline, you can always affiliate yourself with a larger entity, such as a College of Arts and Sciences. However, because courtesy appointments in research centers or even business schools are not uncommon, you can always use that instead.

15. Executives visit college campuses to educate students and faculty. It is therefore not unreasonable to present yourself as someone who wants to be educated.

16. On several occasions in lectures to undergraduate audiences, I have mentioned my interest in meeting with or interviewing executives in a given company or industry. Twice now, it yielded introductions from the children of important people.

17. At the risk of being redundant, I must repeat that the questions you wish to have answered might in fact be answerable by someone else.

18. This is a point I have stressed but rarely gotten across to colleagues not accustomed to field research. For example, in training faculty in how to do interviews—and then accompanying them as they did it—it was difficult to persuade them to not give lectures with each question and to avoid the temptation to challenge every answer they were given.

19. Obviously, part of your initial research should involve efforts to find out what are currently deemed real and important problems. Without misrepresenting what is your real interest, it is often relatively easy to frame your interest in terms that might pique their interest.

20. To date, my most memorable interview was conducted in the old Playboy Club in Chicago. I have not had the experience of some colleagues who have had meetings in corporate jets, hot tubs, and saunas.

21. See, for example, Spradley (1979), McCracken (1988), Seidman (1991), Thomas (1983), and Schein (1987).

22. For example, I often use a letter to confirm the interview time and place and submit along with it a brief statement of my research interests—usually one that reiterates what I've said or written previously—along with a sampling of questions that "give the flavor of" what I am likely to ask. I usually repeat the same statement at the outset of the interview as a way to jog the person's memory as to who I am and why I'm there.

23. I make it a practice to tape record and fully transcribe all interviews. I explain this honestly: I have great difficulty listening, writing, and thinking all at the same time. Thus I tape record in order to be attentive and to make sure I understand what people are telling me then and later. I also routinely offer to keep confidential the identities of

the people I interview. I do the latter in large part because it is unimportant to me that specific organizations or individuals be identified.

24. Schein (1987), for example, makes a cogent case for the unstructured interview as part of a clinical approach to fieldwork.

25. I recall vividly one situation when I politely interrupted just such a speech by noting that I'd heard the executive make that argument 2 weeks earlier on a cable TV business program. He looked at me first in shock and then in embarrassment—although he did not say exactly why he was embarrassed. He immediately responded, however, that "Oh, I forgot. This is *your* interview, isn't it?"

26. Proprietary agreements—or confidentiality statements—usually do not enter into the picture when the interview is "one time only." However, the ability of corporations and their representatives to sue in the event of a breach of agreement sets up important differences in this kind of research by comparison to other work.

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