You'll come back another day: exploring the challenges of interviewing upper class elites.

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Abstract (100-150 words)

This article addresses the challenges of undertaking elite interviews with members of the aristocracy and gentry who constitute the upper classes in Great Britain. It reviews the existing guidance on elite interviewing from a number of social science disciplines highlighting areas of commonality and difference. The aim of the article is to provide advice for those undertaking research on the upper classes. It draws on empirical examples to highlight strategies for undertaking broad and deep literature reviews and to present a pragmatic process for identifying, selecting, and undertaking interviews with members of the upper classes. Existing guidance on interview format is highlighted as being unsuitable. We argue for the need to allow for flexibility in interview structures ranging from fully structured to almost entirely unstructured, depending on the positionality and personality of the interviewee. We also explore how the presupposition of anonymity and confidentiality in the literature presents a dilemma for researching the upper classes that warrants wider debate.

Suggested keywords (8-10) elites, elite status, upper classes, social class, interviews, anonymity, masking, researching up

Introduction

There has been renewed interest in interviewing elites in recent years (e.g. Glas, 2021; Scally et al., 2021; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). However, conducting research into the traditional land owning aristocracy and gentry - constituting the upper classes in Great Britain - has received little attention. To address this, this paper draws on empirical evidence gained from our programme of research into the engagement in entrepreneurial activities by members of the upper classes. Underpinned by the methodological literature of elites, it provides reflection and guidance to researchers from fields such as sociology, business history, rural development, elite studies and entrepreneurship on the process of undertaking research into the upper classes.

Elite status often stems from social and/or professional position (Goldman and Swayze, 2012). When linked to professional position, the political power and influence derived from elite status can wax and wane throughout an individual's life course, e.g. Lilleker (2003).

The upper classes constitute a status group unlike other elite groups. Their class status is inherited from generation to generation and not directly related to professional position. This status derives from family background, title and rank, ownership of land and property, and endowments of social, cultural, and linguistic capital. They can also exert considerable political power, such as Scottish landowners who often act as de-facto rural planners (McKee, 2015).

Background

After much email correspondence between our research team, a notable, titled member of the aristocracy, and their Personal Assistant (PA) we arranged an interview. Our researcher made the long journey from the North East of Scotland to the large estate in England, and sitting in the reception of the castle, was excited about conducting an interview on the entrepreneurial activities being undertaken on the estate.

After a long wait, the interview was convened in a dark basement room. Various senior members of the estate management team were present, including an external consultant, although we had not requested their participation. The interviewee arrived, and in between sending messages on their phone, queried the purpose and focus of the interview. Satisfied with the answers, it appeared that the long-awaited interview was about to start. However, at this point, the interviewee stood up and said “you’ve just come to say hello, haven’t you? You’ll come back another day?”, and then left the room. The interview did not go ahead.

Two days earlier, the research team had arranged an interview with another member of the peerage at their home - a noted architectural masterpiece. The interviewee was gracious and honest about the challenges of inheriting the estate from his father. The interview was followed by an impromptu lunch in his private kitchen. An off-the-record conversation over lunch with considerable amounts of wine, was both a test of our social skills, and a valuable insight into the private lives of the upper classes.

These two examples represent just some of the extremes of interviewing the upper classes. As members of an elite status group, they are highly visible in the public eye, yet difficult to access. Even when access is achieved, as demonstrated above, interviews can go awry. However, some can also be extremely generous with their time and resources, as in the second anecdote, and interviews can provide considerable insights into the interests, preoccupations, behaviours, and use of language peculiar to the upper classes.

In this paper we review the guidance on conducting research among upper class elites across the themes of: preparing to meet elites, conducting interviews, and issues of positionality and reflexivity. We then reflect on our own experiences of researching upper class elites, indicating what literature we were able able to draw on for guidance and areas where existing literature was lacking, or inappropriate. We highlight two areas – interview structure and the issue of anonymity and confidentiality - where existing guidance is lacking and/or unsuitable. We conclude with recommendations for a pragmatic process for accessing and interviewing the upper classes.

Understanding and researching elites: guidance from the literature

Researching elites is a complex undertaking and differs from other qualitative research, typically involving "researching up" (Neal and McGlaughlin, 2009), i.e. interviewing people of higher status and / or power. This brings issues of access, interview dynamics, and difficulties associated with "the ability to control the results of the research" (Oglesby, 2010).

Elites are not a homogeneous group (Solinari and Aguinis, 2021). Moore and Stokes (2012) note both inter-differences between broad groups of elites, but also intra-differences between elites within a sector. Researchers therefore must be cognisant of the differences between elites in different contexts, and not assume applicability of advice from researching one type of elite to another (Solinari and Aguinis, 2021), despite much of the methodological literature being skewed towards political science and human geography (Empson, 2017).

Guidance on elite interviewing often comprises reflections on researchers' experiences, with a few articles providing "best practice" recommendations, such as Solarini and Aguinis (2021) on conducting interviews with business elites. Some authors have focused on specific types of elite, such as political (Lilleker, 2003; Marland and Esselment, 2019); local governmental (Ward and Jones, 1999); organisational (Welch et al., 2002; Delaney, 2007; Goldman and Swayze, 2012; Ma, Seidl and McNulty, 2021); historical (O'Neill, 2020); educational (Quaresma and Villalobos, 2019); elites in specific geographic locations (Herod, 1999; Rivera, Kozyreva and Sarovskii, 2002; McEvoy, 2006; Vorrath, 2013; Drew, 2014); media (Herzog and Ali, 2015); tourism (Darbi and Hall, 2014; Snyder et al., 2013), and urban development (Scally et al., 2021). Specific aspects of interviewing, such as Stephens (2007) on telephone interviews and Harvey (2011) on conducting interviews provide guidance on the broader process of sampling, contacting, and interviewing elites. There is a further body of work that considers conceptual issues, notably power and reflexivity (Rice, 2010; Ruan, 2020; Perera, 2021; Glas, 2021).

Whilst there is very little specific guidance on interviewing the upper classes, the literature on interviewing other types of elites provides a useful starting point for us to explore, and reflect on, the challenges of interviewing this particular group.

Preparing to interview elites

Familiarisation with the milieu and context

Interviewing elites relies on having a pre-existing understanding of their subjects' milieu (Ward and Jones, 1999; Berry, 2002; Mikecz, 2012), although this tends to be an implicit assumption (Morris, 2009) and there is "no specific guidance is provided as to how to uncover this information" (Goldman and Swayze, 2012, p.238).

Sampling

Sampling strategies vary between disciplines. Political science tends to use scientific sampling methods, e.g. Rivera, Kozyreva and Sarovski (2002) and Marland and Esselment (2019). Other branches of social sciences have employed non-probability approaches, such as purposive and/or snowball sampling, e.g. Delaney (2007), Goldman and Swayze (2012) and Nudzor (2013) or more specialised approaches, such as Tansey's (2007) process tracing approach. Regardless of strategy, elites -

although difficult to access - are generally visible, and initial sample pools can be compiled from public directories, media lists, directories and press media (Odendahl and Shaw, 2002).

Preparing to make contact with elites

It is also crucial to understand the individual subjects themselves through thorough preparation and advance reading (Zuckerman,1972; Mikecz, 2012). Such preparation can alleviate pitfalls including referring to the status of an organization incorrectly (Empson, 2017) or breaching norms of etiquette (Marland and Esselment, 2019). Researchers are also warned that elites are likely to undertake research into the interviewer. Marland and Esselment (2019) and Esselment and Marland (2019) therefore counsel researchers to be prepared to be digitally vetted by potential respondents and their gatekeepers, which requires managing and keeping one's online profile current and professional.

Gaining access to elites

Gaining access is challenging (Conti and O'Neil, 2007), requiring careful negotiation (Mikecz, 2012), although some researchers have been surprised by the level of access afforded, e.g. Oglesby (2010) and Lounasmeri (2020). Elites' willingness to participate depends on their availability, personal interest, and their "esteem for, and perception of, the academic profession" (Welch et al., 2002). The positionality of the researcher, i.e. their status as insider/outsider can impact their access to elites (Mason-Bish, 2019). This can lead to a paradoxical situation in that to understand elites, one requires access to them, but that access is dependent on an understanding of the world in which they exist.

Elites are often surrounded by gatekeepers (Mikecz, 2012), such as PAs who can filter requests for interviews (Stephens, 2007). Gatekeepers can though act as referral sources, and building relationships with them is encouraged (Goldman and Swayze, 2012; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). Gatekeepers can also be bypassed by developing and leveraging key contacts in one's network to gain personal referrals, together with the leveraging of institutional affiliations to "establish credibility" (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021, p.659).

Persistence and multiple methods of approach are required. Odendahl and Shaw (2002) and Lilleker (2003), recommend writing an initial letter on institutional headed paper, whereas Mikecz (2012) used his subjects' preferred medium of email, but maintained certain formalities, such as addressing respondents by their correct formal title. Marland and Esselment (2019) recommend "placing a phone call and/or mailing a letter before initiating digital communication" (p.693). If no response is forthcoming, a final approach is recommended which signals to the potential interviewee that this will be the last approach (Marland and Esselment, 2019).

There may be extended dialogue before an interview is finally secured or declined (Empson, 2018). Elites have considerable demands on their time (Ma, Seidl and McNulty, 2021) and may be keen to highlight their busy schedules (Odendahl and Shaw, 2002). For the best chances of securing an interview, approaches must detail the research project, why the interview will benefit the interviewee (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021) and the types of questions that will be asked (Lilleker, 2003). Arguing for research transparency, and pre-empting Aguinis and Solarino (2019), Harvey (2011) offers an extended set of criteria, detailing himself, his institutional affiliation, a clear outline of his research, his sponsors, the proposed length of interview, how the data will be used, where the findings will be reported or published, and whether respondents would be anonymised or not.

Conducting interviews with elites
Interviews can be granted at short notice, and take place in unexpected locations, e.g. in a car (Mason-Bish, 2019). Face-to-face interviews are generally recommended, although telephone interviews can produce equally valuable data, and can be more suitable for interviewees due to the flexibility of location and ability to rearrange at short notice (Harvey, 2011). Solarini and Aguinis (2021) advise that video interviews can be a valuable format. Due to their widespread adoption during the Covid-19 pandemic they may be now a preferred format.

Interview lengths can vary: Mikecz's (2012) planned one hour interviews lasted between 55 minutes to over three hours, with the average being one hour 15 minutes. If interviewees enjoy the interview experience they may be willing to extend the interview duration (Ma, Seidl and McNulty, 2021). However, interviews can also be very short and beset by interruptions (Odendahl and Shaw, 2002).

The general advice is to arrive early (Empson, 2017) and conduct interviews in quiet, locations (Mikecz, 2012; Harvey, 2010).These can be private offices (Stephens, 2007) or domestic spaces (Maclean, Harvey and Chia,2012). Locations should be chosen for the interviewee's convenience (Odendahl and Shaw, 2002), which may involve considerable travel and expense for the interviewer. Interviews may also take place in sub-optimal locations, such as moving between office and boardroom and back, or in noisy cafes and restaurants, but these can still yield quality data (Mikecz, 2012).

Most scholars recommend some form of semi-structured interviewing, with Stephens (2007) arguing there is no alternative for gaining "an account of the values and experiences of the respondent in terms meaningful to them" (p.206). Ma, Seidl and McNulty (2021) used a semi-structured approach to allow interviewees to veer into unexpected territory, with an interview guide used to draw the conversation back on track. Where there is the luxury of extended or repeat contact, unstructured interviews are preferable (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). Harvey (2011) though argues that structured and unstructured questions can be employed together, allowing for the generation of both quantitative and qualitative data, if the research topic demands.

Elites may discuss areas of interest not related to the interview topic. This should be allowed (Leech, 2002; Lilleker, 2003; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021) and if the conversation goes off-topic, the interviewee should gently lead them back. Thuesen (2011) advocates adopting a non-confrontational, dialogic approach to interviewing, but when elite interviewees persistently refuse to answer a question, the researcher should adopt a more confrontational, agnostic approach. Delaney (2007), however, argues that confrontation - if required - should come through the analysis rather than the interview itself. Kezar (2003) notes confrontation can lead to interviews being shut down early, and also recommends asking potentially contentious questions near the end of the interview. Solarino and Aguinis (2021) argue that challenging questions can help re-address power imbalances, but should not be asked at the outset.

Positionality and reflexivity
Issues of power imbalances between interviewer and elite interviewee have been noted from Dexter (1970) onwards. They are such a central issue in elite interviewing that methodologies have been developed to analyse power imbalances in interviews (e.g. Boucher (2017). Such imbalances may be more acute for the novice researcher. Interviewing senior managers in China, Liu (2018) was often left waiting for several hours, with some interviewees refusing to be recorded, or only willing to answer specific questions from a list provided.

The positionally of the researcher has often been framed as an insider/outsider dichotomy (i.e. elite or non elite), though increasingly considered as a spectrum (Desmond, 2004; Solarini and Aguinis, 2021) Reflexive approaches suggest interviewers reflect on their position on this spectrum. Kezar (2003) highlights the “importance of describing one’s own perspective” (p.401) and recommends interviewers" reflect in a journal on his or her own biases toward people in positions of power and to examine how these feelings may impact the interview situation” (p.406). Mikecz (2012) advocates reflective practices such as taking notes both before and after the interview, to reflect on the interview itself, but also to reflect on issues of positionality.

Understanding positionality can be exploited to gain rapport with interviewees and mitigate against the imbalance of power. This necessitates an understanding of both one’s own position, but also that of the interviewee, and utilising an “elasticity of positionality”(Rice, 2010, p.74). Being “acquainted with the habits, styles of dress, and rituals of interaction that are typical among EIs [Elite Informants] being interviewed” (Thomas, 1993) can help, as can being acquainted with their “jargon and vocabulary” (Ma, Seidl and McNulty, 2021, p.93). Mikecz (2012) advocates dressing to “blend in” during an interview, such as wearing business attire. Empson (2017) recommends not only being familiar with the elite interviewee’s ways of dressing, but also to “mirror their modes of discourse” (p.63). For example, Herod (1999) demonstrated the benefits of “playing up” his Britishness when interviewing Anglophiles to gain rapport.

Pilot interviews
Nudzor (2013) recommends conducting pilot interviews, particularly for novice researchers, as a way to identify “questions that were poorly worded, questions with offensive or emotion-laden wording, or questions revealing the researcher’s own biases, personal values, or blind spots” (p.12). As a novice researcher, Liu (2018) did two pilot interviews which provided useful experience on interview techniques, particularly valuing the feedback provided by the interviewees on issues such as the usefulness of non-verbal feedback and the use of open-ended follow-up questions.

Reflections on selecting, contacting and interviewing members of the upper-class

This section provides an account of the process we adopted to identify a potential sample of research participants from the upper classes, contact them and undertake interviews with them. It highlights which guidance from the literature on elites was applied, noting which guidance worked, which did not work, and which was inadequate or lacking completely.

Elites, defined as individuals who "hold or has held some powerful position that has afforded the individual unique knowledge or information from a privileged perspective" (Natow, 2020) "are characterised by an exceptionally high socio-economic status" (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2018, p.6). Whilst "researching up" has a class dimension (Darbi and Hall, 2014) and access to elites becomes increasingly difficult when they are of high class status (Littig, 2012) elites have rarely been studied in a class context: a few exceptions being Ostrander (1995), Odendahl and Shaw (2002), Smith (2016) and King and Smith (2018). Despite the benefits of a pre-existing understanding of the research milieu, Solarino and Aguinis (2021) argue that over 50% of published work on elite interviews does not fully identify the research setting and its pre-existing conditions.

Familiarisation

Our research (Author A) focused on the identification and exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities on estates in Great Britain which had remained in family ownership. Through prior research and personal interests the milieu of the upper classes was one we had some understanding of. However, we needed to formalise our knowledge of them, and also to identify any specific advice on conducting research on them. This required undertaking an extended literature review that was both broad and deep. We consulted literature from multiple disciplines, including history, geography, land economy, sociology, and entrepreneurship, to gain an understanding of the historical evolution of the upper-classes, their activities, their beliefs and attitudes.

This review highlighted three main issues: that the upper classes are differentiated from other social classes (Cannadine, 1990); they have been overlooked in contemporary research (Maclean, Harvey and Kling, 2017); and existing literature on them is outdated. Savage et al. (2015) noted that Scott's (1982) work on the upper classes marked the end of an era: "the 1980s marked the last blast of this old aristocratic culture" (p.304), during which decade their presence in the national press greatly diminished (James, 2009).

Academic literature has also shifted focus from the traditional upper classes, towards an elite business class. These approaches take a Bourdieusian approach to class studies, defining class position "as an emergent property of different 'capitals' which allow their possessors to accumulate resources over time so that their relative advantages over others rise" (Savage, 2016, p.5). Although the focus is on business elites, this class contains the vestigial upper-classes amongst them (Maclean, Harvey and Kling, 2017), which meant that both elite class theory and approaches to elite interviewing was applicable to our research.

For additional perspectives we turned to non-academic sources. Periodicals such as Country Life, social class focused websites, and (auto)biographies and popular fiction such as the novels of Anne Glenconner provided less academically rigorous, but useful information on the activities, lifestyles and fashions of the upper classes, and changing perceptions of them since the 1980s.

We also researched the language used by the upper classes. Their use of language as a class differentiator was most famously described by Mitford (1959). Fox (2014) identified this as a continuing practice whereby linguistic capital is a stronger indicator of class than economic capital, alerting us that interviewees may use language to reinforce their class status.

Books covering the historical evolution of the upper classes provided useful understanding of their past – and continued – political power through Great Britain's transition to an industrialised nation, such as Guttsman (1969) covering the 19th and part of the 20th century, Wiener (1981, 2004) covering 1850-1980, Beckett (1989) covering the period 1660-1914, and Cannadine (1990), Mandler (1997), and Thompson all covering the 19th and 20th centuries. Nicolson (2011) is particularly helpful on the gentry, i.e. the untitled component of the upper classes.

Reference works such as Burke's Peerage and Burke's Landed Gentry in their various editions provide definitive guides to the genealogy and heraldry of historical families worldwide, and also included useful essays on social class.

Biographies, autobiographies and diaries proved useful in illuminating the range of personalities – yet similarity in values – of individual members of the upper classes, such as the diaries of James Lee Milne (1908-1997) and Chips Channon (1897-1958), and autobiographies of Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire (1920-2014) and Anne Tennant, Baroness Glenconner (b.1932). Lawrence (1981) and Lacey (1983) – non academic, but credible texts - include illuminating interviews with aristocrats, providing excellent case studies of their language, attitudes and manners.

Whilst the power of traditional upper classes has declined, they still constitute major landowners: historically the ownership of land being the primary factor for inclusion in the upper classes (Cannadine, 1990). The literature on land ownership, such as Cramb (2000), Callander (1998), Bird (1981) and Wightman's Who Owns Scotland website covering Scottish land ownership, where private ownership remains the "most characteristic and spatially dominant form of land ownership in Scotland" (Glass, Scott and Price, 2013, p.255) were helpful on this aspect of the upper classes. Shrubsole (2019) has similarly investigated land ownership in England.

Country Life and Tatler magazines provide contemporary contextualisation of the activities and attitudes of the upper classes. Additionally, television documentaries such as Country House Rescue, The Aristocracy, The Effing Fulfords, Lady Lairds and Keeping Up With The Aristocracy provide insights both serious and comedic. Drama shows such as Monarch of the Glen, Downton Abbey and The Crown act as reminders of the enduring appeal of the upper classes. Although coverage of the upper classes in the national press has greatly diminished (James 2009), we did find some relevant pieces in newspaper articles and so would advocate inclusions of this text source in search strategy when preparing to interview elites. Indeed the genesis of our research was an an article in the Telegraph Newspaper on the so-called Posh-Preneurs, written by Jessica Fellowes, niece of Downton Abbey creator Julian Fellowes.

Identifying Estates
Before we could identify individual respondents, we needed to identify landed estates. Odendahl and Shaw's (2002) suggestion that directories should provide contact details of elites provided a useful starting point. However, no complete directory of upper class estate owners exists, and identifying a suitable sample was a lengthy and laborious process. Identifying the ownership of land in Great Britain can be difficult. The latest record of land ownership was the 1872 Return of Owners of Land - in itself an imperfect and inadequate source of data (Cannadine, 1990). Subsequent scholars (Bird, 1981; Cahill, 2001; Wightman's ongoing www.whoownsscotland.org.uk website and Shrubsole, 2019) have investigated subsequent changes in land ownership. However, no definitive database of landed estates in Great Britain exists (Hindle et al., 2014, p.7). Partial lists of National Trust properties, National Trust for Scotland properties, and Historic Houses Association members were available. National Trust and National Trust for Scotland properties were discounted as they are not owned, and often not lived in, by the original family. These did not meet the criteria for our study, which was estates that had been in the same family ownership for a number of generations and over 500 acres in size.

From a list of 309 members of the Historic Houses Association properties accessible to the public we constructed an evaluative matrix which analysed websites and press materials on the estates and their owners.This process added rigour to our sampling process and deepened the understanding of the upper classes gained through the literature review. It allowed us to create a picture of the types of activities, such as farming, forestry, tourism, hospitality and property development that estates engage in, and the ways in which they promote themselves to the public.

First Phase Sampling
Initially, twelve estates were purposively selected from the evaluative matrix to gauge the level of interest of estate owners in being interviewed. For our case study method it was decided that 8-12 estates would be a suitable number to provide sufficient breadth without "drowning" in excess data (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Following Odendahl and Shaw (2002), our first contact was deliberately formal. Taking additional guidance from Debrett's guide to etiquette, letters on University headed paper were sent directly to estate owners. Envelopes were correctly addressed according to rank and title, and hand-written in blue-black fountain pen ink to demonstrate an understanding of the traditional etiquette system of the upper classes. Drawing on best practices recommended by Lilleker (2003), Harvey (2011) and Solarina and Aguinis (2021), the letters outlined our institutional affiliation, the case study nature of the research project and the level and duration of access required. Twelve letters were sent, seven responses were received, three interviews were secured, with one failing to proceed on the day of interview.

Second Phase Sampling
Having secured only two viable interviews through the first phase of purposive sampling, we embarked on a second phase of referral and snowball sampling. A chance encounter with a social contact led to contact with a local, well-connected, landowner. This landowner then emailed a number of his fellow landowners on our behalf, requesting their participation. Demonstrating the strong social ties between

landowners, this led to a higher proportion of conversions into interviews than the initial sample had yielded.

In parallel to this snowball sample, further purposive sampling was undertaken, based on a more detailed matrix of estates in Scotland to partially mitigate against selection bias. During this phase, emails rather than letters were sent, although - in line with Mikecz (2012) - maintaining the formality of tone and outlining the same requirements of access as the original letters. Whilst a random sample might have offered more rigour, we had to be pragmatic, and due to the difficulty of accessing estate owners, and the exploratory nature of the research, it was agreed that this approach was appropriate.

Access

What was unexpected was the variety, formats, and degrees of formality of response. Some estate owners did not reply. Others replied personally, either by letter, email or phone call. In other cases, gatekeepers, normally the estate manager, estate archivist or PA, made contact with the research team, often several months after the initial letter.

Some landowners who telephoned directly were sceptical or made unrealistic demands. One estate owner argued that entrepreneurial activities had already been covered in Country Life magazine. Another insisted that the fully research team “jump in a car” and meet him to explain the project further before he decided whether to participate. We politely declined this request. An estate archivist for a noted estate telephoned and interrogated the purpose of the research, and our educational and social credentials.

Another very high ranking aristocrat emailed directly, and informally, making interview arrangements themselves. Of the interviews that were requested via email, all subsequent contact was also via email, either directly from the estate owner, or via a gatekeeper.

Generally, gatekeepers were formal and businesslike, but keen to facilitate the interview with little interrogation of the project. Communication was purely functional regarding times, dates and locations of interviews.

Pilot Interview

A pilot interview was conducted with a local estate owner to gain experience and test our interview guide. The process was invaluable, confirming much of the guidance from the literature, whilst also highlighting some unanticipated issues. The interviewee had forgotten the interview, despite email confirmation, and conducted it in his dressing gown whilst unwell. Potential interruptions were anticipated, and in this case, a local farmer popped in to say hello and joined the interview, as did the estate owner’s wife. Whilst these additional perspectives were useful, the interruptions also highlighted the problem of sticking too closely to the interview guide, which at that stage was quite detailed and structured.

Subsequently, the guide was considerably altered to be less structured. The pilot interview also highlighted that talking directly about social class was extremely problematic. Despite following the guidance to introduce difficult questions late on in an interview (Harvey (2011; 2010) once rapport had been established, asking directly about class halted the flow of the interview. Subsequently, we avoiding referring to social class directly, but instead covered class signifiers, such as school and university education, social contacts and language with the class elements teased out during post-interview analysis.

Conducting Interviews

Following oral permission to record the interview and use the estate as a case study each interview started with a reiteration of the research project, followed by a series of questions to confirm the size and activities of the estate and what title(s) interviewees wished to use. Although these were researched in advance of the interview, in most cases the size of the estate and/or the full range of activities were not as anticipated.

Due to the imbalance of power between interviewer and interviewee, estate owners often led the conversation, taking it in directions that were not directly related to the topic or making contentious statements. Following the almost universal consensus that this should be allowed (Leech, 2002; Lilleker, 2003; Kezar. 2003; Delaney, 2007; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021) interviewees were free to discuss areas of personal interest before being gently guided back to the main topics. In one case during a telephone interview, the interviewee talked for half an hour on taxation issues which were not relevant, although a useful insight into their preoccupations.

Bogner, Littig and Menz (2018) consider ruefully whether a “methodological canonisation” of a particular type of semi-structured elite interview is in sight (p.16). For us, adopting the same level of structure in each interview was unsuitable. We developed our interview guide to allow for either a fairly structured or a very unstructured interview, depending on the interviewee’s personality, gauged during the opening part of the interview. If questions were answered briefly and accurately, we tended to adopt a more structured approach to the rest of the interview. If answers were long and abstract, or if interviewees discussed other issues, we adopted an almost completely unstructured approach to the rest of the interview, only consulting the guide towards the end of the interview to ensure no topics had been missed.

Despite power imbalances being greatest with higher ranked members of the peerage, these interviews were generally the most structured. They provided more focused answers to questions, and the interview guide was followed more strictly. These peers were more publicly visible than other interviewees, and in some cases had considerable commercial experience before inheriting their estate which may have made then more accustomed to being interviewed. Possibly the power imbalance was so stark (e.g. having to refer to them as Your Grace if they were a Duke or Duchess), that they did not feel a need to demonstrate their power by leading the conversation.

Interview durations varied from 30 minutes to several hours, and it was important to expect this. This meant that only one interview could be scheduled per day, and the whole day had to be blocked out, even if this meant rearranging other institutional or personal commitments.

Positionality and Reflexivity
Prior to undertaking interviews, the research team reflected on our own class position. Our education and social circumstances had brought us in proximity to the upper classes, but we were not directly part of their social circle. This proximity, together with the knowledge gained during the literature review and sampling process helped us develop an elasticity of position during interviews. This led to some reflection as to whether we performing an authentic role, but drawing on Empson (2018) as authentic researchers our foremost duty was to our research and identity as researchers and to make our interviewees feel comfortable.

This involved mirroring their dress, by wearing an inexpensive vintage tweed jacket to interviews with local landowners, and a suit and tie (which is part of the standard academic uniform) to interviews with larger, more business-like estates. We also highlighted our rural or institutional affiliations. This extended to highlighting our social capital and knowledge of the arts, when an estate owner disclosed their "hobby" of buying Renaissance artwork or pointing out a priceless bust sitting on their desk which they had "rescued" from the garden.

For novice researchers who have not accrued these levels of cultural capital, Mason-Bish (2019) presents an alternative strategy of adopting the role of deferential and grateful interviewee. Whilst some of the strategies we employed may have been useful in establishing rapport with interviewees, they were not essential to securing successful interviews. More important was to be polite, respectful of our interviewee's position, and most importantly to allow them to speak uninterrupted, even if the interview veered wildly off course for a time.

Abortive Interviews
A number of scheduled interviews failed to go ahead, sometimes cancelled at very short notice. Whilst frustrating, this also gave greater insights into the variation of behaviours amongst the upper classes. There is a temptation to assume that because they are relatively homogeneous in their attitudes and activities, they are also homogeneous in personality. However, it became apparent that there was a spectrum of personalities. Some estate owners were extremely hospitable, charming and excellent company. Others were polite, but formal and businesslike and some could appear defensive and unwelcoming. Some were extremely organised and kept to the schedules, whereas others were less reliable, with one potential interviewee having decided to clear his diary to work on a personal project, without informing estate staff, or the estate owner asking whether we would come back another day. In that case, this erratic behaviour had been forewarned by another landowner, and therefore was not completely unexpected, but frustrating nonetheless.

Supplementary interviews
Estate owners often suggested additional estate staff be interviewed, or brought these staff to interviews. Although the initial selection criteria was strictly estate owners themselves, we subsequently accepted and conducted a number of interviews with in-house estate managers and archivists. We also conducted a series of interviews with a retired and much respected estate manager who had extensive knowledge of Scottish estates who had been recommended by a previous

interviewee. They were extremely valuable, and helped provide additional perspectives to the estate owners, and the process of engaging in commercial activities on estates.

A Pragmatic Process for Accessing and Interviewing the Upper Classes

As we discovered, much of the guidance on elite research proved extremely useful. However, it was not always suitable to be applied to interviewing the upper classes, and we identified a number of areas where the guidance was unsuitable or lacking, particularly that the gamut of interview structures ran counter to the advice provided in the literature and the issues of anonymity and confidentiality which have been largely overlooked. To guide researchers in the process of accessing and interviewing the upper classes, we offer our guidance for a pragmatic process for accessing and interviewing the upper classes.

Understanding of context and milieu is particularly important when researching the upper classes. Much of their identity as a status group draws on their historical forebears, and therefore it is crucial to undertake an extensive literature review. We recommend researchers of any discipline research literature across multiple domains, notably history, geography, land management and sociology in addition to their core domain. Class-targeted periodicals, media, popular literature and articles on the use of language by the upper classes are useful sources to help fill in the gaps in the academic literature.

When researching upper class estate owners in Great Britain, we found the process of constructing an evaluative matrix of estates an invaluable experience. This helped deepen our knowledge gained during the literature review, provide a robust basis for comparison, and form an initial sample pool.

The upper classes remain difficult to access. Accordingly, sampling strategies should retain academic rigour, yet adopt a pragmatic approach to maximise the chances of gaining access. Referral and snowball sampling generated the highest response rate, yet the purposive sampling from the evaluative matrix led to interviews with high ranking peers who we may not have been referred to through a snowball sampling process. Therefore, it is important to employ multiple strategies to generate as robust a sample as possible.

The majority of communication was via institutional email accounts. These communications provided details of alternative methods of communication (office and mobile phone number, postal address) to ensure that respondents could make contact through their preferred channel at their preferred time: phone calls were often made outside standard office hours. Formal letters could be sent at the same time as emails, but even in the traditional upper classes, letter writing appears now to be a less favoured method of communication. Emails should maintain letter writing conventions. We retained formality of title in all our emails, even when respondents signed their first name - our replies were always respectful of their title. When corresponding with peers, it is also crucial to understand the difference between their title and the manner of addressing them (e.g. a Duke would be written to as Duke of XXXX, but referred to as Your Grace in person). Etiquette manuals, such as Debrett, are the standard reference.

Researchers should be prepared to have their research interrogated by potential participants and prepare a polite, but robust, defence. It may take several rounds of communication to finally schedule an interview, and this should be allowed for: interviews should be scheduled several months in advance. Many will not proceed despite extended communication. Researchers should also plan for last minute cancellations and for the interviews to vary in duration, location, and level of structure.

Every interview we have undertaken has been at a venue of the elite's choosing. These may be sub-optimal in terms of noise and potential distractions, e.g. noisy restaurants, or in office settings with telephones ringing. However, this cannot be avoided. Researchers insisting on conducting interviews in a neutral space would likely be refused and endanger the possibility of the interview proceeding.

We strongly recommend preparing an interview format, and underlying research design, that is sufficiently flexible to allow for interviews to range from being unstructured to structured, depending on the personality of the interviewee. The degree of structure can be informed by preparing a series of "fact-checking" questions, based on the biographical research undertaken on the interviewee in advance. If their replies are brief and factual, a more structured approach may be more appropriate, whereas if their replies are extended and veer away from the question asked, a less structured approach may be useful. An interview guide should be constructed that can be followed in any order, and in the case of extremely unstructured interviews, used as a checklist towards the end of the interview to ensure all topics of interest have been covered.

Telephone interviews can be extremely valuable and should not be seen as less valuable than in person interviews. A more structured approach is also useful for undertaking them, as they lack the non-verbal cues which can shape face to face discussion. We expect video interviews to become more prevalent in future and would expect these to more fully replicate the spectrum of structure that we encountered in face-to-face interviews.

We emphasise the value of pilot interviews, especially for novice researchers. Due to difficulties in securing participants, it is tempting to use all interviews as part of the main data collection. In our research, we were able to include the pilot interview as a separate case study, which was clearly identified as a pilot, and which included extended reflections on the process. Undertaking pilot interviews will give researchers experience of experimenting with different approaches to the structured / unstructured spectrum, and help understand the imbalance of power inherent in interviews with members of the upper classes.

Upper class interviewees are well aware of power imbalances between themselves and the interviewer. Such are the subtleties of the British class system that it would be impossible - and unethical - for the interviewer to pretend to be a fellow member of the upper classes (unless they happen to be). However, utilising an elasticity of position, in appearance and language used, can help establish rapport with the interviewee, wary as they may be of their often poor portrayal in the popular media.

Interviewers should accept offers of interviews with staff, family members and experts, even if they are not the target. They may not form part of the data itself, but can provide rich insights into the upper class milieu.

Consent, anonymity and confidentiality are dilemmas that should be dealt with sensitively on a case-by-case basis, and authors should directly address the thinking behind their decisions to mask or not (Guenther, 2009). Whilst institutional ethics boards – and indeed some journals (Murphy et al., 2021) will insist on some degree of masking, we recommend that the default position be that interviewees are directly named, unless there are compelling reasons as to why they should not be, Whilst well educated, the upper classes are not generally au fait with academic research conventions. We recommend at the outset of interviews explaining where the research might be published, what the aims of the research is, and to directly address confidentiality and consent. If it is likely that the interviewee be directly named or identifiable, this should be articulated, and consent sought. It is crucial that if granted, these permissions be captured again on a recording.

If interviewees request to be anonymized or not mentioned to other interviewees, care must be taken in the writing up. Anonymity extends far beyond simply removing the name and / or rank of interviewees. Due to their relatively small numbers, and inter-connectedness, other identifiable characteristics would also need to be removed if anonymity has been assured, such as their location, certain business activities or family circumstances, which can impact the richness of the data being presented.

Trustworthiness and validity

Within elite interviews it is “impossible to achieve perfect reliability and validity” (Mikecz, 2012, p.491), yet issues of validity, trustworthiness and replicability are debated in the literature, with renewed focus on issues of transparency (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). To ensure our own research was trustworthy, we ensured that we were as transparent as possible across all 12 of Aguinis and Solarino’s criteria. However, we also faced further issues of transparency regarding the reliability of our respondents’ statements.

One of the peculiarities of the upper classes we had anticipated through our process of familiarization with the upper classes was the use of language as a class differentiator, and this was universal amongst interviewees. However, this was not restricted to the use of certain words, or pronunciation. We found that members of the upper classes could be deliberately vague regarding certain details, such as referring to distant relatives simply as ‘cousins’, or discussing events from several years ago as happening “the other day”. They would occasionally embellish the facts of their historical roots.

This, though, had been anticipated from our reading of the literature and prior familiarization with the broader upper classes. In these cases, some triangulation and post-interview fact checking from secondary sources, such as newspaper articles or archive materials was necessary. Our intention though was not to prove the unreliability of our interviewees. Our research approach was underpinned by a social constructionist perspective in which we sought to understand estate owners’ own understanding of the world, and these examples helped demonstrate that within the milieu of the upper classes, understanding of time, and family relationships are broader than in many other people's understanding, which for our study had implications for the motivations and time scales through which they engaged in entrepreneurial activities.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Implicit in much of the literature are assumptions of interviewee anonymity and confidentiality. Odendahl and Shaw (2002) believe "it is important that researchers not disclose personal traits or organizational affiliations through which their respondents could be easily identified" (p.17). Nudzor (2013) had difficulty recruiting elites unless there was a condition of anonymity, and Lancaster (2017) discusses the problem of compromising anonymity, and chose to not include certain information that could have identified respondents.

Ma, Seidl and McNulty (2021) claim that confidentiality is a "critical condition of conducting an in-depth interview". Although business elites may attempt to assert their dominance by enquiring as to who other interviewees are, or what they may have said, Solarino and Aguinis (2021) reiterate the assumption that responses should be confidential and did not provide this information to interviewees.

Confidentiality and anonymity are often used interchangeably, or interpreted differently. Saunders et al. (2015) argue that anonymity refers to data which even the researcher does not know the source of. The literature of elite interviewing is predicated on ensuring the confidentiality of sources through the use of masking techniques (Jerolmack and Murphy, 2019) such as assigning pseudonyms or creating composite characters (Murphy et al., 2021) or changing details of people, places and events (Reyes, 2018), to ensure that participants' privacy is respected and that no reputational harm comes from their participation.

Although the use of pseudonyms is often seen as integral to the social science process (Lahman et al., 2015), the age of the internet and social media has made traditional masking behaviours challenging (Murphy et al., 2021) and worthy of reconsidering.

Jerolmack and Murphy (2019) argue that disclosure – not masking – be the default position. In the age of the internet, it is often easy to un-mask participants and locations, unless they have been heavily masked and promises of confidentiality may be impossible to make.

Confidentiality in an elite setting has certain nuances. Ellesgaard et al. (2021) argue that whilst using contextualizing information can make elites and ultra-elites easy to identify, often they are notably willing to be named in publication and often are experienced in being interviewed and are aware of the difference of being on and off the record in interview situations.

In our case, masking would have been extremely problematic. The types of elites we were researching are a particularly small group located within a specific geographical boundary. Due to the small numbers, and the specificity of each estate's circumstances and activities, it would have been impossible to mask them, as any reader with some pre-existing knowledge could have easily identified the estates. Indeed as part of the literature review we found examples of estates and elite groups who had been masked but whose identity and location was very obvious.

The case study approach, with its characteristic richness of detail (Stake, 1995) would have made confidentiality near impossible. Due to this, it was decided that estates would be named and presented as individual cases, followed by cross-case analysis. However, we were extremely careful in our use of direct quotes to not misrepresent estate owners. Many of them were extremely forthright in their views. When they had made contentious statements during our interviews we were extremely careful to ensure that these had been previously reported in publicly-available media.

Lahman et al. (2015) report some research participants being unhappy with the pseudonym and other altered details and who desired to be ‘honoured’ in research through the use of their real name and identifying characteristics. Seeing one’s (real) name in print can be for some “the primary benefit of participation” (Jerolmack and Murphy, 2019).

In the early stages of the research, we were unable to keep respondents’ identities confidential from each other. We were lucky to secure early interviews at a number of high profile estates across the UK. Subsequent respondents were keen to ask who else had participated, and we decided to mention when asked, the names of some previous interviewees. They had already agreed to be named, and indeed often provided recommendations of other estate owners to contact. Whilst we would have preferred not to have mentioned other participants, this proved a valuable means of gaining access to further respondents, the high-profile estate owners acting as a social qualifier of the validity of our research.

Our programme of work into the upper classes continues, and we still wrestle with the issue of anonymity We are not alone in this, and note the current debate in in visual research, such as in Marcella-Hood’s (2020) work on self-curated photo elicitation. We ask ourselves whether future qualitative work with specific groups such as the upper classes or with data comprising visual media should be anonymised? Or should participants be more fully briefed on the academic publishing process, ensuring that they are aware of the potential ramifications of these not being anonymised responses? We are firm believers in the power and richness of data that qualitative research can bring, particularly in the case study approach, but also as ethical researchers do not wish to cause negative consequences for our participants. Pragmatically, we also do not wish to have the small amount of hard-won access that we have been granted to this hard to reach, and under-researched population withdrawn due to negative reactions to our work from participants.

Conclusions and further research

Interest in, and guidance on, elite interviewing has grown in recent decades. We demonstrate that the guidance provided a solid foundation for our research into the upper classes. It is not though always sufficient or appropriate, depending on the research area and underlying discipline. We have explicated the requirement to undertake a deep and broad literature review to gain understanding of this difficult to access type of elite in advance of sampling and attempting to gain access. Our pragmatic process for undertaking research on the upper classes provides a framework to guide researchers through the process of conducting research into the upper classes.

The area of interview structure is one area where we make a contribution, by identifying that, counter to most guidance that suggest semi-structured interview approaches as the most appropriate format for elite interviews, interviews can range from structured to almost completely unstructured depending on the personality and power dynamics of each interview situation. By asking factual questions at the start of the interview, it is possible to assess the type of structure suitable for the rest of the interview. Interview guides require careful design to ensure that a variety of structures can be adopted in real time.

We have identified that issues of anonymity and confidentiality have been assumed in the literature, but - particularly with the rise of interest of visual research methods - require further debate. We argue that in our research, it was not possible to anonymise our research subjects, as they, and their estates, would be easily identifiable. Presenting them as individual case studies provided richness of detail that would not have been possible had they been anonymised. Nor were we able to ensure confidentiality. One of the most successful ways of securing interviews was by telling potential participants who had already been interviewed. Whilst this was done with the consent of participants, it requires assessment on an individual basis, and we believe the field of elite studies would benefit from further research and debate on the issues of anonymity and confidentiality.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest
The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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