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The Scholar, the Wealthy and the Powerful. Notes on Academic Culture in Elite-Focused Fieldwork

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The Scholar, the Wealthy and the Powerful. Notes on Academic culture in Elite-Focused fieldwork¹

Drawing on our experiences of interviewing elites, this article suggests that methodological reflexivity yields insights into the construction of symbolic and social hierarchies in contextualized interactions. The paper focuses on “academic culture” as the *locus* through which power relations were experienced in interview situations – more so than structures such as age, gender, race and class. We argue that academic cultural resources do not always function as valuable assets in interviews with elites, and explore how different elite interviewees mobilize a wide-ranging cultural repertoire to display status.

Keywords: qualitative methodology, sociology of elites, academic culture, elite sociability, reflexivity

Word count: 10436

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Introduction

“The sociologist (...) is vulnerable to the illusion of immediate self-evidence or the temptation to unconsciously universalize particular experience when he forgets that he is the cultivated subject of a particular culture (...) As an intellectual, the sociologist (...) is inclined to see as self-evident the interests, the schemes of thought, the problematics, in short the system of presuppositions that is linked to the intellectual class as a privileged reference group.” (Bourdieu *et al.* 1991[1968])

Pierre Bourdieu’s call for a greater level of reflexivity in conducting sociological enquiries emerged from a particular moment of class analysis, whose debates had been shaped, in France at least, by the “cause of the lower classes” (Mauger 2013). In this paper, we examine how Bourdieu’s insights into the sociologist’s class-centric outlook on the working classes might apply to studies of the upper class. We use reflexive analysis of interviews conducted with two different elite groups as a way to examine how social and symbolic hierarchies are created *in situ*. We show that 1) academic resources were mobilized in interviews with elites as both weapons and shields, helping us to establish rapport and to guide discussions towards topics of sociological interest; 2) our self-presentation as scholars were relatively devalued by elite interviewees, who could draw on a combination of cultural resources to affirm their significantly greater status. This paper thus contributes to methodological discussions about the locations of power in qualitative research with elites, and to theoretical debates over the contextualized value of cultural (here, academic) resources (see Savage et al. 2015; Serre and Wagner 2015).

Methodological Challenges in Elite Studies

As a methodological stance meant to ensure “the permanent sociological (...) control of sociological practice” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 40), reflexivity was first deployed to locate social asymmetries and to understand the social contours of researchers’ analytical

perspectives in non-elite contexts. As such, it helped draw a nuanced picture of working-class cultures, attentive to legitimacy effects in data collection. The concept of “scholastic bias” plays a central role in Bourdieu’s conception of reflexivity (Kenway and McLeod 2004); by clarifying how scholars project their worldviews onto their subjects’, it constructs reflexivity not only as an analysis of researchers’ social selves, but also as a collective enterprise to decipher the ‘social and intellectual unconscious’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 36) of sociology as a scholarly practice.

Locating social asymmetries in fieldwork with elites is, however, a harder task, as power relations between researcher and subject in elite contexts do not exactly reverse-mirror those emerging in non-elite situations. Some scholars have argued that researchers continue to have substantial agency in qualitative research on elites (Herzog 1995; Sabot 1999), and ultimately retain control over the design, development and publication of research output (Hertz and Imber 1995). Conversely, many studies underline the multifaceted challenges of ‘studying up’, and insist on the visible hand that elite subjects have on negotiations over fieldwork access, on their authoritative voices in data collection, and, thus, on their ability to ‘impress’ the researcher (see Aguiar & Schneider 2012; Howard & Kenway 2015; Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1997; Smith 2006; Willemez *et al.* 1994).

This approach has led some scholars to share useful approaches to ‘get them [elites] to talk’ or to let them talk, – either by “contest[ing] elite inclinations to just talk” (Ostrander 1993:21; Laurens 2007), or by “assuming the role of someone who needs to learn something” (Delaney 2007:215). While acknowledging difficulties of gaining access and maintaining rapport, others emphasize “alternative methodological storylines” (Howard and Kenway 2015:1008), and analyze how researchers can foster productive partnerships and collect narratives built on relations of trust and confidence. Affect in particular has been recently identified as central in qualitative research processes, sometimes seen as conveying empathy

and trust, and sometimes fueling a sense of foreignness and exclusion (Jakubowska 2012; Maxwell and Aggleton 2015).

We cannot, here, do justice to the rich literature on elite interviewing. We would like, however, to suggest that its debates are fundamentally related to the very *fugitive and ubiquitous* nature of power in these contexts.

From Power Relations to Academic Culture

Marxist and Gramscian analytical influences in social sciences have long emphasized how processes of concealment of domination were constitutive of power relations and the ferment of (ideological) consent. Certain ethnographical works drew on these insights to state that within one-to-one interactions, power relations contain contradictory elements, and thus cannot be described unambiguously (Gluckman 1940; Burawoy 2000). James Scott's analysis of subordinate groups' disguises of resistance has notably shown how marks of deference and subtle defiance to domination can be hard to differentiate (Scott 1990). Conversely, elites' politeness, manners or etiquette appear as codified cultural practices through which elites could affirm status by sustaining at the same time a fiction of equality. Thus, in trying to understand how the 'politics of invisibility' might sustain powerful identities (Ho 2012), it is likely to be generative if we seek to locate and make sense of the power relations which develop during the interviewing processes. Here, the subjectivity of researcher her/himself, where fieldwork experience will vary, and their social attributes differ, as well as the degree to which s/he has internalised the legitimacy of existing social and symbolic hierarchies will not only shape the data generated, but a close analysis of these factors will yield greater understandings of how power shapes and sustains certain positions.

Where other scholars have focused on the intersecting structures such as age, gender, race and class (see Archer 2002, Herzog 1995), in this paper we focus on "academic culture" as the *locus* where we primarily experienced power relations in interview situations.

Academic culture is both a contextual and analytical viewpoint from which we thought about and made sense, *in situ* and retrospectively, of the social differences between us and our interviewees, and tried to characterize the latter's logics of practices. We thus consider social and symbolic markers that were evident and became salient in shaping our interviews. In particular we came to understand academic resources as both a weapon and shield when facing our elite interviewees. In this paper, we closely examine how our interviewees appeared to devalue our self-presentations as scholars. In contrast, we then show how our interviewees could draw on a combination of various cultural resources to secure social dominance in the interaction. We draw here on Fritz Ringer's definition of 'academic culture' as a relevant framework to make sense of our interview experiences. "Academic culture" refers to the historically constructed set of practices and beliefs that influence action (Ringer 1992), and that, in France, root the "academic intellectual as a mental category and social type" (Wacquant 1981:181). Routinely associated with an intellectualized, aestheticized and ascetic relation to the world, "academic culture" should however not be reified, and takes on different modalities depending on the context in which it is engaged and experienced. We use it here to designate contextualized resources pertaining to the "academic practices of teaching, learning and research" (Ringer 1992:13), which we engaged in interview settings, and confronted to the logics of interactional process. This historical concept helps grasp what, for us, was as tangible a social characteristic/marker within the groups studied as were our age, gender and race. In this paper, "academic culture" is thus defined relationally – as a series of resources strategically displayed in interviewing processes, and as an unconscious way of being (an ethos) with the groups we studied.

The Wealthy and the Powerful: Two Case-studies

This paper uses as primary material the close analysis of interviews conducted in the context of our PhD dissertations. In order to make our two experiences comparable, we focus

on what we call ‘institutional interviews’, conducted with actors who, partly, acted as spokesmen for their institutions. Focused on secondary international boarding schools in Switzerland, the first author’s work examined how the headmasters’ and managers’ social and professional trajectories may have shaped how they approached the leadership of their schools². We analysed the 16 interviews conducted with headmasters and managers at seven private boarding schools. They are former teachers, heirs to directors of proprietary schools, managers trained in international education, former managers in industry and finance. The second author’s research focused on the French Treasury from the mid-1960s until the mid-1990s, and examined how we might understand this institution as a place of brokerage between public and private interests during periods of major financial and economic change. We look at the (meta)- data generated during the course of 40 interviews conducted with former Treasury bureaucrats: interviewees had worked in the Treasury at different times and attained varied levels of responsibility, and they are now mainly working in various parts of the French public and private finance sector. These interviews focused on how interviewees collected and converted resources during and after their time at the Treasury.

Despite researching quite different institutional spaces, our approach to semi-structured interviewing was relatively similar. For both of us, interview situations were characterized by significant age, gender and class differences: where interviewees were predominantly middle-aged men from well-off backgrounds, while we were two young women aged under 30, who grew up in lower middle-class families. Our social origins may

² Historically legitimized by appealing to West-European and North-American cosmopolitan aspirations, these boarding schools have recently used curricular consolidation to reinforce their global appeal, and have increasingly attracted students from the former USSR, South America and the Middle East. Located in Francophone Switzerland, charging fees of up to 100,000 USD, they generally offer English, American middle and high school curricula and/or International Baccalaureate Diploma Programs.

not have always been obvious to our interviewees, but they certainly had an impact on our contradictory feelings of uneasiness, insecurity and fascination during interviews, and, thus, on the way we conducted research. Neither of us had previously conducted long-term participant observation in these settings, nor had prior contact or practical knowledge of the milieus under investigation. We thus approached interviews as “thick” social situations, and we took field-notes on interview settings and processes (material décor, interviewees’ attitudes and hexis, negotiations over access etc.). Not only were interviews informative, they were also the place to solicit discourses on concrete practices, and to observe attitudes that give meaning to narratives (Beaud and Weber 2003). Because we could not capitalize on established relations of trust, nor on insider knowledge, we tried to enhance discussions by molding ourselves into what we thought were our interviewees’ expectations, at the risk of appearing, maybe, too deferential. Our strategies to maintain rapport were thus structured by a thorny trade-off between appearing too complacent or too intrusive.

The rest of this paper examines our experiences under two main themes – negotiating access and the process of guiding discussions. For both sections, we lay out how academic culture shaped our relationship to interviewees, and examine the relative value of academic resources in the interactional process. We argue, first, that our academic self-presentations, meant to prove our seriousness and credibility, were relatively devalued by our interviewees, who either seemed to consider them irrelevant (Swiss school managers), or to understand them as signaling both worthiness but also harmlessness (Treasury bureaucrats). Second, we show how we relied, during interviews, on academic culture to pursue connivance and conversation, while interviewees used anecdotes related to wealth and power to maintain a sense of social exclusivity, and could draw on a wide-ranging cultural repertoire to affirm status in our interactions. Finally, we discuss these findings further by focusing on the relative

values of our interviewees' resources and our own, to suggest how the value of cultural and social resources depends on their ability to circulate in various social spheres.

Negotiating Access: Elites, Titles and Academic Excellence

The difficulties of 'gaining access' is a widely discussed issue in elite studies, and, in preparing for our own interviews, we adopted broadly similar fieldwork procedures: we carefully listed possible first contacts, designed appropriate ways to introduce ourselves and define our research interests, and accumulated historical and biographical data about interviewees and their institutions. Yet while such preparatory work makes interviewing processes smoother and prepares the interviewer for unfamiliar and potentially impressive social encounters (Willemez *et al* 1994), it can also lead to misunderstandings and miscalculations. In particular, although we thought that one way to bridge the social distance with our interviewees would be to ostensibly display our academic credentials—something we emphasized in contact letters, emails and phone calls—we came to realize that we had over-estimated the role of elite academic credentials as markers of universally-accepted legitimacy and status.

This ethnocentric belief was partially fed by a widely-held sociological assumption, that the importance of credentials in hierarchizing social and professional positions had substantially grown since the Second World War, thus arguably putting academic capital at the heart of elites' modes of reproduction (Collins 1979). But it also reflects the "intellectual and linguistic patterns transmitted by French education" (Bourdieu 1967:338), which shape and naturalize the role of academic excellence in elite status. The importance of scholastic merit as central to social and symbolic hierarchies is, in France, linked to the model of the *Grandes écoles* – French public elite schools with close links to the State, which were central in processes of state consolidation and bureaucratic expansion (van Zanten and Maxwell 2015). As alumni of the *École normale supérieure* (ENS), an elite research state-school in

Paris whose criteria of admission rely mostly on academic excellence, and as middle-class young women from outside Paris whose entry into ENS was understood as us having gained a foothold into an elite trajectory, we identified strongly with an academic-centered approach to elite legitimacy, and were perhaps too quick to equate the possession of elite titles with a shared valuation of academic culture. Here are examples to illustrate this point.

Academic versus upper-class definitions of schooling: Interviews with Swiss headmasters

When Caroline began her interviews with headmasters and managers in Swiss boarding schools, she understood that these schools had built their legitimacy on the "cosmopolitan values" proselytized by early European aristocracies and bourgeoisies. Only recently have these institutions and the families using them begun to place more emphasis on high academic achievement. Caroline therefore intended to focus discussions with interviewees on academic matters such as curricular arrangements and extra-curricular activities and thought school officials would be eager to discuss the academic side of their school provision. Her intention was to use the topic as a way to build trust in the interaction. She also believed that seeking to engage participants in discussions about the academic work they engaged in would also signal to them her status as different – as an academic - rather than the ever-present curious, often invasive, media interest the schools received.

However, Caroline realized very quickly that extended discussions about a school's curricular offer or educational desires for its pupils were not necessarily something these participants appeared interested in elaborating on. Often Caroline experienced very short responses to an open question³:

“Regarding teachers you recruit, do you expect them to have particular degrees?”

³ All interview extracts are translated from French.

All of them, firstly, are teachers who are willing to devote part of their private time to the school.” [April 2013, boarding school headmaster]

In another school, her curiosity over how curricular arrangements accommodate children coming from different schooling systems seemed irrelevant.

“So that makes a very particular situation for every child. All the school systems...that must create additional work for you....”

Exactly.

And that [which academic section the student enters] must be decided very soon. How do you deal with different sections and which student should go where?

[Interviewee laughs] We’re used to it.” [Head of Marketing and relations, December 2012]

During such interactions, Caroline felt that her questions appeared to be annoying the interviewees. She was expecting the former interviewee to specify recruitment standards, instead of insisting on teachers’ “devotion”, and thought the latter would explain institutional guidelines related to student counselling. Both interviewees, after these initial questions, went on to discuss how the *pensionnats*’ [schools’] founding fathers paid particular attention to the location of these new educational institutions, insisting on the view provided by the Swiss lakes, on the temperate climate, on the nearby city and/or rural atmospheres; they talked at length about the new buildings under construction and the successive extensions of campuses. This appeared reminiscent of the description one might give of an aristocratic estate.

These non-engaged replies to academic-focused questions were frequent in the interviews Caroline undertook, regardless of the previous professional background of interviewees, be they trained educators or former managers in industry and finance. Caroline wondered whether they did not engage more with her because she was not expressing proper deference for the uniqueness of the place or the beauty of the premises. These situations remain difficult to interpret unambiguously: were the interviewees mainly entertaining an

‘outsider’? Did they praise the architectural beauties of the schools and the sublimity of the Swiss mountains to enact social codes that the interviewer was expected to share? By moving the topic away from academic matters, was their aim to make the outcome of the interview less threatening in terms of divulging information about the school, its clientele and the processes of selection? Caroline was obviously attempting to secure the interview relation around academic and bureaucratic questions, while interviewees mainly reproduced the common opinion at these schools: because course material is of secondary importance, dealing with new students’ transition to new course work is too. As interviewees frequently reminded her, sometimes by showing made-for-display statistics, academic programs were not ‘original’, “curricular aspects [were] not interesting”, “not showing any particularity”: indeed, ‘school’ in her sense of the word – as an administration of academic knowledge – seemed, for school officials, of little interest. One way to understand why school officials side-tracked academic questions is to relate it to the subordinate position of Swiss boarding schools in global educational hierarchies, in terms of academic results, but also of admission rates to prestigious British and American universities. Talking at length about academic matters would thus have been at odds with the institutional strategies of these schools, which rest on the promotion of the moral benefits of their geographical locations in the Swiss mountains or on the shores of Swiss lakes.

Caroline’s interview with Nicholas Durand⁴, an admissions director, offers an important insight into the position of Swiss boarding schools in the global field of elite education. Within the context of the interview, tensions over the status and role of *pensionnats* were arguably revealed by Mr. Durand’s careful choice of words to describe his institution, notably when correcting Caroline’s phrasings.

⁴ All the names of the interviewees have been modified.

As she was leaving the interview, Caroline used the term ‘school,’ as a subconscious effort to avoid using the term ‘*pension*’, the old-fashioned upper-class word that some of her interviewees had used. Mr. Durand, smiling, as he went to shake her hand, commented: “You need to understand that we are not a school”. A former senior manager in a luxury multinational firm, Nicholas Durand, Swiss-born to a bi-national French-English family, had only been working in the school for three years. He had no previous experience in school management but was a close friend to the headmaster. The tour of the campus he offered to Caroline was explicitly made to impress, but Caroline felt she wasn’t allowed either to be overly enthusiastic. When visiting a high point of their facilities, the sauna, she asked, in a tone meant to be both lightly engaging and professionally serious, “whether the students were allowed to come down here whenever they want”. Mr. Durand replied, forcefully, “You should not overstate it. We are not a hotel!”

The apparent inconsistencies of Mr. Durand’s discourse – refuting the term ‘school’ to describe the *pensionnat*, and at the same time asserting its serious (non-leisurely) educational vocation – could also be analyzed in reference to the evolution, since the 1970s, of the position of Swiss boarding schools in internationalized school hierarchies. The Swiss schools continue to appeal to a wealthy and upper-class clientele and to maintain a low academic selection, but they struggle to keep the advantage they once had for admission in the most selective British and American universities.

Reflecting on the moments where Caroline’s attempts to develop rapport or to elicit further information about the school’s curriculum and organization appeared to be blocked, offers some insights into how a reflexive approach to analysis can yield a deeper understanding of the context. Some of the senior leaders of these schools, such as Mr. Durand, shared the same upper-class backgrounds as their clientele, and/or came from an entrepreneurial professional position. Meanwhile, Caroline’s subjectivity was strongly shaped

by a public education system that valued the ‘scholastic’ very highly, and she had thus incorrectly expected that constructing academic excellence would be central to institutional presentations. The fact that interview exchanges developed through a disjuncture between interviewee and interviewer over the meaning and value of academic excellence indicated that these schools mainly draw on upper-class markers to position themselves as ‘elite’.

Perhaps linked to this, but also surprising given the public interest in such schools, few of the headmasters and managers appeared all that concerned about the academic purpose of the research or even to verify Caroline’s academic credentials as entitling her to undertake such an investigation in which they were partaking. Few participants asked for specifics about how the research would be reported, apparently relying on a confidence in, first, their own powers of self-presentation and, as importantly, on what they took to be a tacit understanding that their very acceptance to be interviewed was itself a sign of benevolent tolerance of academic ends, ends they seemingly perceived as wholly external to their own interests. This converges with Maxwell’s observations that managers in English elite secondary schools in her study accepted to be interviewed “out of a sense of altruism” (Maxwell and Aggleton 2015:1073). While Caroline had envisioned these ‘institutional’ interviews as a way to get information about the schools’ academic affairs, most interviewees defined schooling – and the purpose of their institution – against another canvas – a set of relations with members of a ‘high society’ where schools’ ability to provide luxurious, unrivaled and specifically “Swiss” environments were upheld as critical to their appeal. For this reason, Caroline’s value in terms of her academic credentials offered little in terms of commonality or status during these encounters.

The Scholar and the Journalist: Interviews with Treasury Bureaucrats

Unlike Caroline’s experiences, elite school credentials seemed to carry value in Sarah’s research. Generally considered the elite of French bureaucrats, Treasury officials are

highly credentialed. This particular group of Treasury administrators all graduated from the *École nationale d'administration*⁵, and almost 70% of them graduated from at least two higher education institutions prior to entering the ENA. Alumni of the ENA *and* other *grandes écoles*, and notably the most prestigious ones, like the *École polytechnique* or the *École des Hautes Études commerciales*, are quite common. Elite academic credentials appeared to be the only social attribute Sarah had access to that might act as a counter-balance to the significant social, gender and age asymmetries she faced during her interviews, and that might actually resonate with interviewees' own life experiences and professional expectations. Concrete identity negotiations at the beginning of interviews also prompted her to assert her academic self. Sarah realized that, in many cases, the curiosity of many (male) interviewees about the object of her study (the Treasury) was related to their surprise to such a female incursion (hers) into what is traditional male territory (economic and financial matters). As one interviewee put it rather bluntly: "so, why is a young lady like you studying a topic like this?". She routinely dodged the question by laying out the twists and turns of her research pursuits, and explaining how her previous work on the economic training of civil servants fueled her interest in actors, structures and processes of economic policy-making. By building up her academic 'face', Sarah was also trying to 'neutralize' gender and age attributes that interviewees seemed to think of as ill-fitted to her research interests.

This particular self-presentation "strategy" seems to have paid off: negotiating access to interviewees was much easier than expected. The vision that many interviewees had of the Treasury, as an exciting professional paradise ("the best part of my professional career", as many of them asserted) definitely helped to open doors, as did their sense of social and moral

⁵ Created in 1945, the *École nationale d'administration* is France's main public school of power; most of its prestige stems from its ties to the State and the guaranteed access of its alumni to the highest positions in different ministerial departments.

duty – a bureaucratic form of “noblesse oblige” so to speak. Sarah was, however, struck by the fact that at the start of many interviews the focus appeared to be on discussing the interviewer’s academic titles, that both conveyed recognition and cordial interest, as well as a discreet policing of social identity: “And so, you are a *normalienne*?”, “But which *classe préparatoire* did you go to?” Those who had a mid-range career at the Treasury praised her “impressive and brilliant career” “on your way to Harvard”, or ostentatiously displayed their cultural knowledge, quoting Austin’s performativity, Colbert’s politics, or the memoirs of the *Comtesse de Boignes*. The interviewees’ fascination for elite credentials seemed to stem from their belief in meritocracy and the sacredness of naturalized hierarchies; but they also appeared very distant from academic culture, as evidenced through their exotic fascination for American universities, or the way they equated academic culture with the mastery of a canonized set of texts and references.

During the interviews, Sarah noted many underlying tensions emerging, which could be attributed to the fictitious proximity elite credentials were creating. For instance, a number of participants asked Sarah when she would have completed “this thing” (*i.e.* the thesis). Sarah explained that it might be years before she had completed the standard 500-page document required for submission of a PhD. Registering surprise, interviewees usually replied that “(they) wouldn’t be able to focus on a topic for that long”, implicitly revealing that they had initially thought of what I was writing as a long memo, a report – the kind of bureaucratic output they frequently delivered in their professional lives. In other instances, interviewees would try to make sense of their apparent feelings of socio-cultural distance by offering Sarah advice about how to be more “like them”: for example, a formerly high-ranking member of the Treasury, now retired but still active in the non-profit world, told her at the end of their first interview: “next time, you should be more daring, more incisive”. This remark, of course, reflected age- and gender-based paternalism. As this interviewee explained, he felt like “(he)

was at the right point in his life to talk about his career and experiences”, and he seemed so engrossed in his train of thought during the interview that Sarah did not dare interrupt him. As this was the first interview Sarah conducted with a well-known bureaucrat, her initial reaction was to be impressed, and slightly overwhelmed about whether or not to interrupt her subject. She thinks she is likely to have given him the impression of being docile and deferent. The interviewee’s remark may, of course, be read as an expression of his own embarrassment and anxiety at not being relevant in the context of the interview, but his offer of advice could also indicate that he felt Sarah to be enough of an ‘insider’ to make her worthy of his consideration.

During the interviews Sarah was frequently suspected of being an undercover journalist. Interviewees would sometimes interrupt the discussion mid-flow and ask her: “You are not a journalist, right?” Other researchers studying economic elites have discussed how building trust with subjects requires them to distance themselves from behaviours and approaches that might be labelled ‘journalistic’ (Offerlé 2014). For Treasury officials, who frequently spent time in ministerial cabinets, and/or were used to testifying as historical witnesses or public policy experts, journalists were a familiar figure, but also a much despised one. Such mistrust but also condescension can be linked to bureaucrats’ codified role as gatekeepers of the state: journalistic enquiries are at the same time deemed ‘trivial’ (*i.e.* dealing with meaningless details) and ‘threatening’ (because of their potential to mobilize a larger public). Some interviewees appeared to draw on various indicators (Sarah’s online CV, the way she prepared for and conducted the interview, the many notes she took etc.) to ensure she was truly “not like journalists”.

For instance, when Sarah told one interviewee, a man in his sixties, now working in an investment bank, obviously anxious about her maybe being a journalist (he had asked about it

several times), that she had read online about his prolonged stay in the USA, he reacted in the following way:

“Oh, so you prepared for the interview”

“Yes I always do, it is important”

“Well that definitely proves you are not a journalist”

Delivered as a joke, this remark was probably meant to build some complicity with Sarah on the basis of a ‘shared’ distrust for journalists; it arguably indicates that Sarah’s behavior and position were read in relation to what the interviewee perceived as typical journalistic attitudes. In a sense, Sarah seemed to occupy a slightly ambiguous position, and to be considered, on the one hand, ‘serious’ (she was worth talking to), but also ‘docile’ (as a “non-journalist”, she was not in a position to threaten the bureaucratic order of things).

This reveals the particular position academics apparently hold in bureaucrats’ understanding of social hierarchies: credentialed (‘serious’) but lacking in social power. As Max Weber (1968 [1922]) famously showed, the claims of bureaucrats on the exercise of state power rely on the registers of expertise and competence, as attested by impersonal and merit-based selection processes. The importance of meritocratic principles in French bureaucrats’ sense of legitimacy helps explain Treasury officials’ frequent respect for elite titles. At the same time, scholars have suggested that bureaucrats tend to value instrumental uses of knowledge for action and power (Eymeri 2001). In that sense, the ‘almost-bureaucrat/non-journalist’ identity that was attributed to Sarah in the interview settings was not a particularly valued one, because it assigned the researcher to an irrelevant ‘scholastic’ stance, far from the hard choices of ‘action-oriented’ postures, and disengaged from the public at large. The constant reference to journalists was a powerful reminder that, if academic knowledge was deemed ‘serious’, it was also deemed ‘harmless’.

These reflections suggest to us that our academic credentials provided us with some degree of legitimacy – particularly within the French bureaucratic elite whose own educational trajectory mirrored those of the authors to some extent. However, even if, in that case, Sarah’s academic self-presentation helped to create a sense of formal proximity, her relative lack of social power seemed to ultimately devalue her in interviewees’ eyes. Meanwhile, Caroline’s academic resources proved to hold little value to elite Swiss school administrators, who instead placed great weight on high society sociability and cosmopolitan attitudes. In both cases, interviewees appeared to approach the interview using what were for them, though not for us, ordinary modes of exchange – high society small talk or “on/off the record” conversations.

Conducting Interviews: Anecdotes and Hypotheses

Getting interviewees to talk in ways that would yield sociologically interesting material proved equally challenging. Because they frequently acted as spokesmen or institutional gatekeepers in the context of their professional activities, elite interviewees tended to revert back to official discourses; as a consequence, getting them to articulate their ordinary day-to-day professional practices was often difficult. Official discourse was sometimes useful, as it helped us to probe categorization systems and symbolic worlds (see also Lamont & Swidler 2014). Our interviewees, however – and this seems overlooked by existing methodological literature in elite studies – did *also* try to give us a (non-official) sense of their professional worlds, and used extensive anecdotes to depict characters, situations, and logics of action. We contend that both these repertoires – institutional and non-official narratives within interviews – are not contradictory per se, but that they reflect how the interviewees combined various resources that actualize a sense of social exclusivity. We focus especially on the role of anecdotes as discursive devices that structure social exclusivity.

Anecdotes on the Wealthy and the Powerful

Anecdotes can yield interesting sociological material, because they are, in interview contexts, both “an event” and “a narrative” (Lilti 2015). Polarized by both the pleasure of romanticising oneself, and the drive to ‘get to the true meaning’ of events, anecdotes are a way to access logics of practice, as they authorize the interviewee to say what “ordinary social censure forbids” (Beaud and Weber 2003:222). We were often made uncomfortable, however, by the anecdotes our interviewees told us, when they took the form of fascination for wealth (in Caroline’s experiences), or gossip about the powerful (in Sarah’s experiences)⁶.

(Caroline) A headmaster, Hermann Bronn was, when I met him, about to retire and pass on the school to his son and daughter. Heir to three generations of owners of Swiss private schools and colleges, he embodied both the idea of a Swiss pedagogue and the figure of the local notable, being closely linked with prominent Swiss entrepreneurs of luxury goods and wealthy students’ international parents. In the muffled and private atmosphere of his wainscoted Lake Geneva office, I had time to peruse the antiques and gifts that were exhibited as friendship tokens from other countries’ officials and students’ families. During the interview, he emphasized his relationships with those in power at national and international levels:

“Our philosophy is, never speak about the illustrious (“*Les grands*”) ... We’re discreet—that’s expected of us. Of course, we’ve had big names of the industry, and now we have more politicians’ children. If they’re really children of royal families, Bern [The Federal authorities] tells us to change names, so we change names. By the way, it’s our policy to call children by their first names. We don’t write down their names. A child’s father may be the president of such or such country—we don’t even tell the teachers. One parent called me once and told me ‘You know you have armed bodyguards in the school’. I didn’t know. There was a sheikh who had his children here, accompanied by two bodyguards.”

I clumsily asked, “He employed them?” to which he responded: “The father? Yes. After that, we didn’t see the bodyguards anymore, but they were here, staying at ‘the

⁶ The following reflections build on research diary entries.

palace” —actually a nearby hotel, which I was expected to recognize. Hermann Bronn then mentioned another ‘sheikh’ family, and added:

“They are very special—the embassy always brought food for the prince here”.

I repeated “Here?” Hermann Bronn found a moral to the story: “After a while, this child said ‘I don’t want this food anymore, I want to be like everyone else, to share my room’”—the school’s usual practice. “His father was not pleased. And I said one time to the student when he was playing football, ‘Take off your diamond ring’. You see, he didn’t know the ring could hurt someone, and that this isn’t the right way to play sports. But he liked his stay here so much, you cannot even imagine, he could be like anyone else”⁷.

This excerpt is suggestive of how Swiss boarding school administrators use images of power to demonstrate their institutions’ exceptional quality. Caroline was surprised by the headmaster’s focus on anecdotes displaying the wealth and power of his clientele, which were hard to react to and interpret. They revealed, on the one hand, the interviewee’s fascination with the ‘extraordinary’ social status of some school boarders, but, also, his desire to be recognized as a moral gatekeeper – getting pupils to understand that there is more than just money, and, thus, trying to discipline “new money” into the traditional norms and values of the “old money” he saw himself as representing ⁸.

The use of stereotyped references to power and wealth is, in a way, a product of the artificiality of the interview setting. As shown by the excerpts above, trivialities left scant place for Caroline to prompt further discussion about how power and wealth were debated inside institutions: since she could not mobilize such cliché images on her own, Caroline could only repeat part of what the interviewee was saying. This reflects how sociologists of French high society Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot (1997) analyzed the

⁷ Translated from French.

⁸ He made sure that I would know he was less well off than the parents he told stories about, but he couldn’t help mentioning his own bourgeois upbringing and luxurious expenditures.

cocktails they had been invited to: they recounted feeling disarmed by the uncanny mix of familiarity and formality, both crude words and mannered language their interviewees displayed. Language tricks, uncouth stories and, as Ostrander (1993) puts it, “social graces”, are part of high society poise and mastery of the art of conversation and, consequently, of upper-class sociability.

For our interviewees, anecdotes about wealth and power were apparently not supposed to embarrass us or demean us: they were often used in interviews as moments of fun and light-heartedness, meant to draw us in – “I am going to tell you an anecdote, you are going to laugh”, as one interviewee told Sarah. By presenting themselves as holders of subversive truths about their institution, interviewees created a sense of social complicity, and gave us the impression we were privileged interlocutors, somehow worthy of this kind of intimate knowledge – which was also knowingly tape-recorded. We couldn’t really respond to these anecdotes, first because we didn’t have similar ones to exchange (and could only either show our surprise, fascination or reserve), but also, because, in the end, we were not really expected to answer back.

(Sarah) My interview with Daniel Klein, a former Treasury official now working as a high-ranking diplomat in an international institution exemplifies these dynamics. We had scheduled the interview at his office, in a chic *arrondissement* in Paris. He arrived at his office at the same time, coming out of a luxury black sedan, which his chauffeur had parked diagonally in the entryway. I recognized him immediately, and he me—we had both done our research—and extended his arm to shake hands, before letting me into the building and explaining the absence of security guards (“budgetary cuts”). He graciously let me take the tiny one-person elevator, and his secretary then escorted me to his spacious office.

These pre-interview moments offered me a glimpse into the material and symbolic privileges the Republic offers its civil servants, but also into the sense of effortless ease and courtesy with which Daniel Klein negotiates social encounters. This made me feel at times welcomed and included, and, at others, like an irrelevant intruder: Daniel Klein

indeed frequently interrupted the interview, asking me to leave the room when he was receiving phone calls, for prolonged periods of time; I had initially thought he was busy with sensitive state affairs, but he explained later that he was trying to “book” the Versailles Castle for a private diplomatic dinner. The confusion that “can arise from a simultaneous sense of being put in one’s place by elites at the same time that they are being warm, friendly, open and communicative” (Ostrander 1993:19) happened throughout the interview.

I understood quickly that Daniel Klein was thinking about writing his memoirs, and was using our time together as an opportunity to gather his thoughts. Much more than any other Treasury official I interviewed, he had a politicized reading of the Treasury, and was highly familiar with journalists; as he told me, “I’m usually quite straight-forward. As far as citations are concerned, I don’t mind you quoting me. I know journalists use direct quotes without analysing them and by taking them out of context, but I think it should be different in a scholarly work.” He would sometimes proclaim, “You can quote me on that”; usually such proclamations were delivered as final subversive judgment calls on his former employing institution (“the Treasury has incestuous relationships with the banking sector”) and meant to be repeated as decontextualized catchphrases. Daniel Klein would thus simultaneously assert his contempt for journalistic ‘gossip’, and attempt to build complicity with me based on this particular form of discourse.

One moment illustrates this further. Daniel Klein guided the interview to a particular moment in the history of the Treasury, when the newly elected socialist government had to nominate a new head for the institution. He described the three contenders; one of them, notoriously right-wing, was a “no-go” for the new government, and he “never got over it, even after more than thirty years”. He then elaborated on the careers of the other two, and their type of political and religious commitments (“the story goes that the new Finance minister would have met (one of the contenders) at Sunday mass. *That* ties people together”, he said with a smile). I tried to get him to be more precise on the range of possible political commitments within the Treasury, and asked, about one of the contenders: “Because X, he was officially affiliated with the Socialist Party?” He answered, surprised: “No, no, he never pretended he was left-wing. He was more like a Christian-Democrat”. And then: “But that kind of personal judgment on individuals ...”, and he stopped, giving me a reproachful look, as I was apologizing for my “intrusive” question.

Daniel Klein enjoyed telling personal anecdotes about officials and politicians, but, when asked to clarify details, would back off, leading me to distance myself from the ‘journalistic logic’ he had previously criticized. Partly, my apologizing was linked to my fear of losing rapport and, ultimately, to the loss of face and credibility in an interconnected world – that of the French ‘summits of power’—in which, or so I thought at the time, reputations are crucial and judgments circulate easily. Partly, I believe I was also trying to ‘fit’ into what seemed to be his expectations of ‘scholarly work’, which he had explicitly defined in opposition to journalistic modes of investigation.

This moment in the interview can be analyzed in relation to a cognitive instrument through which high officials ordinarily adjust their relation to journalists – “off the record” conversations. To be sure, Daniel Klein never mentioned that our discussions were “off the record”, and he had authorized early on, without hesitation, the presence of an active recording device. But the fact that he would sometimes stop the flow of conversation by stating “you can quote me on that” also meant that conventions about what I could use from the interview and what I couldn’t were not very clear-cut⁹. Obviously, Daniel Klein was thus sharing “backstage” data to build connivance. However, unlike a journalist, I did not know the tacit rules regulating this particular kind of interaction, and I was not particularly interested in this sort of “backstage” data. I could thus not ‘give back’ and ‘play my part’ in the exchange. And even if I had been able to, it was not clear whether that would have been acceptable behavior from someone seen as engaged in ‘scholarly work’. The particular configuration of roles that emerged from these situations constrained me by forcing me in the dominated position of the listener.

The anecdotes about wealth and power we were told seemed to constitute, for our interviewees, both a mode of self-publicity and an ordinary form of conversation based on exclusivity. In Caroline’s case, interviewees gossiping about the private wealth of some boarders, appeared often to be looking for signs of mutual understanding and recognition of

⁹ This echoes what Jean-Baptiste Legavre (1992) has shown about the uses of “off the record” discussions between officials and journalists: he analyzes them as conversations based on “controlled confidences”, and shows that there is a very blurry frontier between what is “on” and what is “off the record”, which engages the subjective and moral appreciations of journalists.

the gratifications but also challenges of hosting rich and illustrious pupils: they were trying to build connivance in the interaction. In Sarah's case, anecdotes about powerful people were delivered as confidences, and engaged her in a sort of social and professional exclusivity. By displaying their privileged access to the best, brightest and richest, interviewees were trying to include and impress. They thus disclosed what they seemed to think of as "unofficial" truths about their institutions, and assigned to us a place as authorized but passive voyeur. And yet in doing so they were not giving us the right contextual keys to understand anecdotes, and were reluctant to engage in further discussions about, in Caroline's case, how power and wealth were discussed within the institution and, in Sarah's case, about politics in the Treasury. This was not, we would argue, the result of conscious strategies on their part: sharing anecdotes seemed to be, for them, an ordinary mode of conversation, in which the content of the exchange is both cognitive ('backstage information') and symbolic ('prestige' and 'exclusivity'). It is thus fundamentally a distinctive practice, drawing a boundary between those who are worthy of this particular, 'extraordinary' knowledge, and those who are not. We could, however, not sustain these "exclusive" ties: these anecdotes were too far from our social experiences as PhD students, and we did not know the right codes that structure these semi-mundane, semi-professional forms of conversations. Whether or not interviewees expected us to share these codes, anecdotes about wealth and power did function, for us, as a mechanism of symbolic violence – they made us feel at the same time included and put back to our place.

Sharing Hypotheses

In interview settings, small talk involving displays of or access to those in positions of wealth or power, demonstrated our interviewees' ability to give a favorable vision of themselves and to confidently guide and control different social encounters. Just as anecdotes were a way for our interviewees to share what they thought of as privileged non-official

information about their professional worlds, we tried in some circumstances to share our own research hypotheses – partly to just ‘talk on’, partly to try and re-position ourselves in the interview situation, to prove our ‘worthiness’ and ‘seriousness’, and to live up to the credentials we were seeking to display. In that sense, intellectualizing the interview was partly about compensating for our feelings of social illegitimacy when interviewing elites. By talking about our research questions, we were, most importantly, trying to guide the conversation away from the official discourse interviewees sometimes engaged in to describe their institutions. In order to focus interviews on concrete institutional dynamics – which we could not observe directly -- we relied on another dimension of our academic resources: we encouraged interviewees to adopt a more academic orientation to the knowledge the interview process was intending to generate. It was not, however, most of the time, a conscious and rationalized strategy on our part, and it took several different forms, depending on the interviewee.

Sometimes, revealing our hypotheses was in response to interviewees’ wishes, curious to know more about the study. Talking about our research questions stimulated interviewees’ sense of reflexivity: they would answer by showing their expertise or by dismissing hypotheses, but they were also inclined to reflect on their own experiences.

In Caroline’s case, sharing hypotheses during interviews with headmasters and managers sometimes prompted interviewees to explain their social trajectory. This was for instance the case with Hermann Bronn. Drawing on what he had said about his dual position as headmaster and as president of the main interest group representing private boarding schools, Caroline asked him whether he had observed any change in headmasters and managers’ social and professional careers, and, in particular, whether these would now require some kind of international experience – which was one of her research hypotheses about how Swiss boarding schools had evolved over time. Hermann Bronn responded by

explaining how he had himself capitalized on the long-time engagement of his family in the local private school sector, and on his strong social ties with owners of other boarding schools. Caroline's question prompted him to think reflexively about his own position within his family dynasty: he thus talked at length about his own training in school management, and how he had inherited his own entrepreneurial and pedagogical strategies from his father (trained in psychology) and his grandfather (trained as a banker). He insisted that his management style was very different from his brother's who, trained as a lawyer, had inherited a larger and better-known family boarding school than himself in the 1970s. He also emphasized that most of his family, including himself, had been educated in Britain and in the United States. His response seemed partly defensive – preserving the family legacy against growing international pressures on Swiss private boarding schools. But Caroline also found that in actively seeking to share one of her research hypotheses with Hermann Bronn, this had created an opportunity for him to delineate more precisely the type of local and social legitimacy his family boarding schools drew on, and in doing so, reveal that internationalization can take different forms at different periods of time.

In Sarah's case, the interview was for some former Treasury bureaucrats a way to appropriate their past; Daniel Klein, for instance, was notably using the interview as an opportunity to gather and order his thoughts for the memoirs he intended to write, and asked Sarah to send him the transcript of the interview – she was for him a ghost writer of sorts. Some bureaucrats, particularly those in the Treasury in the 1980s – a time of major financial change – seemed to be wondering whether, back then, they had made the 'right choice' for the country; this led in particular to an interesting exchange about the ambiguous relation of Treasury officials to politics (in which the interviewees sought to emphasize their influence on policy-making processes, while blaming policy failures on 'incompetent' politicians). In some cases, setting up an intellectual framework for what could otherwise be seen as

'intrusive' and 'sensitive' questions was a way to justify their relevance. In particular, Sarah took great care to explain why she was asking questions about the 'exit door' from the Treasury into the private sector, specifying that she was particularly interested in how interviewees had managed (or not) to build their legitimacy in their new professional environments, and that she believed it was not as easy as sometimes assumed. This way of presenting a potentially intrusive question appeared to be usually well received, and led some interviewees to elaborate on the particular circumstances, challenges and opportunities of their career change in what appeared to be quite reflexive and open discussion.

In general, interviewees were also looking for clear(er) interactional guidelines to format their answers into sociologically-interesting material. Sometimes they appeared genuinely curious about what it meant to be interviewed for research purposes, and seemed to consider it an entertaining way of spending time. Their willingness to help, as attested by their interest in the 'rules' of interviews, was often mixed with a willingness to stay relevant – making sure their voice could still 'count'. Fundamentally, this capacity to 'switch codes' demonstrated our interviewees' ability to resort to a wide-ranging repertoire of self-narratives – as one Treasury official agonistically asked Sarah, "How do you want me to answer? Because I can talk for long or just answer in two words, as you wish".

In that sense, sharing hypotheses was a way to operationalize academic dispositions in the interview context. Meant to prove our 'seriousness', it sometimes provided heuristic results, by activating our interviewees' sense of reflexivity. This happened, of course, with specific interviewees, who had identified us as allies in their personal quests for biographical meaning. Other interviewees graciously agreed to play along, displaying at the same time their long-learned ability to switch codes and to secure symbolic relevance.

Discussion: Powers to circulate

In Bourdieu's conceptual framework, 'scholastic bias' was meant to criticize the privileged position of the scholar when interviewing lower-class subjects, as characterized by the 'bracketing of temporal emergency and of economic necessity' (Bourdieu 1990:382), and to delineate the particular point of view on the social world (gratuitous, aestheticized and intellectualized) an academic promotes. Bourdieu's argument emphasized how the scholar holds, in these contexts, a position of social and symbolic dominance.

In our experiences of interviewing elites, we experienced the impact of such scholastic postures quite differently. We have argued that the latter could be a resource in interview settings – it helped us to sustain a sense of self-confidence, to establish rapport during long but one-off interactions, and to guide discussions towards issues that were of interest to us specifically. We do not claim here that our professional identities were the only social attribute that shaped interview dynamics – as we have shown, gender, class and age regularly intersected to frame expectations and give meaning to interactions. We suggest, though, that our academic self presentations provided both opportunities for us as interviewers, as much as they also conditioned the range of things that could be said, and how they could be talked about.

The fact that academic culture could function, in certain circumstances, as a resource, notably by bringing the interview back to a more sociological track, it does not mean that interviews were sites where both interviewer and interviewee could equally control the flow of discussion. Our interviewees' resources were, indeed, much more varied than our own: they could mobilize wide-ranging cultural repertoires, navigate with ease different social encounters, and switch linguistic codes. The reflexive approach taken to analyse our interview experiences, we believe, offers insights into how different elites might be able to simultaneously engage in social closure practices, while also allowing 'outsiders' a quick look 'insider', however temporary. Interviewees could use resources that pertained to all

dimensions of their status, *i.e.*, that were not only limited to their professional activities (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 1997). By contrast, we strongly relied on academic resources as our main (and only) ‘elite’ asset, and struggled to get this socially recognized in the context of our interviews.

These asymmetries do not only stem from our lower social class backgrounds; we want to suggest here that they may have a great deal to do with how different elite fractions cultivate resources that are convertible and valued in various spaces. While the academic field has traditionally tended to preclude taking-up positions outside the field, other elites have over time moved more seamlessly across fields. This ability to circulate can be related to what Boltanski (1973) called ‘social surface’ *i.e.* the extent in different fields and social spheres of an individual’s social capital. In this same way, our interviewees partly secured their status through their distinctive ability to circulate with ease between scenes and across spheres.

Both Treasury officials and Swiss *pensionnat* managers cultivate their social and professional surfaces. In Caroline’s case, in order to secure the future of their institutions, boarding school headmasters and managers maintain close relationships with local state officials, hoping to influence the design of educational policies; they develop financial partnerships with educational multinational companies and the local banking industry; and travel extensively abroad to sustain ties with alumni and clientele.

In Sarah’s case, Treasury officials try to secure future positions outside the Treasury by increasing their visibility and reputation in extra-bureaucratic arenas – on the boards of various companies, where they sit as representatives of the state, in different schools of power, where they give lectures on financial policy and so forth. Their “multipositionality” (Boltanski 1973) is partly a product of their primary socialization, and partly depends on the properties of the social and professional spaces in which they are engaged, which determined the resources they must cultivate. But it also invites them to invest in resources that are

‘cashable’ in different scenes, even in those situations that are as artificial and forced as our interviews with them. In that sense, we argue that interviews should be analysed as moments when elite interviewees display the resources they have acquired that enable them to occupy various social positions of consequence.

Conclusion

The recent revival of the sociology of elites has elicited a progressively expanding corpus of methodological literature, which lays out the multifaceted opportunities and challenges of “studying up”, and analyzes the locations and effects on research of social asymmetries between qualitative sociologists and their elite subjects. This article is positioned within these contributions; specifically, it looks at power dynamics during interviews with elites through the lens of “academic culture” as an under-discussed social marker that shapes researchers’ positionality in interviewing situations. We have used the reflexive analysis of key interviewing moments in our respective research to operationalize the Bourdieusian concept of “scholastic bias” in elite contexts, and to analyze how distinction work “works” in contextualized interactions. We have shown that academic culture provided us with useful resources, but that, in the end, our academic self-presentations were relatively devalued, and were of little help to destabilizing the interviewees’ positions, who could mobilize a wide-ranging cultural repertoire to display status. We have further suggested that these social asymmetries could be related to the relative ‘unipositionnality’ of scholars compared to other elite groups.

These reflexive insights thus shed light on the relative value of academic resources depending on scenes and contexts. As recent studies have noted (see notably Serre and Wagner 2015), the effectiveness of cultural capital as a hierarchizing principle is best understood and analyzed relationally, by paying close attention to the variability of its uses. Likewise, we have emphasized here the relative plasticity of academic resources as sources of

social and symbolic legitimacy. This article thus represents a step in the direction of a less substantialized approach to academic cultural capital, by contextualizing the latter' role in creating and sustaining elite identities.

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