Research note

Walking a tight rope: Doing elite interviews in Nigeria

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Introduction

In recent times, extensive field research have been conducted by political scientists and other social researchers in Africa. Yet, only a handful of recent literature document the field experiences of political scientists and social researchers in the continent (see, for example, Thomson, Ansoms and Murison (2013), Gokah (2006), Goduka (1990), and Robertson (1985). In Nigeria, recent literature that assess and record the fieldwork experiences of political scientists are almost non-existent. The failure of contemporary political science students to report their fieldwork experiences deny the scientific community the opportunity to garner lessons and improve research tools and processes. To address this gap, this article seeks first, to serve as a guide to researchers, and second, as a reference point for researchers who might find themselves walking the tight rope of elite interview.

This study is set against the backdrop of the field research I conducted between December 2009 and February 2010, which sought to elicit the opinion of the members of the House of Representatives on the practice of power sharing in Nigeria, particularly whether power-sharing works, reasons why it seems to be working or not, how it contributes to nation-building, and the ways it can be improved. The fieldwork was supported by Institut Français De Recherche En Afrique (IFRA) and the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, as part of the research programme on ‘what works in Nigeria’. The following is a reflexive account of my fieldwork experience and my thoughts on doing elite interviews in Nigeria. The article is divided into five sections, examining, respectively, data collection, data analysis, ethical issues, the challenges I encountered during the fieldwork, and conclusion.

Data collection

I employed a variety of techniques to collect data. The main instrument of data collection I used was interview. I conducted a total of eleven interviews. All the interviews were with members of the House of Representatives. The interviews took place at the offices of the respective honourable members at the National Assembly premises in Abuja. All the interviews I conducted could be described as semi-structured, since I prepared a standard interview guide that contains all the questions and ensured that the respondents were asked the same questions in a very similar order. However, I tried to be flexible and follow digressions depending on the circumstance that I encountered. In all, the questions I asked and themes I followed were pre-established although a few emerged from previous interviews. I used two main techniques to record the interviews. The initial interviews I conducted were note taken, primarily because I had technical difficulties with my recording device. Later on, I used electronic recording device. There were no difficulties getting the
honourable members to accept the recording of their words. The interviews took an average of twenty-five minutes. Very brief interviews occurred mainly where the respondents were not particularly interested in the research, but feel an obligation to respond to the research.

Being very busy people, I realised that it was hard for all my prospective respondents to grant me an oral interview. Consequently, I distributed a questionnaire (with the same questions in my interview guide), which prospective respondents who could not grant an oral interview could answer in writing at their convenience. A total of eight written responses were returned to me at the time I ended the field research. Some honourable members promised to send me their written response by e-mail as I was leaving Abuja, but they never did till I concluded the research. A number of the respondents took time to answer the questions put to them, but the information provided by others in the questionnaires lacked depth. This is expected considering that many honourable members may find it difficult to sit down and write long notes. However, this option was provided to make it convenient for all prospective respondents to participate in the research.

I also collected data through several personal conversations with the honourable members and their aides, mainly with the aides I had come to know well. The conversations with the honourable members were mostly with those I did not select to be part of my research but whom I ran into through other contacts. Often, these conversations started as general discussion and would touch on a topic of my interest, especially when some would demand to know what has brought me to the National Assembly. Sometimes, I would take notes during a chat. At other times, I made notes after I had concluded the conversation. The conversations with the aides were especially useful in helping me to work out the arrangements for gaining access to prospective respondents. The aides served as informants, educating me on when and how to reach the individuals that would offer useful responses. They also helped to talk to their colleagues about my research, sensitising them on the need to support my project through facilitating access to their bosses.

Preparing the interview guide/questionnaire

My interview guide/questionnaire contained seventeen open-ended questions. These questions were structured around three main themes. The themes were aimed at highlighting the cognitive, evaluative and normative perceptions concerning the practice of power-sharing in Nigeria. The themes include:

- the meaning of power-sharing - this theme sought to identify how the respondents understand and interpret the concept of power-sharing;
- Perceptions about the relevance/efficacy of power-sharing - this theme sought to capture the views of respondents about the relevance of power sharing in Nigerian politics, particularly the ways through which power-sharing promotes nation-building; and
- views on how power-sharing can be modified - under this theme, respondents were asked to suggest ways in which power-sharing can be modified into a more meaningful strategy for promoting democracy, development, and national cohesion in Nigeria.
In developing the interview guide, I brainstormed over a fairly long list of questions and topics that I thought might be useful to include in the research with a few colleagues at Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki and University of Nigeria, Nsukka. I deleted a number of questions; I considered overlapping or redundant, while the questions that I selected after the brainstorming were then re-phrased in a way it would help stimulate discussion. These questions were finally put in some kind of logical order following the pre-establish themes. During the actual interviews, the precise order of questions shifted slightly. But this did not distort the structure of the interview guide. In line with the practice, easier and less-threatening questions were placed at the beginning while the more challenging questions came after.

**Deciding whom to interview**

My field research focused on eliciting the perceptions of the elite about the relevance and effectiveness of power-sharing in Nigeria. The decision to focus on elite perceptions is informed by two major considerations. First, the political elite are mostly involved in the interpretation, implementation and preservation of power-sharing arrangements in Nigeria. Consequently, they are more informed than the average citizen with regard to the practice of power-sharing. Secondly, the political elite have a much broader, nationwide view of politics than the ordinary citizens. As such, the political elite are an appropriate sample group. The respondents for this study were drawn from the members of the House of Representatives. I chose the House of Representatives because it is the institution that offers the largest pool of elite from where one can draw a good sample. Furthermore, the House of Representative offers the most diversified mix of elite, representing different ethnic, religious, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Considering the short time frame of this project (three months), I selected and requested seventy-two members of the House of Representatives (twenty percent of the House) to participate in the research. This number was spread across the different states, geopolitical zones, political parties, and gender groups.

**Preparing for the interviews**

My fieldwork began on 16 November 2009, one week after I received funding for the project. However, I spent the first two weeks of my timeframe laying the groundwork of the fieldwork. In the first place, I had to work out the logistics of my stay in Abuja – e.g., booking of accommodation and settling with my contact persons on how to secure right of entry into the National Assembly. Since I had initially selected 72 potential respondents from a list of the members of the House of Representatives, my earliest research activity was writing letters to the potential interviewees requesting to have oral interviews with them. I designed letter-headed papers for this purpose. I took time to insert the names and addresses of each of the prospective respondents in the letters to ensure that the letters meet all formal standards.

Considering that about five months had passed between the time I wrote my research proposal (June 2009) and the time the research grant was disbursed (November 2009), there were a few new developments that emerged which affected my preparations. Let me mention
a few of the developments to illustrate my point. First, the National Assembly which vacated for annual recess in September 2009 resumed in first week of November 2009. Since the members of the National Assembly were just returning from their annual vacation, not many of the members were present in Abuja. This delayed my trip to Abuja and the commencement of the project. Again, by first week of December when I arrived Abuja, the National Assembly was embroiled in tensions following the conflict that erupted between the Senate and the House of Representatives over the 2010 budget presentation. There were disputes over whether the President would address the National Assembly in the Senate or House of Representatives chamber. Amidst that controversy, I could not do much meaningful work, besides distributing request for interviews. This is because most members of National Assembly devoted much of their time in attempts to resolve the conflict and could not spend substantial time in office.

**Getting in touch with prospective interviewees**

On arrival at the National Assembly on 1 December 2009, I met with my contact persons. Through meeting a number of individuals and the aid of a letter I was issued at my home institution, I resolved many practical issues such as how to gain right of entry into the National Assembly. I collected the office address of my potential interviewees from the House Services Committee and the Protocol Unit of the National Assembly. Then, I proceeded to deliver letters requesting interviews in their offices. I personally delivered the letters in the offices of all the 72 Honourable Members I had selected for the research. The offices of some of the honourable members were not open until the second week of January 2010. In any case, I delivered the letters as soon as the offices were open.

I got in touch with the respondents in two ways. First, since I provided my mobile phone numbers in the letters I wrote to prospective respondents, some of them who were really interested in my research called me and from that point we arranged subsequent meetings. Secondly, I followed-up my letters with visits. In some cases, I visited the offices of prospective respondents up to ten times before I was able to get a response from them. Anyway, this approach seemed to be the most productive since it brought me into direct contact with the office staff of the honourable members, many of whom later played prominent roles in getting me an access to meet with the honourable members.

**Developing relationships**

Developing good relationship with people is an important aspect of doing elite interviews. The success or failure of elite interviews depends on the extent to which a researcher is able to present him/herself in the most admirable manner. As a researcher, your appearance and general disposition can put people off, making them less likely to participate in your research. In elite research, especially in the Nigerian context, one group that one must develop good relationship with is the aides to the elite, such as secretaries, personal assistants, and legislative aides. Aides are vital in facilitating access to the elite. Having this in mind, I ensured that I approached each of these aides in a respectful and patient manner. The polite manner with which I approached both the elite and their aides endeared me to them. In some occasions, I spent up to five to six hours waiting to meet with a legislator only
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for the meeting to be called-off at the very last minute. In all such situations, I tried to be calm, giving no indication of disappointment. My attitude compelled many people to become sympathetic to my research. Some aides went beyond their official bounds in putting up calls to inform me when to get their elusive bosses in office. Others took it upon themselves to follow-up and remind their bosses about my request for interview. There were some occasions where prospective respondents had to grant me an interview at their own inconvenience because they could not afford to cancel the appointment anymore considering that I have visited severally or have waited for so long. During the eight weeks I spent at the National Assembly, I was able to establish friendship with a number of individuals. These friends were very helpful to my research in many ways.

Responses of prospective interviewees

There are five different kinds of responses I received after sending out letters to prospective interviewees.

First, a number of the honourable members outrightly rejected my request. Considering that the prospective interviewees that outrightly rejected my request cut across gender, political party affiliation, ethnic and geo-political lines; I concluded that social differences did not play much role in the response of the honourable members. Rather, their response was a function of personal dispositions.

Secondly, there were some honourable members that gave the impression that they were willing to participate in the research but later opted out in a strange manner. For instance, they were some honourable members that called me on phone to fix an appointment. When the date came, they could not meet the appointment and it was cancelled. Subsequent efforts to get them to give another appointment did not succeed until the duration of the research elapsed. Another example is an honourable member who directed his secretary to give me his private phone number so I could call and fix an appointment with him. When I eventually called he said he had forgotten the matter and was not interested anyway.

Thirdly, some honourable members showed interest in the research but could not participate later on due to seemingly genuine reasons such as sudden illness, emergency trip abroad, and other official assignments.

Fourthly, there were some honourable members that were not fully disposed to participating in the research at the beginning, but later changed their mind, perhaps due to pressures from their aides, my repeated visits, or because they gave my request a second thought.

Finally, some honourable members outrightly granted me interview the first day I was at their office without even asking whether I had made a prior appointment. Some of the most productive interviews I conducted were with this category of respondents, perhaps because of their whole-hearted interest in the project. A good example is an honourable member I went to his office to ask for appointment. When his senior legislative aide went to seek his opinion, he directed that I should be invited to explain what I want. When I came in, he asked why the interview would not take place immediately. I accepted to have the interview, he excused all the guests in his office and the interview took place to my pleasant surprise.
Data analysis

Analysing the data I collected during the fieldwork involved two major activities namely: data reduction and conclusion drawing. Both activities are accepted processes of qualitative data analysis (Miles 1979). Data reduction enabled me to sort, discard, and organise data in such a way that it would be easy to draw conclusions. Data reduction normally occurs before, during, and after data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1984). I began the process of data reduction at the inception of the research at the point where I arrived at the research questions, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and instrument of data collection. Anticipatory data reduction enabled me to organise and focus the data collection. In the first place, it helped me to tailor data collection towards the major themes and sub-themes that emerged from conceptual and theoretical analysis. These themes and sub-themes were to provide the basis for coding of data.

Data reduction also occurred during in the process of fieldwork. At this point, I would read through data collected to ensure that subsequent data collection is focused on the emergent themes and that so much extraneous material are not collected. At the end of data collection, I began the process of data reduction by selecting, simplifying and linking the data collected to the main themes of the study. This involved summarising, paraphrasing, and subsuming of relevant data under a broad theme. Data reduction also involved the interrogation of the data for key words, how and in what context they were used as well as the isolation of relevant quotations. This process helped me to formulate the overall research arguments and in explanation building.

The last stage of data analysis involved conclusion-drawing. This entailed drawing meaning from the reduced data. The main activity at this point was to note patterns and regularities in the responses and explanations offered by respondents and to relate these patterns to the themes and sub-themes of the study. Like most qualitative research, the main concern of my study was to uncover knowledge about what people think and feel about a particular phenomena (in this case, the practice of power sharing) rather than to make judgments about whether those thoughts and feelings are valid or not. Thus, the conclusion drawn in the study outlined mainly the elite perceptions about power-sharing and what informed those perceptions.

Ethical issues

Ethics are crucial aspect of any research endeavour. Consequently, I ensured that important ethical issues relating to my research were addressed. A major ethical issue concerns gaining the consent of the respondents about the use of their words and names in the research. Although I did not obtain written consent from the respondents, they however granted oral consent to the use of their words and names in the research. Many of the respondents said they had nothing to hide and as such would be happy to express their views. It was only in one interview that the respondent demanded at a point that the conversation be kept ‘off-record’ due to the sensitivity of the matter the respondent raised.

The other ethical issue that I considered was the sharing of data and analysis with respondents. In the letter I wrote to the prospective respondents soliciting their participation
in the research, I explicitly promised to provide the respondents with abstract/summary of the outcome/findings of the research. I ensured that this promise was fulfilled at the completion of the reporting stage of the research.

**The challenge of doing elite interviews in Nigeria**

Carrying out elite interviews brings with it several challenges, particularly in Nigeria; a country where a marked distinction exists between the elite and the rest of the society. The first challenge is what can be referred to as ‘the big man syndrome’. The Nigerian elite usually referred to as ‘oga’ or ‘ogamadam’ has a habit of shielding him- or herself from the public. This is illustrated by the large number of aides that surround the elite, blocking people from accessing them. It is usually difficult to gain access to and speak to the elite in Nigeria. One reason for this is that the Nigerian elite tend to avoid the less privileged public who normally flock around them seeking for various forms of assistance. Unfortunately, people with more genuine intentions like researchers are, most times, equally shielded out from gaining access to the elite. An aide to one of the honourable members told me that his boss is no more disposed to granting interviews because researchers and journalists are using it as a guise to solicit for financial assistance. In his words, ‘oga no dey like see una people, because dem dey always beg for money’. Because some of the aides do not know the difference between the work of journalists and researchers, my guess is that they misconstrue researchers as journalists who are known for soliciting for gifts (brown envelopes) after interviews.

In situations where the elite are averse to granting interviews but would not want the prospective interviewer to be aware of their disposition, the usual response of their aides to researcher’s request for interview is ‘oga is busy’. Being busy is often used as a cover-up to shield the elite from several people who want to see them. Again, aides that work with the elite may use the notion of ‘oga is busy’ to punish those who fail to give out gifts by way of denying them access to the elite. In many public offices in Nigeria, aides normally expect gifts, consisting of money, mobile phone recharge cards, and other items, from guests wishing to have access to the ogas. Sometimes, those visiting the ogas voluntarily offer gifts to the aides with the hope of currying their favour. At other times, the aides ask for gifts before cooperating with those seeking to have access to their ogas. If I look back at my interactions with aides at the National Assembly, I realise that I could have made much more progress had I offered gifts to the aides. If I had given some money to the aides to enable them call and inform me about the whereabouts of their ogas, they could have been more willing to facilitate access to their bosses. But since gift-giving was not part of my research plan and funding, I did not offer gifts to any aide. Interestingly, none of the aides, except one, expressly demanded for money before allowing me gain access to their ogas. However, there were some aides who subtly requested for different forms of assistance from me such as securing admission for their relatives and wards in my institution. In each case, I politely explained my limitations and the extent I can assist. These exchanges brought me closer to some of the aides, making it easier to have access with their busy bosses.
Although it seems the elite are using their busy schedule as excuse for refusing to attend to visitors, one cannot deny that some ogas are actually very busy people. As such, a second challenge to doing elite interviews is the fact that the elite are people with extremely busy schedule. Despite observable willingness by some prospective respondents to participate in my research, the interviews failed to hold in some occasions due to the tight schedule of the prospective respondents. The elite are people known for frequent travels, and this played out well as a major obstacle to my research. Several appointments I made with prospective respondents were called-off due to the fact that they embarked on official assignments or emergency trip abroad. During my stay at the National Assembly, I observed that, like most elite in Nigeria, many members of the House of Representatives are rarely in control of their time. Unlike many chief executives, who have protocol staff that organise their schedules, many honourable members have really chaotic schedules which make it difficult to track them down. Considering that so many private and official engagements are competing for space in the schedules of honourable members, only a few honourable members found time to grant me interviews. When interviews were finally granted, the next challenge became how to secure a reliable appointment.

My experience with the honourable members shows that these elite do not keep to appointments. There were cases where I had to wait four to five hours after an appointed time in order to meet with an honourable member. There were worse situations where I rescheduled appointments repeatedly without being able to have an interview with honourable members who actually expressed interest in my research. In some cases, the honourable members will completely forget that they gave such appointments. This development worked against my research in a remarkable ways. Bearing in mind the short time frame of my research project I had to schedule many interviews within one day. But since many of the honourable members were not working with the appointments and I had to wait long hours in one office, I ended up missing interview appointments given to me by other honourable members due clash in my programme. My strategy then was to focus on the honourable members that gave the strongest indication of granting interviews and to forfeit the ones that are hesitant. There were offices where it was the aides that pointed out to me the futility of fixing appointments. In one of those offices, the aide advised me not to bother making appointments. In his words, ‘don’t worry, the next time you come, I will just open the door for you to see him’. I came to that office on a later date, fortunately the honourable member was on sit, the aide facilitated a meeting between me and the honourable member and the interview was done. This was after I had spent more than four weeks trying to make and keep appointments. The failure of the honourable members to keep appointments made it difficult for me to conduct the number of interviews I had earlier proposed.

The role of secretaries, personal assistants, legislative assistants and other aides in getting access to the elite is another major challenge. I noticed during my stay at the National Assembly that aides to public officials can influence the work of a researcher in two different ways. First, where the aides of public officials are receptive to the work of a researcher they can facilitate access to the official. But where the aides of public officials, for any reason, are not receptive to the work of the researcher, it may be difficult for the researcher to gain access to the official. I recall one office I visited; when I approached the secretary to deliver
letter requesting for interview with the honourable member, the secretary outrightly refused to collect the letter saying that her boss is so busy and would not welcome any request for interview. Attempts to persuade her to transmit the letter to her boss failed. Like in the case of honourable members, the attitude of aides to researchers can also be attributed to the personal disposition of the aides. I observed that receptivity or hostility to researchers do not have much to do with issues such as educational status, level of social exposure, or gender status, as hostility to researchers cuts across those with these social attributes. Although, one can easily observe that the more educated and socially exposed people are more sociable, this does not predispose them to facilitate the work of a researcher.

Another challenge that came up during my fieldwork concerns the growing anti-intellectualism in Nigeria. Among the Nigerian federal legislators, there are many who feel that speaking to researchers is a tedious ‘brain work’ which they are not prepared to do. I was specifically advised by some honourable members to ‘go and find some less busy people that would help you answer your questions’. As far as many of the honourable members are concerned, granting interviews to researchers is next to doing school work which they are not ready to do. The anti-intellectual stance of many federal legislators was acknowledged by some of their aides. In a personal conversation with an aide to one of the legislators, I was advised to look at the profile of the honourable members before approaching them for interview. The suggestion was that I should focus on the legislators with good educational background, since they are the ones that are likely going to be receptive to my project. However, the experience I had contradicted this suggestion. Although the less-educated honourable members may tend to evade interviews in order not to expose their educational deficiency, however, there are less-educated people who, by the virtue of social exposure and experience, have become more competent and receptive than educated people. This category of people may be willing to participate in a research to share their view. Again, there are people who are usually more disposed to intellectual issues whether they are more or less-educated. Thus, I approached the challenge of anti-intellectualism as a national malaise rather than a problem associated with the less-educated people. I noticed that most honourable members I met, both more or less-educated, considered my request for a research interview as a matter of lower priority than most issues that they had to confront at work on a particular day.

Yet, another matter that posed a serious challenge is the issue of statism and ethnicity. A number of the honourable members I approached for an interview demanded to know my state of origin. When I responded, they bluntly asked me to go to the law-makers from my ‘area’ for the interview. This is in spite of my efforts to explain that my research is national in focus and seeks the opinion of federal legislators from all over Nigeria. Specifically, in one of the offices I visited, the personal assistant to the honourable member, after consulting his boss regarding my request for interview, asked me: ‘I hope you know we are XYZ’s. When I replied in affirmative, he advised me to go to the legislators from my ‘area’ because his oga is busy and will not have time to grant me interview. My assumption is that many legislators feel responsible only to individuals from their ‘area’. Perhaps, they believe that it is the people from their ‘area’ that actually deserve their time.
Finally, the fact that the elite are the main stakeholders in national politics is also a major challenge to doing elite interviews. The National Assembly is central to public affairs in Nigeria. On several occasions, I had to cancel interview appointments due to the emergence of matters of national interest. One example deserves to be mentioned. I was at the National Assembly on 9 February 2010 to conduct four interviews. Incidentally, that was the day the Senate was to consider a resolution that would empower Nigeria’s vice president Goodluck Jonathan to assume duties as acting president. Recall that Nigeria’s president Umaru Yar’dua had left the country on 23 November 2009 for medical treatment in Saudi Arabia without handing over power to his vice. Tensions had been simmering since President Yar’dua’s departure, but the Senate wanted to lay the matter to rest on that 9 February. There were fears that the proposed resolution by the Senate would provoke conflict. Consequently, the National Assembly authorities barred all visitors from gaining entrance into the complex. I was at the National Assembly at about 9.30 am and had contacted my prospective respondents on phone. Not even the intervention of these honourable members could facilitate my access to the complex. I was able to enter into the complex around 3.40 pm only when the Senate had completed their sitting and vacated the building. I succeeded in conducting one interview while the rest were cancelled. They could not be rescheduled since that was the last week of my fieldwork and the prospective respondents could not find any other convenient time for the interview within the week.

Conclusion

This article examined the tools, processes and challenges of doing elite interviews in Nigeria. It outlined the steps, opportunities and obstacles that researchers should consider while planning and conducting elite interviews. The study examined the nature of research instruments required, the desirable data collection techniques, the preparations, skills and capacities needed to effectively conduct elite interviews as well as the methods of reaching out to elite respondents and the nature of responses to expect from them. The centrality of relationship building in conducting elite interviews was highlighted. The article also examined the challenges that researchers may face in conducting elite interview and assessed how field realities may affect their research work.
By examining the intricacies of doing elite interviews in Nigeria, this article connects to and addresses the core issues relating to field research in political science. The discussion of Nigerian social life in relation to the author’s own experience should be sufficient to warn researchers intending to conduct elite interviews about the factors that they are likely to confront and which can impede their fieldwork. I have made a deliberate attempt to put forward issues about access, ethics, contact-building and the researcher’s role in the field. It is important that researchers are guided by following laid down protocol when doing elite interviews. In effect, what this article has done is to present a reflexive account of a researcher’s fieldwork experience in a particular social context and to discuss how such experiences can be practically linked to issues about access, ethics, societal character, risks, and the researcher’s role in the field.

References


