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Chapter 13: Interviewing key informants from the corporate sector

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Interviewing key informants is a well-established research method used to document, and understand, the motivations, goals and activities of organizations. There are three main types of research interview – structured, unstructured and semi-structured (see Brinkman 2013). In structured interviews, the interview is closely controlled by the interviewer and content is strictly limited to pre-designed questionnaire in order to facilitate comparison between respondents. To control for bias questions may be read verbatim by the interviewer from a script. In unstructured interviews general themes are identified by the interviewer, but the specific content and direction of the interview is allowed to flow organically. Open questions are used to prompt the respondent to share their account and generate narratives. Unstructured interviews are often take the form of life stories or personal accounts of events and experience and are thus widely used in the field of oral history (see Chapter 15). Semi-structured interviews, combine elements of both: using interview guides to shape the content and flow of the interview but allowing flexibility to pursue new issues and lines of questioning which may arise in the interview itself.

In this chapter, we focus on semi-structured interviews which have been widely deployed in the field of policy analysis to understand the process of policy change and the role of key actors in bringing about this change. Interviews provide new, sometimes unique, primary data sources derived from key actors such as policy makers, or those otherwise engaged in the policy process including civil society representatives and corporate actors. Semi-structured interviews also allow researchers to examine issues in depth; to seek clarification and additional details and to probe issues with respondents to develop more nuanced understandings of complex processes. The process of conducting interviews may also reveal additional lines of inquiry, areas of interest and research questions which augment or deepen understandings of an organisation.

There is now a sizeable literature on elite interviewing which guides the process of arranging, conducting and analysing interviews (see for example Rubin and Rubin 2012; Brinkman 2013; Bryman 2015). However, interviewing has arguably been underutilised to

date in researching corporations and global health governance (GHG). This chapter sets out the specific issues which arise when doing interviews with corporations, and the types of research questions to be answered through them. This is achieved by discussing how semi-structured interviews have been used to study the alcohol and gambling industries, and then how they might be applied to corporate actors in other contexts.

Using interviews to study corporations

Interviews with key informants about corporations present challenges associated with elite interviewing more generally (Mikecz, 2012). Identifying key informants with the ability, and willingness, to speak candidly and knowledgably about a corporation can be the first challenge. Potential key informants can be identified through an initial stakeholder mapping exercise, which identifies key actors involved in a policy debate, along with their perceived interests and attitudes (Brugha and Varvasovszky, 2000; Varvasovszky and Brugha, 2000). Typical stakeholders include civil servants, politicians and policy makers, public interest groups, and private sector actors such as lobbyists and industry associations.

Given the nature of some business activities, and the perception that public health researchers may be antithetical to their interests, business representatives may be reluctant to participate. Individuals may be inhibited to speak about existing or former employers, or be subject to confidentiality agreements. Where an interview is granted, the researcher may be directed to an individual not well placed to answer their research questions or lacking relevant experience or insights. Researchers may also not be able to control and manage the dynamics of the interview to ensure key issues are covered and useful data is generated.

The identity of the key informant interviewed will determine the type of data generated, and the nature of the claims that can be made. It may be possible to secure an interview with the Head of Government Affairs in a particular corporation, for example, who orchestrates the company's lobbying strategy. Alternatively, you may find yourself face-to-face with a public relations (PR) spokesperson whose role it is to deflect attention away from issues deemed sensitive to corporate interests. A meeting with researchers might even be approached as an opportunity to promote the company's corporate messaging. Rather than unearthing information about corporate political strategy, researchers may risk becoming an unwitting conduit for publicising this strategy.

Aside from current employees of corporations, there are other key informants who can be considered as, or provide useful insights on, corporate actors. These include industry association representatives, business analysts and scholars, private consultants, lobbyists, and

former and retired employees. The advantage of speaking to trade associations is that representatives may be easier to gain access to, and may wish to help you understand the overall activities and perspectives of a specific industry, as well as specific position on a given issue. If the trade association's membership covers corporations with different interests, it might be a useful source to understand potential tensions or competing goals within an industry.

As in all social science research, it is vital to combine industry interviews with other data sources (e.g. policy documents and industry publications) in a process known as 'triangulation' (Skeggs 1997) in order to gain a full and accurate account of corporate behaviour. Finally, since interview-based research involves human subjects, it is vital to adhere to recognised research ethics standards of practice. How data is recorded, stored and analysed pose important ethical and legal issues concerning confidentiality and anonymity (see Chapter 23).

Using interviews to study the global alcohol industry

A study of how alcohol industry actors attempted to influence policy debates on pricing policy in the UK demonstrates the wide range of insights to be generated with semi-structured interviews, and the issues researchers need to be aware of at different stages of the research process (McCambridge et al., 2014). The aim of the research is to identify the positions adopted by alcohol industry actors on pricing, explore their rationale for these positions, and investigate the ways in which they sought to articulate their preferences to government and influence the policy process. Thirty-five qualitative interviews were conducted with representatives of transnational alcohol companies (TACs), trade associations; public health advocates, civil society organisations, and policy makers including civil servants and parliamentarians identified from responses to the Scottish government's 2008 alcohol policy consultation. Key informants were identified through purposive sampling (i.e. seeking interviewees with specific expertise on the issue at hand), and those initially contacted were then asked to suggest further respondents (i.e. snowball sampling). While around half the industry actors approached declined to participate in the study, interviews were eventually conducted with all key stakeholder groups, and with representatives of all sectors of the alcohol industry.

Interviewees were recruited by email and telephone, and through the researchers' attendance at events (e.g. seminars and policy forums) in which industry and other policy actors were present. Face to face contact proved the most effective way of gaining access to

industry respondents, although effort was often needed to follow up initial contacts to secure an interview. The response of industry actors to interview requests varied. Almost all trade association representatives agreed to participate in the study, while only half of those corporations provided respondents.

Each interview was roughly one hour, and mainly took place in the offices of the organisations in question. Complete anonymity was offered to respondents, who could select how the data they provided could be used and attributed to them, as set out in a consent form. Offering anonymity in this way can be vital to recruiting respondents and assuring candid responses. The interview drew on stakeholder mapping and documentary analysis to set out the main research questions, and potential follow-up questions and probes to delve deeper into issues which emerge during the course of the interview (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). This allowed actors' positions to be explored further in a way which is impossible with documentary analysis. Having a semi-structure to the interview, while allowing space to explore unexpected angles and responses, is a key strength of this approach to data gathering.

The researchers found that many respondents were highly skilled at dealing with the questions asked. They appeared to have predetermined answers to certain types of questions, or potential criticisms of their businesses, which often closely mirrored positions stated in company publications and other documents. They sometimes repeated these carefully crafted phrasings when pushed on a subject. At times, inconsistencies in the arguments presented, or between the interview transcript and the published position of the companies, emerged. In several cases, respondents sought to control the dynamic of the interview, even steering conversation to favoured topics. It is thus important for the researcher to prepare ahead of time different ways of addressing key themes and issues at different points during the interview.

For this study, the key informants ranged from a Chief Executive, to government affairs actors at the heart of the organisation's political strategy, to PR officers who had limited insights on the company's policy engagement. As described above, the data generated from interviews with PR spokespersons (and those with government and public health actors) had a different status, and offered insights into different areas of interest, to actors more directly involved in corporate-government affairs. While PR officers told us little about policy influencing strategies, they were vital in understanding attempts by industry actors to 'frame' the debate on alcohol related harm, or to shape perceptions of their organisations as part of the solution to these problems. Framing refers to the way in which policy problems and their solutions are presented by policy actors. Attempts to frame policy

debates – to shape the terms in which they are couched and which aspects of the issue are given most attention – are key components of corporate political strategy (Hawkins and Holden 2013). Different types of interview will be useful for answering different types of research question, and the researcher needs to reflexively engage with the status of the data generated and the insights they offer.

To facilitate the analysis, all interviews were recorded (none of the participants declined this request) and then transcribed by an external transcription agency. Transcripts were then coded thematically using Nvivo coding software. The interview transcripts were initially read by the researcher who conducted the interviews, and recordings were listened to by a second researcher to identify the key themes which emerged. From this, the researchers identified and agreed on the key themes that emerged from the interviews and these served as the basis for the codes used for systematic analysis of the transcripts. For example, it was a common element of industry responses to try to play down the extent of alcohol-related harm, so “Claims about Alcohol Harms” was used as a code and all examples of this were recorded. During the analysis phase, additional codes, and patterns between codes emerged.

The analysis of responses by key stakeholders to the Scottish consultation, on the proposed introduction of MUP, facilitated triangulation between interviews and other data sources (Holden et al., 2012). By triangulating industry interview responses, against those from respondents in other sectors and documentary sources, the study was able to build a picture of the points of access available to industry actors in the policy process and the methods they use to influence policy (Holden and Hawkins, 2012; Hawkins and Holden, 2014), as well as the internal dynamics of the alcohol industry as they sought a co-ordinated response to the pricing issue (Holden et al., 2012).

Using interviews to study the gambling industry

The size of the global market for regulated gambling has more than doubled during the past thirteen years, from just over US\$200 billion in 2001, to US\$450 billion in 2014 (GBGC, 2015). In the US, this expansion can be traced to the 1970s and the growth of casinos (Schüll, 2012). The gambling market in Europe is more diverse and the industry has expanded primarily through sports betting and online gambling, both of which are illegal in the majority of US states. Industry growth in Asia has been driven by tourists from China, where gambling is illegal, visiting casinos in Macau and Singapore. Regulated gambling has taken diverse forms across these regions, but in all cases expansion has been accompanied by

efforts by corporate actors to redefine gambling as a leisure activity rather than an illicit or immoral activity (Cassidy, 2016).

Policy makers and gambling scholars argue that we lack high quality evidence about gambling behaviour on which to base policy. A recent project (Cassidy, et al., 2014) set out to ask academics, policy makers and gambling treatment providers why they thought this was the case, and how they produced and made use of particular kinds of evidence. The project focused principally on the UK, the most diverse regulated gambling market in the world, but included interviews with participants in important emerging markets in Europe, Hong Kong and Macau.

Multiple methods, including interviews, participant observation at industry conferences and work shadowing, were used in an iterative process, with each of these methods serving a particular purpose within the overall research design. The value of interviewing, in this case, was that it enabled researchers to get beyond public representations of gambling, to more nuanced and complex positions. Most importantly, interviewees were provided with anonymity which allowed them to share information which would not otherwise have entered the public domain.

First, a focus group of potential respondents was convened, to develop and refine a specific set of interview questions. Once the core questions were agreed, the project team conducted semi-structured interviews with 109 active participants in gambling research, including users (policy makers, treatment providers, regulators), producers (in academia, the gambling industry and in research institutes) and members of the gambling industries, both traditional (including sports betting and casinos) and new forms of gambling (including online and mobile gambling). An initial group of participants was selected based upon their senior positions in the gambling industry and /or gambling research community. This included actors sitting on commercial, regulatory and public health boards; those contributing authoritative pieces of research in the field; and those supported by prestigious funding bodies, including national research councils.

Subsequent interviewees were identified using the snowball sampling method (also known as ‘chain’ or ‘chain referral’ sampling), whereby each participant was invited to recommend others they felt might make a valuable contribution to the study (Atkinson and Flint, 2004). This was complemented by a randomly selected group of additional respondents from within the field, included to ensure that we consulted as widely as possible with members of different networks and at different stages of their careers. This allowed us to gather what might be called ‘outlier’ experiences. A random number generator was used

to select potential respondents from, for example, a list of participants at a gambling conference, who were then approached to participate in the study.

Negotiating access to corporate actors working in gambling is extremely difficult and often unsuccessful. Many gambling operators simply do not respond to requests for access. Even where access is granted, this may be a long, time-consuming process. Approximately six months were spent negotiating, unsuccessfully, for access to one corporation, for example. However, this is not always the case; an offhand remark to a bookmaker during a boisterous industry event, for instance, yielded unconditional and instant access to workers in a chain of shops.

Interviews took place in a variety of settings including the respondents' work places, in coffee shops and pubs. Each took around one hour to complete. Some participants chose to meet on multiple occasions, and one respondent generated more than six hours of data. Interviews were sound recorded, and transcribed and entered into qualitative data analysis software for thematic coding. The project focused on sensitive information that could affect career progression, reputation and commercial practices, meaning that the researchers' responsibilities to participants were extensive. In accordance with the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth guidelines (ASA, 2014), consent was conceived of as an ongoing process. This included guarantees that their participation, or the content of their interview, would not be discussed with other members of the target group, and that they would not be identifiable in the report.

Participants were briefed about the purpose of the study, and how their data would be used prior to the interview. Throughout the process participants were assured that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. We asked permission to categorise them by gender, role, location and years of experience. They were also given the option not to be quoted, to speak entirely off the record, and to stop the recording at any time. All data was managed and stored according to UK rules on data protection.

All data produced through interviews is dialogic; a product of the relationship between the interviewer and their subject. Trust and even rapport takes a great deal of time to build up, and can be easily lost. As with TACs, all participants in the gambling study had a position that they wished to present. It was up to the researcher to ask questions that were sufficiently stimulating or unexpected to avoid receiving routine, premeditated or superficial answers. Findings were triangulated with other data sources, including research outputs, industry documents and publications, communications from research centres, research

councils, regulators, government departments and funding bodies, and participant observation at conferences and meetings.

Similar to the alcohol study discussed above, it was evident, on triangulating our interviews, that attempts had been made by some informants – both senior researchers and members of the industry – to shape and guide the interviews towards certain topics and away from others. There was also evidence of collusion between interviewees in their responses, which was uncovered by careful comparison of the interview transcripts. This was again important data. Participants were asked about it, and produced a justification which focused on reputation management.

The interviews produced unprecedented insights into the operations of the gambling industry and their attitudes towards research and regulation. The data suggested an alternative explanation for the dearth of high quality evidence in the gambling field - the result of structural issues (including the funding of research by industry and their control over access to data) rather than due to the difficulty of studying gamblers as a hard to reach group. This conclusion was supported by the number and range of informants interviewed, and their insider status.

Critical reflections on using interviews to study corporations and health

These case studies demonstrate how confidential, anonymised interviews can reveal crucial information about corporations' activities. They can provide insights into businesses' 'real' agenda, which may differ from the official accounts found on company websites or in publications. Interviews can also reveal inconsistencies within companies' publicly-stated positions which are, in themselves, interesting findings that may suggest areas for further investigation. At all times, however, it was vital to be aware that the responses may be designed to promote a particular image of the company or further a specific agenda. Responses of this kind may tell us little about the actual approach taken by corporations, but they are potentially helpful in understanding the way corporations attempt to frame policy debates and perceptions of their businesses and products.

The motivation for companies to participate in these particular studies is unclear but, in both studies, it was possible to gain access to industry respondents. The relative novelty of the research agenda on alcohol and gambling, and the limited public health research in these areas at the time, may partly explain the willingness of industry actors to engage in the studies documented above. It is uncertain, however, whether publication of these studies will affect future access to corporate actors in these and other fields. Our experiences suggest that

interview-based studies may be most successful in subject areas that are currently under-researched. Given these obstacles, it is vital to use each interview opportunity to its fullest potential, by asking as wide a range of questions and establishing as extensive a dataset as possible.

Interviews can produce unprecedented data about the alcohol and gambling industries. However, there are certain barriers which may limit the effectiveness of this approach when applied to the field of tobacco. The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) explicitly wards against the undue influence of the industry in the formulation of government policy in Article 5.3 and many academic institutions have policies of non-engagement with the tobacco industry. Some health journals refuse to publish tobacco industry funded research. As a result of this, meeting with the tobacco industry, even for the purpose of conducting research interviews, is potentially politically problematic in a way which it may not yet be for researchers to meet with and engage with actors from other industries such as alcohol and gambling. Undertaking interviews with industry actors always has the potential of undermining the credibility of the researcher and the research in the eyes of the wider scholarly community. In the field of tobacco, this danger is especially pronounced.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates both the potential insights to be gained from, and the challenges involved in conducting, interview-based studies on corporations and global health. To date, interviews have been underutilised by researchers interested in corporations and global health. This chapter is intended to facilitate the use of interview based studies to research other health harming industries and different national contexts to which they have not to date been applied. Comparative analysis both across sectors countries may also be undertaken using this methodology. The case studies presented here focus on the national level, interviews can be used to study corporate political influence at the regional or global levels, for example at the WHO. Working above the national level poses additional challenges as there may be language barriers and different cultural norms to negotiate, but in the context of globalization it is necessary to use the full range of methodologies at our disposal at all levels of governance in order to fully understand the political strategies, and impact on health, of trans-national corporations.

Notes

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