Chapter 3
Flipping the Paradigm: Studying Up and Research for Social Justice

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Abstract Social justice research most often focuses on the voices, experiences, and practices of underserved and marginalized groups. While this focus produces important insights, it disregards the actions of those in power who create and maintain systems of inequality and injustice in the first place. To address this gap, this chapter examines methodological approaches for studying up or researching the powerful. It describes the challenges faced by researchers who study those in power, such as problems of access, interview pitfalls, dangers in data analysis and interpretation, ethical concerns, and dissemination of findings. The chapter also provides suggestions for how researchers can address those challenges. The significance of this chapter lies in a systematic presentation of methodological tools necessary for studying the powerful in research for social justice.

Equity and social justice research often focuses on oppressed or underserved groups (Griffiths, 1998). Many of the classical and contemporary ethnographies in the field of education attend to marginalized populations (see Ferguson, 2010; MacLeod, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999; Willis, 1977). Other works compare the experiences of the privileged and underprivileged groups, juxtaposing how they engage with schooling in ways that lead to different educational outcomes (see Anyon, 1981; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2000). The overall focus on marginalized groups leaves out of consideration the actions of those in power who create and maintain systems of inequality and injustice in the first place. This omission is unfortunate because dominant groups that hold power in the society—be they White middle-class parents, policymakers, or conservative think tanks—create, advocate, and promote practices and policies that protect their privilege, reproduce inequality, and retrench social hierarchies. In other words, by limiting research to the oppressed, we leave the oppressors unaccountable

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for their actions. Exceptions exist, but they are rare (see Demerath, 2009; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Overall, if scholarly investigations do not examine the oppressors' voices, experiences, and practices more consistently, the pursuit of liberation and alternative futures that could be more just for all will be greatly undermined.

This chapter explores possibilities for addressing this gap through researching the powerful, also known as studying up or researching elites. While there is a sizable body of scholarship on studying up, little of it focuses on equity and social justice. Thus, this chapter considers methodological tools helpful for social justice research.

Defining Power, Conceptualizing Elite Status

In researching the powerful, an important question to consider is what assumptions of power guide the research project. Historically, researchers equated power status with participants' structural positions in the society: those who occupied higher positions in the social hierarchies were believed to have more power. Recently, this approach has been problematized. Smith (2006), for example, argued that post-structural conceptions of power that recognize its fluid, dynamic, and context-dependent nature are necessary to disrupt the assumptions about fixed and static positions of power. Yet while this observation is helpful for attending to power in particular social settings, it does not address the dynamics of how dominant groups use their power to create injustice and inequality through their daily actions (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009).

Smith's (2006) argument stems from the observation that there is a significant variation in how different scholars identify their participants as elites. Some of them rely on the status differentials between the researcher and the participants (Hunter, 1995; Mikecz, 2012; Stephens, 2007), while others take into account participants' position of power, professional status, and sphere of influence (Fitz, Halpin, & Power, 1994; Harvey, 2011). For example, in educational research, some scholars identified policymakers (Phillips, 1998; Gewirtz & Ozga, 1994), philanthropic organizations' employees (Ostrander, 1995), or NGO heads (Straubhaar, 2015) as elites. In many cases, the upper-class background of the participants or settings where research is conducted is enough to designate participants as elites (Priyadharshini, 2003). Such conceptual profusion is misleading as research approaches differ if participants are politicians or students in elite high schools. For this reason, this chapter uses examples from research in policy circles as actors in this area have a significant influence not just on maintaining their privilege (as elite participants in other settings do) but also on recreating oppressive and unequal social structures more broadly through their policy initiatives. Despite this focus, the challenges in conducting research with the powerful and ways to address them described in this chapter are useful for researching other social groups that hold power in the society, such as parents from elite backgrounds, lobbyists that promote neoliberal approaches to education, or conservative groups that promote dominant ideologies.

The variation in definitions and conceptualizations is a useful reminder that social positions are relative, relational, and are in the process of constant negotiation. In that regard, it is helpful for researchers to be reflexive about their positions throughout the research project and to recognize the fluid subject positions available to both the researchers and the study participants (Priyadharshini, 2003).

Challenges in Researching the Powerful

Research with the powerful is wrought with numerous methodological challenges. In researching the powerful, problems of access leave much uncertainty in the process of conceptualizing the study. When scholars collect and analyze the data, the veracity of verbal data becomes suspect, and intentionality of participants' actions emerges as a puzzling riddle. Considering a study's ethics, scholars juggle the responsibility to treat their participants with respect and care at the same time as they contemplate how such treatment makes them complicit in maintaining systems of injustice and oppression. In what follows, I will address each of the challenges in more detail.

Access and Flexible Designs

One of the first challenges that a researcher has to consider is the problem of access, as those who occupy positions of power and privilege may be hard to access. Busy schedules, the sensitivity of the topic, or sheer unwillingness to meet with a researcher can undermine one's attempts to collect data (Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2002). To mitigate some of those challenges, researchers can delay the study until the most severe struggles are over or focus on those who held power in the past, such as retirees or those who moved on to other projects (Lancaster, 2017; Phillips, 1998; Selwyn, 2013). Some scholars, however, argue that challenges of access may be exaggerated and that many respondents are willing to find time in their busy schedules for interviews with researchers (Walford, 2012).

In tackling the challenge of access, one has to consider whether the inquiry can proceed if access is denied. In that regard, developing a study with maximum flexibility and multiple data sources is highly advisable. Another point to consider is whether interviews alone are sufficient for the study. In ethnographic studies often judged by one's prolonged immersion in participants' cultures, interviews alone may not be enough. To have access to observations, one has to consider what roles one can play in the organizations with which most participants are associated. In elite studies of international corporations or law firms, anthropologists took up positions of apprentices or full-time employees. Where possible, this could be a worthwhile option to consider for educational researchers.

Most studies with the powerful do rely on interviews as the primary source of data. First, one has to consider how to identify and access key participants. Farquharson (2005) proposed the method of reputational snowball, whereby researchers ask powerful participants to identify and, if possible, introduce the researcher to other actors in their networks. In elite studies, the recommendation is to "start at the top" (Ostrander, 1995, p. 136), contacting the most powerful individuals or groups first. To gain access to those who hold power, some researchers draw on their established networks and relationships. For example, previous work for a government agency (Gewirtz & Ozga, 1994) or friendships with those who know someone in elite circles (Ostrander, 1995) can provide a useful entrée for the study. Other possibilities include requesting interviews by email, phone, or letter (Duke, 2002; Ostrander, 1995), using networking opportunities during conferences, summits, or research seminars (Stephens, 2007), or even establishing contact through LinkedIn, Facebook, or Twitter (Straubhaar, 2015).

As one embarks on scheduling interviews, one needs to consider the logistics of the process. First, there is the question of navigating busy schedules and research project timing. Most interviews have to be scheduled weeks and months in advance. It is also common for participants to cancel interviews or delay them for hours, days, or even weeks. In the situations when the researcher has to travel domestically or internationally for data collection, such delays can be detrimental for the study's timeline. To mitigate these challenges, some scholars suggest using phone or Skype interviews as an alternative to face-to-face interviews (Stephens, 2007).

Another logistical consideration is interview locations. Many participants prefer to meet in their offices but spaces where interviews are conducted shape the information shared. More formal settings create conditions where answers to interview questions are stilted and lifeless (Duke, 2002; Fitz et al., 1994). Public spaces with onlookers around can heighten participants' concerns about being watched or overheard. Acknowledging the context of the interview and the role of others in it enhances the quality of research and allows the reader to critically assess researchers' claims.

Collecting Data, Conducting Interviews

An important matter to consider before scheduling interviews is how much a researcher can learn about the topic and study participants from other sources. Many scholars note the importance of doing one's homework before the interviews (Berry, 2002; Harvey, 2011; Thuesen, 2011). Various sources of data could be used for this purpose: policy documents, reports, participants' interviews or opinion pieces in popular media, archival materials, national or local newspapers, participants' articles in mainstream or academic outlets, organizational newsletters, financial reports, participants' (auto)biographies or publicly available CVs, and even Twitter or Facebook conversations. All of those resources could help researchers strengthen their study, deepen their understanding of the issue, and tailor interview questions for the participants' specific areas of expertise.

For interview design, it is often recommended to use semi-structured interviews (Leech, 2002) with open-ended questions that invite participants to share their personal perspectives (Duke, 2002; Harvey, 2011). Close-ended questions can significantly stifle the conversation as elites are used to sharing their opinions at length (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). Many scholars suggest adopting maximum flexibility in the interview process, arguing that interviews are more productive and data are richer when interviewers adopt a more conversational style and allow the interview to flow between topics, instead of strictly following a list of questions in an interview schedule (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Stephens, 2007).

One of the most important challenges of interviewing the powerful is that many of them are familiar with the interview process (Duke, 2002). Unlike participants from underprivileged groups for whom the experience of being asked questions about personal views or being listened to can be relatively new, the powerful may have gone through this process multiple times. This means that when a researcher arrives at the interview, the interviewee can have a polished performance that represents "the official line" and does not offer any new insights beyond the publicly available information (Duke, 2002). Learning how to probe and how to ask difficult, shocking (Ostrander, 1995), or "presuming" questions (Leech, 2002) is important to move the interview beyond the official storyline.

During the actual interviews, the researcher's ability to navigate power differentials plays an important role in determining the study's success. Those who occupy positions of power in the society may attempt to exert greater control over the interview process than researchers anticipate (Duke, 2002). This can take the form of controlling the conversation, providing extended utterances with no questions asked, refusing to answer questions, criticizing interview questions, evading questions to redirect the conversation, or using the interview to pose questions to the researcher. Many of these moves are a part of a "performance" (Aydarova, forthcoming; Lancaster, 2017) meant to reassert power hierarchies. Observing the variation of these behaviors in his interviews with powerful policymakers, calls for the researchers to "recognize and explore more fully the interview as an extension of the 'play of power' rather than separate from it" (p. 113). To address these differentials, the researcher can assume a more assertive role or play along to learn more about participants' perceptions of the topic of inquiry.

In research for social justice, the researcher also has to consider how to address sensitive issues and political topics. Thuesen (2011), for example, invites qualitative researchers to move between dialogue and confrontation when interviewing elites about topics related to discrimination. Kezar (2003) argues that researchers should engage the powerful in transformational interviews that will help the elites see the issue from different perspectives and recognize their position as the oppressor. In choosing a confrontational approach or engaging powerful participants in the exploration of their involvement in maintaining the system of injustice, researchers have to consider how the study will proceed, especially if the study design requires a large number of interviews with elites in the same network. Those in power share information about the researchers who approach them for interviews. A negative

experience that one person in the network has with a researcher can foreclose opportunities for future interviews and terminate the study prematurely.

Overall, it is recommended to deploy maximum flexibility during the data collection stage. One can pretend to know less about the topic of research or one can use one's lower social status to present oneself as less of a threat (Duke, 2002). The main point here is to be responsive to the situation and adjust one's presentation accordingly. In situations where participants are likely to disclose more to a graduate student, and the researcher is one, that identity can be emphasized over others (Stephens, 2007). In the community where one's professional status and prestige matters more, it would be beneficial for the researchers to highlight their credential, academic position, or university affiliation (Hunter, 1995). If the researcher adopts more fluid and flexible positions (Priyadharshini, 2003), the study is more likely to move forward, potentially advancing the well-being of those who are marginalized and underserved when it is complete.

Analysis and Interpretation

The area that has received less attention in the literature on researching the powerful is analysis and interpretation. This omission is unfortunate, however, because, as Briggs (2003) cautions, studies that do not attend to the contextualization and substantive interpretation of interviews run the risk of reproducing social inequalities and power hierarchies. To avoid this risk, the researcher first has to consider carefully the truthfulness of the accounts collected. One step undertaken by scholars working with elites is to share interview transcripts or summaries with the study participants for a check. Some participants will appreciate the opportunity to check the interview text while others might request to delete parts or the entirety of the interview they gave (Lancaster, 2017). In considering whether transcripts will be shared with participants, the researcher needs to be mindful of the fact that interaction with the transcript, as Briggs (2003) notes, is useful as a new set of data but unlikely to shed more light on the original exchange. Other scholars recommend cross-checking stories that emerge from interviews and observations with other data sources (Berry, 2002; Mikecz, 2012; Phillips, 1998). Particularly helpful in this case can be meeting minutes, detailed records of decision-making, or internal reports if those are available to the researcher.

As was mentioned earlier, many powerful participants share "official responses" during interviews (Fitz et al., 1994; Walford, 2012). It is important for the researcher to recognize that polished stories of benevolent intentions, exaggerated roles, and altruistic motives can be used to justify actions leading to pernicious outcomes for vulnerable populations. Powerful participants often co-opt the language of social justice to justify policies that entrench inequities and further marginalize underserved groups. The burden on the researcher then, as notes, is to engage in the inquiry reflexively in order not to reproduce dominant narratives. Ball argues that researchers working with the powerful should be mindful of

the agendas that the powerful bring to the interview and be attuned to what is being said and how it is being said—not just the content of the interview, but also its form.

In this regard, Briggs (1986) provides two stages for interview data analysis that can be useful in research with the powerful. The first stage attends to the interview as a whole and considers the overall context of where the interview was conducted, who was present, how the conversation was flowing, and whether there were any break-ups in that flow. It also includes the process of chunking interview transcripts into major components to create an overall outline of the conversation. This stage contextualizes the content of the exchange within broader sociopolitical trends. During the second stage of analysis, the researcher attends to the details of how the message was conveyed, focusing on the mechanics of how individual utterances were produced (intonation, prosody, syntax, and semantics, etc.). If a record of body language or eye contact during the interview exists, it is useful to analyze those elements as well. In conducting this level of analysis, the researcher seeks to identify how the interviewees intended the message to be read and responded to.

Qualitative inquiry guides often suggest that a researcher identify recurrent themes and consider data collection completed when themes become saturated because "any additional data collection will result only in more of the same findings" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 229). This approach may be treacherous when researching the powerful because elite participants can repeat the same official story that is shared in their networks. The researcher's task is not to take interview narratives at face value but to look for cracks in the facades even if those cracks do not appear with any regularity in the data. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003, 2013) can be particularly useful for identifying those cracks as it helps the researcher locate discrepancies in the elites' narratives, ruptures in their timelines, or distortions in their presentations. Additionally, Boucher (2017) provides tools from sociolinguistics to analyze how power is constructed, negotiated, and perpetuated through language in interview settings. In sum, whatever tools of analysis the researcher deploys, in conducting research with the powerful, one has to be mindful of the agendas elites pursue and use the analysis stage to preclude the possibility of becoming complicit in recreating unequal structures or unjust causes (Baez, 2002; Berry, 2002; Briggs, 2003; Hunter, 1995; Lancaster, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Even though there are some disagreements on the matter, research with the powerful differs from researching marginalized groups. Because elite participants are often well-known to the public, ensuring anonymity or confidentiality can be difficult to accomplish (Lancaster, 2017; Walford, 2012). Some elite participants, in fact, prefer to have their interviews fully attributed to them and scoff at researchers' offer to use pseudonyms. At the same time, some participants feel that positions of power they occupy place heightened responsibilities on them and discuss the pain involved in engaging in high-profile activities (Lancaster, 2017).

The vulnerability of participants from elite circles suggests that they are not impervious to the attacks from the media, the public, or peers in their networks (Lancaster, 2017). Research findings can damage people's careers and undo the projects into which they invested much time and energy. It is important for the researcher to take precautions not to cause unnecessary harm.

At the same time, one has to consider what the study reveals about elites' involvement in creating and maintaining systems of oppression. One of the common themes in reports on the powerful is comments "off the record," "for background knowledge," and other information shared in confidence that represent insights into the inner workings of power. While ethics recommendations require that scholars do not divulge this information, there is danger in helping the powerful keep their secrets. As Baez (2002) observes, "hidden power arrangements are maintained by secrets—the secrets of those who might benefit from those arrangements… Qualitative research contributes to this disenfranchisement if it prevents the exposure of hidden power arrangements" (p. 52). In that regard, researchers have to consider carefully to whom they are accountable for their research (Aydarova, in press). If the study seeks to shed light on the processes in which the powerful perpetuate injustice, inequality, and marginalization of subordinate groups, it is important to reconsider obligations to the participants.

Sharing the Findings

The final point to consider is how research findings will be disseminated. Observing how neoliberal transformations increase the suffering of marginalized groups worldwide, Bourdieu (2000) called for social scientists to use their scholarship to join social movements and activist groups in their struggle for social justice. In that regard, research findings should be shared with the groups that can put them to use in their work. Additionally, the field of qualitative inquiry is seeking to bring research findings to the public sphere through blog posts for national newspapers, articles in popular magazines, submissions to open source journals, podcasts for series with wide reach, or community performances of (auto)ethnographic studies (Denzin & Giardina, 2018). These are potential outlets to consider so that research findings can reveal many of elites' activities hidden from the public view. The path to liberation in this regard is not through giving voice to those who lack power (if the subaltern speaks, who is there to listen? (Spivak, 1988)), but through equipping those who struggle for justice with the resources needed to take down systems of oppression and injustice. A word of caution, however, is that researchers have to be aware of the dangers that ensue from their work. As Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) show, powerful participants can use lawsuits, public shaming, and other intimidation strategies to silence the researcher. The possibility of retribution calls for a more thorough process of inquiry, careful collation and storage of data, peer debriefing, and audit trails to ensure high quality of research (for more information on these techniques, see Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Conclusion

This chapter described methodological approaches for addressing the challenges in social justice research that focuses on the powerful. The chapter provided strategies for gaining access to elite participants, preparing and conducting interviews, analyzing data, and sharing research findings with broader communities. The key point for researchers to consider is how flexible designs, expansive understandings of what constitutes evidence, as well as multi-stage approaches to data analysis can shed light on the activities of the powerful that may otherwise remain invisible. The importance of this research cannot be underestimated because, as Nader (1972) argued, those in power make decisions that affect all of our lives, but bear most pernicious outcomes for the most vulnerable groups in our society. In striving toward equity and justice, it is important to engage in the type of inquiry that will reveal the inner workings of power and to turn the tides of justice to serve those who need it most.

Recommended Readings

Briggs, C. L. (2003). Interviewing, power/knowledge, and social inequality. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Postmodern interviewing* (pp. 242–255). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

This reading provides a useful critique of "research-as-usual" by showing how interviews can reproduce dominant paradigms and retrench social inequalities unless researchers attend to power in study design and data analysis.

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