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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2018-01-22

Deposited version:

Post-print

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Barroso, M. & Santos, S. (2017). Studying large organizations and elites: limits and challenges of fieldwork. *La Critica Sociologica*. 51 (203), 31-43

Further information on publisher's website:

10.19272/201701203003

Publisher's copyright statement:

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STUDYING LARGE ORGANISATIONS AND ELITES: LIMITS AND CHALLENGES OF FIELDWORK

Studies on large organisations, companies or professional and political elites present researchers with a series of concerns of epistemological, methodological and procedural nature.

Scientific debates on the topic tend to stress the difficulties of access to the field of research and objects under investigation, generally in the perspective of developing strategies to overcome them, attenuating the researcher's role as an outsider and enabling the collection of relevant information for the research. However, the reflections on research concerning large organisations and political and professional elites have progressively come to consider this as a complex social process, in which significant relations of power are played out, and where the role of the respondents or interviewees goes far beyond that of mere holders of useful information for the researcher. Indeed, in the study of large organisations and elites, the researcher has to deal with the public agendas of those being interviewed, in particular with respect to how the organisations or members of the elites wish to be known in the public space. Therefore, the researcher's ability to negotiate and adapt is of central importance in the fieldwork. Added to the usual issues of access and permanence in the field are new challenges, namely in the analysis and interpretation of institutional discourse and narratives and in the actual process of interaction between the researcher and the objects of study.

In this article we propose a reflection based on the most recent literature, combining specific cases of fieldwork of a series of studies on large organisations and professional and political elites. We assume a comprehensive definition of the notion of elites¹, as groups or persons “with strong proximity to power”², with specific and socially valued know-how³, in diversified social contexts, such business, political or professional spheres⁴.

The article is divided into six parts. We begin with a brief examination of the literature on the methodological issues posed in the study of these objects. In the second part, we present the fieldwork experiences that substantiate the considerations drawn over the article. In the third part, we debate the main difficulties and challenges in access to the field of research. In the fourth part, we consider the difficulties and challenges encountered during investigation, and

¹ MORRIS Z, *The truth about interviewing elites*, «Politics», 29(3), 2009.

² LILLEKER, D.G., *Interviewing the Political Elite: Navigating a Potential Minefield*, «Politics» 23(3), 207–214, 2003.

³ BURNHAM, P., K. GILLAND, W. GRANT AND Z. LAYTON-HENRY, *Research Methods in Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

⁴ BECKER HOWARD, *How I learned what a crock was*, HERTZ ROSANNA, JONATHAN IMBER, *Studying Elites using Qualitative Methods*, Londres, Sage, 1995.

reflect specifically on the gender and power relations that emerge in the interaction with the interviewees. In the fifth part, we discuss interviewer-interviewee relations based on the debate on reflexivity. In the sixth part, we propose an analysis of the need for and difficulty in overcoming institutional discourse in the study of elites and large organisations. We finalise by presenting various issues for future debate on the importance of discussing qualitative research challenges in different fields of research.

RECENT DEBATES IN THE LITERATURE

With a strong ethnographic tradition, the notion of fieldwork is very often associated to participant observation. However, as argued by McCall⁵, in a more comprehensive acceptance, fieldwork includes all the research that takes place outside of “controlled” research contexts, such as laboratories or libraries⁶, or more simply, all “desk research”. This means that, irrespective of the research methods and techniques used, most research will include a period of fieldwork, during which information will usually be gathered that will serve other research stages, such as data analysis or writing⁷. Contrary to what happens in the physical or natural sciences, where there may be a distancing between the researcher and the field of observation, fieldwork in the social sciences almost always implies the presence of the researcher, and may, therefore, be endowed with a reflexive dimension around his/her possible interference in the field and vice-versa⁸. This reflexive process is not always confined to the data collection stage, but is frequently present in the analysis of the results, and underlies a whole series of research accounts and theoretical and methodological discussions on the process of investigation, on research topics and the role of the researcher.

The researcher's access to the research field and collection of information is probably one of the topics that has received most attention in these debates. A substantial part of the literature is dedicated to the sharing of experiences, with guidelines on the best ways to access the field and gather information. In the specific case of investigation on large organisations and

⁵ MCCALL GEORGE (2006), *The fieldwork tradition*, DICK HOBBS, RICHARD WRIGHT, *The Sage Handbook of Fieldwork*, Londres, Sage, 2006.3-23.

⁶ MCCALL (2006), *idem*, 23.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

elites, notable work has been produced by Ostrander⁹, Hertz and Imber¹⁰, Thomas¹¹, Adler and Adler¹², Odendahl and Shaw¹³, Welsh¹⁴, Okumus¹⁵, or Drew¹⁶.

Nevertheless, many of these contributions have also presented the particularities of studying large organisations and elites in a more encompassing form, reflecting on the specific features of this object of study and on the complex relations, namely of power¹⁷, that are established in the research context with the researcher.

Thomas¹⁸ recounts his various research experiences involving “important people in large companies”, focusing both on issues of practical nature, such as access to the field and the preparation of fieldwork, and on a series of more reflexive issues about the dynamics of power in an interview context, or the peculiarities of human interaction at the data collection stage. Drew¹⁹ describes the trajectory of his research in the study of German elites, concentrating on the interactive dimension of the qualitative interviews, including issues of power, but also cultural and linguistic. Adler and Adler²⁰ identify large organisations and elites as objects of study that are extremely reluctant in participating in research projects in the social science area. Indeed, it is the actual nature of elites, as a closed group difficult to access, that underlies the difficulties encountered by researchers in studying them²¹, with the act of interviewing elites very often being described as a situation of inequality, where the interviewee holds more power than the interviewer.²²

⁹ OSTRANDER SUSAN, *Surely, you are not in this just to be helpful. Access, rapport and interviews in three studies of elites*, «*Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*», 22 (1), 1993.

¹⁰ HERTZ ROSANNA, JONATHAN IMBER, *Studying Elites using Qualitative Methods*, Londres, Sage, 1995.

¹¹ THOMAS ROBERT, *Interviewing important people in big companies*, ROSANNA HERTZ, JONATHAN IMBER, *Studying Elites using Qualitative Methods*, Londres, Sage, 1995.

¹² ADLER PATRICIA, PETER ADLER, *The reluctant respondent*, JABER GUBRIUM, JAMES HOLSTEIN, *Handbook of Interview Research*, Londres, Sage, 2001 p. 515-536.

¹³ ODENDAHL TERESA, AILEEN SHAW, *Interviewing elites*, JABER GUBRIUM, JAMES HOLSTEIN, *Handbook of Interview Research*, Londres, Sage, 2001, p. 299-316.

¹⁴ WELCH CATHERINE, REBBECA MARSCHAN-PIEKKARI, HELI PENTTINEN, MARJA TAHVANAINEN, *Corporate elites as informants in qualitative international business research*, «*International Business Review*», 11 (5), 2002.

¹⁵ OKUMUS FEVZI, LEVENT ALTINAY, ANGELA ROPER, *Gaining access for research: reflections from experience*, «*Annals of Tourism Research*», 34 (1), 2007.

¹⁶ DREW HILARY, *Overcoming barriers: qualitative interviews with German elites*, «*The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*», 12 (2), 2014.

¹⁷ LIMA MARIA ANTÓNIA, *Grandes famílias, grandes empresas: ensaio antropológico sobre uma elite de Lisboa*, Lisbon, Dom Quixote, 2002.

¹⁸ THOMAS, 1995, idem.

¹⁹ DREW, 2014, idem.

²⁰ ADLER, ADLER, 2001, idem.

²¹ HERTZ, IMBER, 1995, idem.

²² BURNHAM, P., K. GILLAND, W. GRANT AND Z. LAYTON-HENRY, 2004, idem.

As social groups of power - whether economic, political or symbolic - large organisations tend to safeguard their modes of operation and organisational practices, protecting themselves from the possible disturbance that public exposure might cause²³ and also closing their doors as a way of maintaining and reproducing logics of power. The same applies to political and professional elites. As stressed by Thomas²⁴, even when the research goals appear to be innocuous for the organisation, managing to get access is generally difficult, as in this process of isolation and distancing, the business elites and managers act as effective gatekeepers of the information that the researcher seeks to access²⁵.

However, difficulties of access are not only restricted to entry into organisations or elite circuits. When the researcher actually does manage to access the field, she/he is commonly confronted with the reluctance of the discussion partners in answering certain questions or addressing given topics. One of the possible arguments is the global competitive context in which these organisations move, namely major corporate groups, requiring that they must make sure that their methods, practices or trade secrets are not known²⁶.

The study of elites, large organisations and companies thus incorporates a number of particularities that have led to reflection, from the ontological and epistemological point of view, not only on the object of study but also on the role of the researcher.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCES

This article is based on a series of research experiences in the areas of Political Sociology, Sociology of Communication and Sociology of Law in collective and individual projects (of doctorates and post-doctoral studies) on topics such as parliamentary recruitment and democratic decision-making processes in the Portuguese parliament; the liberalisation of the radio sector in Portugal; economic justice; representations of public opinion in the penal system; and finally, on processes of professional socialisation and integration in transnational careers of young lawyers in large firms. Among these projects, the outstanding common feature is the use of interviews and life stories applied to members of the political, legal and media elites or to new and potential members. A total of 100 persons were interviewed.

The experiences recounted in this article are also derived from a series of research projects in the area of the Sociology of Work, including a post-doctoral project on business

²³ ADLER, ADLER, 2001, *idem*.

²⁴ THOMAS, 1995, *idem*.

²⁵ ADLER, ADLER, 2001, *idem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

practices in times of crisis, which implied conducting interviews to business directors and union representatives in Portugal, Spain and Greece, and a doctorate project on organisational practices fostering the quality of life, which involved interviewing business directors and middle management at a multinational company in Portugal and Sweden.

In addition to this research, the experiences described in this article also refer to other research projects on working conditions, reconciliation between work and family life, and business trajectories, in which business directors and managers, senior corporate officials and specialists of the intellectual and scientific professions were interviewed. In total, around 60 persons were interviewed.

GAIN TIME, GAIN SPACE: STRATEGIES TO ASSURE ENTRY AND PERMANENCE IN THE FIELD

As is the case with other objects of study, research on large organisations and professional and political elites faces a number of challenges and difficulties associated to the gathering of information and fieldwork. Many are posed right at the start, in terms of access. As noted above, and widely observed in the literature, the nature and structure of large organisations and professional elites, namely as closed groups, constitutes a first barrier.

Our investigation experience has progressively confirmed that the preparation behind entry into the field is essential for successful access to the object of study. Perhaps in a more evident way than occurs with other research topics or objects, in studies on large organisations and professional elites, this is a long process that is intended to be meticulous. Certainly rare are the cases when it was possible to obtain authorisation for research without needing to demonstrate prior knowledge on the history, structure or functioning of the organisation. **When the researcher requests the participation of a large company in her/his research, the researcher is expected to already have some in-depth knowledge and be prepared to explain the precise pertinence of the specific inclusion of the company in the study.** The study of the organisation and company thus begins even before the first contacts have been made.

Nowadays, this process of preparation is made relatively easier by the considerable amount of information that is available and by the ease of access to the routes that enable obtaining it. Most companies or organisations provide institutional information on their websites and social networks. It is, therefore, possible to know relevant milestones in the organisation's historical path or the names of key persons. Likewise, nowadays it is much easier to access what was said and written about an organisation, and previous studies and research.

On the other hand, the available information is always restricted and limited to the organisation's interests. While it may be relatively easy to access the names, in most cases it is

extremely difficult to access the contacts of these key persons. We are thus talking about an object that is «visible, but not accessible»²⁷. The contacts provided to the public usually refer to the public relations or external departments, which as a rule do not respond favourably to the requests of researchers, or postpone this response with additional requests for information over a length of time that does not always correspond with the research agendas. In our case, this route of entry into the field has not proved to be particularly effective in guaranteeing access to organisations.

A possible route that has proved to be more secure is the attempt to access the organisation through existing informal networks of contacts or via privileged informants. These informants can be found in the immediate context of personal and professional social relations among the researchers, or through other organisations or entities that might mediate a contact with the key persons in the organisation under study, such as unions, employer associations or professional associations.

Independently from the privileged route to establish the first contact and request for access, the way we present the research is essential in assuring eventual participation. Belonging to a higher education establishment that has a good reputation in the country, the use of these institutional credentials has facilitated the initial contacts with companies and professionals. Indeed, it is relatively common for our interviewees in the organisations to have studied at our institution, and that generally constitutes a first step in the request for access to the field and participation in the research to be able to be corresponded in a favourable light. However, it is at this stage that we are frequently confronted with more extensive dynamics of power, namely those established between disciplinary fields. When we introduce ourselves as ISCTE researchers in a business sphere, there is an initial implicit understanding by our interviewees that we must belong to the management department of the university. Upon discovering that we are sociologists, and that we belong to the school of social science, this brings about a renewed distancing, followed by the need to confirm who we know at the university or with whom we have worked. Reference to previous research, to funding sources, to other organisations, companies or professionals with which or whom we have worked also serves to validate competencies, in a process that clearly subjects the researcher and the investigation to an appraisal by the potential participants.

In the study of large organisations and professional elites, the presentation of the research objectives is usually accompanied by the need to demonstrate the potential of the

²⁷ THOMAS, 1995, idem.

research to the participants, following the premise that organisations and professionals will only participate if some interest or benefit arises thereof. Depending on the object of study and the specific research topic, some organisations can have an interest in sharing information, talking about their history, politics and practices. In the same way, it is frequently the case that some professionals, especially the “new” members of certain professional elites - the «nouveau statutés»²⁸- are willing to talk about their trajectory. Nonetheless, this is a difficult task that adds an almost commercial dimension to the research, requiring an effort by the researcher to demonstrate the interest of her/his study. In one of our research projects, an informative leaflet about the research was actually distributed to the potential interviewees, so as to reinforce the explanation of the project's goals and contributions to the company.

During the stage of establishing contacts, an issue that always arises in the study of large organisations and elites is the management and adjustment of the research schedule to individual and organisational agendas. The fieldwork preparatory stage and the difficulties that are usually faced in getting access to the organisations and people create significant impediments to the development of the research. In our current times, the time pressure exerted on research projects is not consistent with the time required to prepare the collection of information. In one of our research projects involving a large organisation, some two years elapsed between the first contact and authorisation to conduct the study. After having found the privileged contact inside the organisation, it was necessary to pass through a successive series of authorisations of different departments, including approval by the ethics committee and board of directors. By the time that the acceptance of participation was given, the research project was approaching its end and other organisations had been included in the study as an alternative. Likewise, the professional elites and the professionals of large organisations always present themselves to researchers as being extremely busy, with little time to spare. The researchers are thus directly dependent on their participants, having to be permanently available, in an effort of continuous persistence and insistence.

²⁸ ADLER, ADLER, 2001, idem.

Much has been said on the role of the researcher during an interview. At this point we shall focus on two strategies: switching the interviewer-interviewee positions and exploring the female gender as a condition in research.

Switching the position with the interviewee means letting the interviewee take over the reins, tell her/his story, her/his own version of the events. This technique for conducting interviews enables creating, from the very beginning, a relationship of empathy with the interviewee, on which the obtaining of relevant information for the research ultimately rests. This does not mean in any way abandoning our questions or placing them at a secondary level, but rather waiting for the right moment to pose them, involving what some interviewers describe as the moment of courtship and seduction²⁹. The success of the interview very often depends on the interviewer's personal ability to manage the topics, performing the role of a confidant³⁰, creating a channel of active listening³¹, where at each moment the interviewer must show her/himself to be attentive, empathic and able to generate new questions, some of which not foreseen in the script. In several of our projects, the most interesting questions, because they enabled lifting the veil over less explored or unknown topics of the research, emerged in these moments of controlled anarchy.

Being a woman is not a neutral factor in the research of large organisations and elites. In the first place, different studies on the presence of women in top positions in organisations have demonstrated the difficult access of women and their relative novelty³². As researchers we are aware of this social reality and from the onset in our studies we are expecting that our interviewees will be men, especially when seeking to address individuals at the top of the organisation's hierarchy.

As interviewers we have been faced with a variety of situations in which we were subjected to appraisal by the interviewee due to the face value of our initial standing - researcher, young and a woman - in some cases being in an advantageous position and in others a position of greater subalternity. Reflecting on our condition as a woman and its impact on the research in principle enables controlling the effects and at any given time adapting our discourse and attitudes in view of the situation. At certain times, being a young woman allows us to go

²⁹ FERREIRA VÍTOR, *Artes e manhas da entrevista compreensiva*, «Saúde Soc. São Paulo», 23 (3), 2014.

³⁰ LAHIRE BERNARD, *Portraits sociologiques: dispositions et variations individuelles*, Paris, Nathan, 2002.

³¹ BACK LES, *The art of listening*. Oxford, Berg, 2007.

³² BROADBRIDGE ADELINA, *Gender and management: lessons from recent research*, «Women in Management Review», 22 (6), 2007.

WEYER BIRGIT, *Twenty years later: explaining the persistence of the glass ceiling for women leaders*, «Women in Management Review», 22 (6), 482-496, 2007.

further than what was originally designed, playing with the idea of being more ‘inoffensive’, with less ‘knowledge’ of the social realities that we intend to study, and therefore more easily drawn or led towards the interests of the interviewee and her/his organisation. Being a woman can also foster greater openness in talking about topics of lesser importance to the core business of the organisation or company, such as the reconciliation between work and family life, daily routines, the behaviour of individuals, or even allow encouraging gossip about certain people or organisations that, while not being central to the investigation in question, might be important when analysing and interpreting the information.

REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity is a central topic in qualitative investigation. Being a lengthy process involving ongoing learning about the object of study, this is likewise a process of discovery and reflection about the actual researcher. Thus we can define reflexivity as a state of awareness: «reflexivity is about being constantly aware of our paradigmatic preferences and how these may bias, compromise and perhaps unduly influence our scientific endeavours, and how we might account for this»³³.

With regard to the interviewees, we can talk of reflexivity in the first place, due to their in-depth knowledge on the research topics. We are addressing people who are used to talking in public, who in most cases have already spoken about these topics in conferences and seminars, both internal and external, who like to give opinions and expect an audience. When studying large organisations and elites, we are dealing with individuals who combine economic capital with cultural and social capital. Therefore, in addition to their thorough knowledge on the topics they also exhibit external signs of wealth³⁴, in the language used, in references to economic, cultural and political spheres, in illustrations given of other worldly experiences, in comparisons with other members of the economic and political elite. These outward signs are simultaneously a passageway to a social reality that is very often unknown and, a toll-gate, a kind of acid test to which the researcher is submitted and which may guarantee, or not, the continuity of the investigation. As in all research, our ability to be on the ball, unveil concealed signals and play all our cards, demonstrate that we know about these realities or these people or at least make a show of such, will be fundamental to keep us firmly in the game.

³³ JEANNES EMMA, TONY HUZARD, *Conclusion: Reflexivity, Ethics and the Researcher*, EMMA JEANNES, TONY HUZARD, *Critical Management Research: Reflections from the Field*, Londres, Sage, 2014, p.235.

³⁴ BOURDIEU PIERRE, *O que falar quer dizer*, Lisbon, Difel, 1998.

A second aspect is related to the public life of the interviewees. In general, we are faced with contact and interview situations where the interviewees have a certain level of public exposure. **The public image of the interviewees is an important component in the relationship between the researcher and the research which should not be overlooked.**

One of the first barriers is to try to break down that socially constructed image and attempt to create an empathy that enables us to go far beyond the planned discourse. This is not always possible, and as we shall see in the following point this task is discussed in the critical analysis of institutional discourse.

In various research projects, the interviewees, aware of the relations of power constructed over the successive contacts, present themselves as protagonists of important episodes of contemporary history, whether by recounting events in which they were involved or telling stories about other public personalities. We have named this the ‘forest gump’ syndrome, just as the protagonist of this film, the interviewees frequently need this type of narrative to legitimate their importance and, thus in their own way, leave a legacy that is intended to be explicit in the research results. I recall in particular an episode of a former director who, having been sidelined due to having reached the age limit of the position, still kept certain privileges, such as the use of a personal secretary to whom he mailed his handwritten notes to be typed up, aimed at producing a book of memoirs. However, in the organisation, the historical memory of his presence only figured in the archives and his management model had been replaced.

The management of the recording device is another important aspect when reflecting on the conditions of the research. Recording enables being more available to listen and enter into dialogue, but it can cause some discomfort and restraint, and in some cases compromise the continuity of the contact. Therefore, **while the use of the recorder may be an appropriately integral part of the ritual of interaction at the time of the interview, it should be turned on and off according to the wishes of the interviewee.**

During the interviews we came across various situations where the interviewees asked us to turn off the recorder because they want to explain, implicating names or revealing aspects that were not known to the public. Very often, these “off the record” statements involved details of little consequence when compared to the revelations that they had made to the recorder. As noted by Dexter when describing his interview experience to members of the United States congress and senate: «I have had interviewees ask me to keep opinions which sounded utterly innocuous off the record and then tell me *without* any such insistence of clearly illegal acts or

express views “on the record” which could have been used to crucify them if reported to the media».³⁵

Understanding or showing empathy during these situations enables us not only to intensify and deepen the interview relationship but also to assure that by the end we might be bestowed with new information, clues and suggestions that will remain outside the recording. What to do with this information raises ethical issues. In our research, we have always decided not to use any information obtained in contexts where the interviewee asked us to keep this information confidential. However, we cannot deny that access to such information might influence the conduct of new contacts and interviews or the analysis of data. As at all research stages, we draw heavily upon our reflexive skills exercised in a consciously self-critical manner on the context, the interviewee and the collected information, crossing it with other research results and investigations.

GOING BEYOND INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE

The difficulties in accessing this research field and the challenges posed during the interviews, namely those associated to the power dynamics established in the context of interaction, can be reflected in subsequent stages of the research and affect the analysis of the collected data.

Considering that professional elites and large organisations, in view of everything presented above, generally show some reluctance in answering the questions made by researchers and/or supplying the necessary information for the research, **it is pertinent to discuss the validity of the information that is in fact actually gained.** It is not uncommon for our interviewees to adopt the institutional discourse of the company or profession throughout the interviews, which implies that the obtained information is not much different from that which could have been gathered from the company's documents or on Internet pages. Whether derived from a concerted strategy of conveying a certain image of the organisational or professional reality - where the public relations departments are especially well trained to this end - or from an unconscious process of effective incorporation of an institutional discourse in individual narratives, researchers are frequently confronted with the need to unravel and discard this institutional dimension from discourses, validate the collected information or test the veracity of what is being said. Probably in a more evident manner than occurs with other objects of

³⁵ DEXTER LEWIS, 2006, p.55.

study, there is a latent assumption that the interviewed elites tend to conceal the truth that the researcher is seeking to find³⁶.

The adoption of a constantly critical standpoint, which is indeed at the very base of a whole tradition of critical investigation in studies on organisations and elites³⁷, implies a balance that is not always easy to achieve between the inevitability of trusting our interviewees and the need to confirm the truth of their statements. The development of methodological resources to validate the information has received less attention in reports on research experiences. Making the same question in different ways, asking the interviewee to answer according to different perspectives³⁸, or seeking to break down into practical terms the abstraction of discourses, are possible paths to overcoming this type of problem.

Another strategy used in our research has been the application of record grids and logbooks. Ideally, the conditions under which interview was conducted and the type of relationship established with the interviewee should be recorded immediately after the interview. The record consists of a supporting file for content analysis divided into three blocks: (i) dynamics of the interview; (ii) attitudes of the interviewee; and (iii) subjective information.

The first block should record general considerations about how the interview went and the topics addressed. The second block should describe the interviewee's attitude according to four types (which may or not be expanded according to the research):

- (i) Distancing – explanation of the events in a detached manner;
- (ii) Involvement – taking a particular angle and confronting the ideas of her/his adversaries;
- (iii) Omission/downplaying – omission of facts and people and/or downplaying of her/his role in the events;
- (iv) Imposition – attempted imposition of her/his vision as the interpretative frame.

The third block should present all the subjective information that is considered relevant, organised into six topics:

- (a) Current emotional state: rage, depression, happiness, amazement, empathy, etc.;
- (b) Opinions (cognitive formulations);

³⁶ MORRIS Z, *The truth about interviewing elites*, «Politics», 29(3), 2009.

³⁷ CZARNIASKA B, *Narrative, Interviews and Organizations*, GUBRIUM, J. F., e J.A. HOLSTEIN, *Handbook of Interview Research*, Londres, Sage, 2001, p. 733-749.

FAIRCLOTH, C. (2012), *After the interview: what is left at the end*, GUBRIUM, J. F., e J.A. HOLSTEIN, *The Sage Handbook of Interview Research: the Complexity of the Craft*, Londres, Sage, 2012.

FINLAY L, *Five lenses for the reflexive interviewer*, GUBRIUM, J. F., e J.A. HOLSTEIN, *The Sage handbook of Interview Research: the Complexity of the Craft*, Londres, Sage, 2012, p. 317-331.

³⁸ THOMAS, 1995, idem.

- (c) Attitudes on and emotional reactions to the topic in question;
- (d) The values and principles underlying her/his opinions;
- (e) Reactions and projections regarding what should be done if certain circumstances were to persist;
- (f) Behavioural tendencies of the interviewee when confronted with certain situations.

The information of subjective nature (emotional state, opinions, attitudes and emotional reactions, values) collected after each interview enable a subsequent period of distancing from the gathered material, allowing each interview to be seen in a fresh light and the produced discourses to be viewed taking into account the conditions in which they were collected. This also enables a critical examination of the different versions of the same event given by interviewees standing at divergent positions. And this allows confronting the analysis with the idea of what is true, and how we know if the interviewee is telling the truth.

Based on the reflection by Lewis Dexter³⁹ in dialogue with the work by William Foote White⁴⁰, we can state that in each person's discourse there is an objective explanation and a subjective explanation. In general, the interviewees combine the two. Even in cases where it appears that the information that has been given is clearly objective, we should take into account that this information is merely the interviewee's perception about an issue, filtered and modified by her/his cognitive and emotional reactions and reported through the use of her/his language. Therefore, we should clearly understand that when we conduct an interview we are receiving images of the world just as the interviewee sees it and, even more so, that we are only being given access to what the interviewee wants to tell us in the particular interview situation. Under other circumstances, what the interviewee would say might be considerably different.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have considered some of the main epistemological and methodological challenges posed to sociological research on elites and large organisations. We did so based on our own experience of research in the field, reflecting on the challenges of accessing the field of research and conducting interviews with members of elites and representatives of large organisations, exploring the gender and power relations that are established in a context of interaction with analytical dimensions of the actual process of investigation. We have also reflected on the interpersonal relations that occur between the interviewer and interviewee, and

³⁹ DEXTER, *idem*, p.119-138.

⁴⁰ WHITE WILLIAM FOOTE, *Street corner society – the social structure of an Italian slum*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1943.

on the processes of reflexivity both of the researcher and interviewee, as intervening parties of the research.

The elites and large organisations, as closed groups and contexts, will always place a whole series of extra difficulties before the sociologist regarding access to and permanence in the field. Research accounts and the sharing of experiences in the academic community have enabled the development of an important body of literature, pointing to clues, based on the constructed wisdom and knowledge, as to how to attenuate some of these difficulties. The constant change of social realities, associated to the evolution of methodological procedures in scientific research, implies that research accounts do not lose their relevance in the context of current academic debates.

The assumption that interviews are processes of dynamic interaction, where the individual characteristics of the researchers and interviewees are pertinent, in particular with respect to sex, age, socio-professional or economic status, further diversifies the range of possible paths for these debates. In this regard, the recounting and sharing of experiences can be more than a mere highlighting of situations of subalternity or superiority between the interviewer and interviewee, by also incorporating the uses that these potential relations might have for investigation. At the same time, as is evident throughout this article, processes of reflexivity occur at various levels and their inclusion in the research or in the considerations drawn about it are inevitable in contemporary societies.

The sociological study of elites and large organisations also raises a series of issues of analytical nature which, in spite of potentially cross-cutting other fields of studies, here take on a greater central importance. These issues are related to the need to overcome the formality and institutionality that very often dominates the discourse in an interview context, above all because interviews are also effectively a moment of public exposure of the interviewee and because there is, in the elites and organisations, a public image that is intended to be upheld. The work of the researchers is thus mediated by the simultaneous need, on the one hand, to deconstruct institutional discourse and validate the collected information, and on the other hand, to check the truth and authenticity of what is said to them by the interviewees.

This need is accompanied by an additional aspect, concerning the necessity to justify the pertinence of the object to the academic community and peers. As argued by Hertz and Imber⁴¹, social scientists tend to demonstrate more empathy with the study of the more vulnerable than with groups in positions of power, which implies that the research on these

⁴¹ HERTZ, IMBER, 1995, *idem*.

objects is frequently more subjected to critique than that applied to other topics. This leaves the researchers with a heightened difficulty of legitimation, which might influence the way that research is developed in this field. Sociological investigation on elites and organisations thus always tends to adopt a more critical perspective; however, the indispensability of this analytical standpoint remains, to a certain extent, open to debate.