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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Peculiarities of Interviewing Elites in Post-Conflict Societies

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Abstract

Those who engage in a task of conducting elite interviews in post-conflict societies must prepare for the context-specific challenges of this environment to mitigate the potentially distorting consequences of the process and the substance. This paper discusses the issues and challenges associated with interviewing elites in post-conflict societies. Examples are drawn from the author's own experiences gained through conducting over seventy interviews while collecting data on peace processes in Cyprus and Kosovo. Particularly, the issues of sampling, gaining access, and the process of interviewing are discussed with a focus on the issues of the impact of terminology, the use of recording devices, the researcher's positionality, and the subjective qualities of data.

Keywords: Elite interviews, post-conflict societies, sampling, gaining access, researcher's positionality.

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1. Introduction

Elite interviewing is a commonly utilized tool to gather rich and in-depth data in the social and political sciences that cannot be obtained through other sources. The commonality of its usage has facilitated the merging of growing debates that address the issues and challenges associated with the method (see Berry, 2002; Lancaster, 2017; McEvoy, 2006; Mikecz, 2012; Morris, 2009; Richardson, 2014; Rivera et al., 2002). This field grows in two dimensions: The first is the interdisciplinary instructional work that provides overarching guidance on the potential challenges and strategies (see Cochrane, 1998; Dexter, 1970, 2006; Harvey, 2009; Morris, 2009). Papers focusing on interviewing elites in a certain context, location, or a specific group of elites constitute the second dimension. For instance, Aberbach & Rockman's (2002) discusses the difficulties of conducting interviews from a sample of bureaucratic elites in Western democracies. Schoenberger (1991) focuses on the case of interviewing corporate elites, whereas Cochrane (1998) explores how to interview local political elites to discover local power structures.

Alongside this, in the last decade, a small but robust body of literature has greatly advanced our understanding of the use of methods in peace research. This body of literature addresses the issues that researchers often confront when collecting data in conflict or post-conflict settings, emphasizing ethics and the principle of "do no harm." (Brewer, 2016; Brounéus, 2011; Wood, 2006). The centrality of political elites in shaping the process of conflict escalation or de-escalation through their strategic actions (see Brass, 1991; Crawford & Lipschutz, 1998), increases the relevance of capturing the way elites perceive, interpret, and approach these conflicts.[1] Despite the value of elite interviewing to capture precious data regarding war-torn and post-conflict societies, so far, only some scant effort has been dedicated to discussing the peculiarities of conducting elite interviews in this context (see Brounéus 2011; McEvoy, 2006).

This paper sits at the intersection of these two growing branches of the literature, intending to contribute to the discussion on the value and usage of elite interviewing as a method to collect data in war-torn and post-conflict societies. The paper relies on data from over seventy semi-structured elite interviews conducted while researching the peace processes in Cyprus and Kosovo.

The first round of interviews was conducted for a PhD thesis that investigates the impact of European integration on the ongoing peace processes of the Kosovo and Cyprus conflicts in three destinations, Nicosia, Belgrade, and Pristina, from November 2010 to June 2011. The second round comprised interviews conducted in Pristina in November 2016 for a research paper that analyses the conditions that influence the implementation process of the series of agreements signed between Belgrade and Pristina under EU facilitation. The paper content presents a reflective account of these encounters and discusses the remedies that generalized debates and advice on the challenges of conducting elite interviews remain short on addressing. The key question here is: What particular issues may arise when interviewing elites in post-conflict societies, and how can they be redressed? The article argues that the instability of the post-conflict settings, the degree of subjectivity of the opinions, and the identity of the researcher are the main factors with a capacity to impinge on the quality of the data in the process of its collection. Consequently, a clear consideration of the sampling technique, the

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[1] This is not to say that the ordinary folks are simply subjected to elite manipulation and mobilization. For an argument on the role of masses see Lacher and Kaymak (2005).

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interviewing process, and the quality of the collected data is essential to reducing the impact of these deceptive factors and increasing the reliability of the outcome.

2. Sampling and Gaining Access

For studies that provide data for this article, a loose definition of the term "political elite" was adopted, as all individuals "with close proximity to power or policymaking" (Lilleker, 2003, p. 207). It is crucial to note that some of the interviewees accessed for this research are considered expert interviews. Expert interviews are semi-structured interviews that provide qualitative in-depth "expert" knowledge on a certain matter (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019). Some claim that these interviews are different in their nature, particularly in terms of power dynamics (see Bogner et al., 2009) and the objective quality of the data they propose (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019). However, for the purpose of this study, the researcher made a concise choice not to omit experiences gained from the series of expert interviews conducted with EU officials in Brussels and local EU branches outside the content of this paper, believing that this data enriches the quality of the work.

In the first phase, an extensive literature review and an online background search were conducted to understand the local power structures, parties, institutions, and other political organizations. An initial sample of potential interviewees developed out of this effort and targeted those active in politics, public service, civil society, media, and academia with either a direct link to conflict resolution and peace processes or the potential to influence public opinion and the tendencies of the wider society regarding this matter. Diversity of political positions, backgrounds, and ideological orientations were taken into account to capture "a balanced perspective," as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2005, p. 64). Judgemental sampling has proven quite efficient in composing the initial sample due to the fact that in targeted locations, the degree of digitalization enabled the researcher to identify the contemporary elites inhabiting the political scenery through an online search.

Literature abounds with a series of well-thought-out strategies for researchers who set off to recruit political elites. Suggestions include using professional affiliations and credential, utilizing personal connections, tailoring invitations professionally, and being flexible with busy individuals (Lancaster, 2017; Welch et al., 2002). Following the advice, I managed to arrange some meetings from this initial list prior to the field trip. Yet, it's unlikely that all those listed as potential interviewees will accept the interview invitation. Political elites are often busy individuals "conscious of their own importance" (Richards, 1996, p. 199) , and accessing them is surely a time-consuming phase with some unexpected delays, suggestions of rescheduling, and even last-minute cancellations. Therefore, after several rounds of initial contact, the limitations of using judgmental sampling in conflict and post-conflict environments became apparent, particularly in identifying and reaching marginalized segments of societies and capturing changes in elite systems.

As "[e]lite systems do not necessarily remain stable over time" (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, p. 675), the lengthy timeframe covered particularly by the first study, rendered it difficult to identify past names through online search. The political instability that characterises the post-conflict societies only exacerbated the likelihood of change in elite systems, which lead to re-organization of government, frequent rotation of civil servants, alteration of power in political parties, and even party leaderships at an unprecedented pattern. As a new researcher with limited funds, tight schedule and no prior contact with the researched societies, circumstances limited my ability to reach sufficient number of recruitments. Furthermore, described

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conditions made last minute cancellations or declining the offer for being interviewed more likely. Declining an invite may carry some meaning (see Morris, 2009), particularly in instances where the researcher diagnoses certain patterns of it. Identifying and accessing the elites of marginalised Kosovo Serbs, the most marginalised group at stake, has proven particularly troublesome. Besides the political instability and the groups marginalised position, the difficulties of recruiting Kosovo Serbs for an interview was also partly related to the group's unwillingness/scepticism of meeting outsiders.

For improving the sample and gaining access, utilising snowball sampling and issuing direct phone calls has provided remedy. The use of snowballing, a method "which uses the social networks of interviewees in order to expand the researcher's potential contacts" (Cohen & Aireli, 2011, p. 428) was useful in two ways. It enabled me to recruit participants in instances where abruptly rising tensions and volatility of elite systems impacted the recruitment process. It also increased the proportionality by enabling the researcher to track down and gain access to individuals that left their mark on the peace process at different periods of the covered timeframe of the research.

In 2011, in Kosovo, delay in forming the government after legislative elections created a power vacuum rendering judgmental sampling through online search nearly impossible until the new government was formed and new appointments were made in key administrative positions. Consequently, many from the political circles in Pristina remained reluctant to answer the invitation for an interview until the situation stabilizes. Political instability compelled the researcher to delay the field trip for about four weeks and then utilise snowballing to have access to sufficient number of interviewees in limited time.

The second incident occurred when I was conducting interviews as a part of a research team, again in Pristina, in November 2016.[2] The controversial move of the Kosovo Parliament, placing Trepca mining and industrial processing complex under its control, has prompted a boycott where all ethnic Serb MPs decided to boycott the parliamentary meetings and even kept their mobile phones close in an act of boycott, rendering themselves inaccessible. The first week of the boycott, which lasted for about six months, coincided with a pre-planned field trip to Pristina. While the intensity of political strife amongst local stakeholders and the time limitations of my pre-arranged one-week fieldwork have put my efforts to capture a balanced perspective on hold, I found a partial remedy through snowballing. In subsiding the lack of data from Kosovo Serb elites, I recruited a couple of civil society representatives active in northern Kosovo, amongst the Kosovo Serb community, to gain an insider opinion. Both have proven that the seemingly straightforward matter of sampling and gaining access could be easily derailed unless the timeframe of fieldwork is arranged by keeping an eye on the volatile political situation that may abruptly change the conditions for research.

Snowballing was also utilized in the worst-case scenario of cancellations. In some instances, some interviewees themselves suggested a replacement from the same party or institutions, etc. In other cases, the researcher kindly asked for a substitute if possible. This effort has reduced the damage that a cancellation can cause.

Phone calls were particularly effective in Cyprus. Greek and Turkish Cypriot invitees were far more willing to accept the offer when the former e-mailed invitation was reminded through a direct call to follow up. When targeting an institution/party/organization if the first point of contact that has been invited declines the offer, I encourage researchers to give a call and explain that you are interested to interview someone that can speak on their behalf. Also,

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[2] Building Knowledge about Kosovo's statehood volume one.

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opening the conversation by giving details of other parties and institutions that has participated into the research project[3], can also prompt interest.

From a comparative perspective, it is important to mark that the researcher encountered more reluctance, especially regarding access and getting these international experts to answer the questions. The reluctance of the international expert to expound ascended with the perceived sensitivity of the issues at stake. The researcher's initial expectation of reaching an objective account of the processes—as suggested by some accounts—through the critique of international expert died out with the international experts' discreetness.

In other times my experience in attempting to gain access to political elites, particularly those outside expert circles, in Cyprus, Kosovo and Serbia has proven surprisingly distressful and attested Ostrander (1995) and Lancaster's (2017) claims that the literature often overemphasizes difficulties of gaining access to interviewees in post-conflict societies, while some more crucial issues remain unexplored. In the next section, the paper will address this rather less explored matters of establishing trust, getting participants to answer to questions, weighing reliability and the validity of the data, and the identity of the researcher.

3. Getting People Talk to You

Interview is, as Dexter (1970, p. 122) suggested in his classical book, "a two-person relationship, a conversation" and gaining access does not guarantee that the researcher will have a frank, in-depth and informative one. Following the advice, I started all interviews with less controversial issues and innocuous questions for getting the conversation flowing (see Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Nevertheless, as argued by McEvoy (2006, p. 185) in divided, conflict-ridden societies even the "seemingly straightforward questions can provoke adversarial, sectarian responses". Below section presents a list of issues encountered during fieldwork with a discussion on potential remedies.

3.1 Researcher's Terminology

At the very early stage of interviewing, in Nicosia, terminology presented itself as one of the main challenges. In conflict settings adversaries often develop competing narratives of past events that perpetuate/inform hostilities and plays crucial role in serving as a guidance as well as justification for the group behaviour. Such narratives often find their expression in a certain terminology. For instance, in official narratives, 1974 operation of Turkey in Cyprus is referred as *peace operation* by Turkish Cypriots and *Turkish invasion* by Greek Cypriots. Similarly, Turkish Cypriot official narratives refer Greek Cypriot dominated Republic of Cyprus as *Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus*. Furthermore, even some ordinary expressions may denote certain political meaning and position. During the course of an interview, interviewees are likely to adopt the terminology that is rooted in their understanding of the conflict and this, in fact, presents itself as data for a peace researcher. However, sloppy use of language and not well-thought terminology of the researcher may alienate the interviewee and damage the relationship. In the first rounds of interviews conducted as a rather an inexperienced researcher, I found myself falling into this trap. Having one's terminology corrected by an interviewee automatically creates an impression of a lack of sufficient knowledge about the case on the researcher's part, damages image of impartiality and reduces the quality of the conversation.

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[3] This act of encouragement was conducted without disclosing individual names of other interviewees to remain loyal to the pledge of anonymity.

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This does not mean that the researcher must adopt the same terminology to comfort the interviewee. Hence, one must gear up for challenges that are likely to arise from the use of terminology by careful examination of the actor's position and their associated terms in advance and adopt the most neutral language possible. Additionally, although the political spectrum of each side is overridden by this official narratives and terminology, one should not assume that all members of the same group subscribed to the same meaning of the past. Meaning that, for instance, not all that defines themselves as Turkish Cypriot will utilise the same terminology. Therefore, careful crafting of a neutral language will assist the researcher to avoid falling into this pitfall.

3.2 The Use of Recording Device

Using a tape recorder captures responses meticulously, prevent data loss, enables the researcher to have a more conversational quality dialogue with interviewees (See Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Richards, 1996) and makes it easier to take observational notes (Harvey, 2009). Also, Aberbach & Rockman (2002) and Mikecz (2012) reports, those agree to be recorded may quickly lost any inhibitions of being recorded. Hence, in the first round of interviews, which was conducted back in 2010-2011, with the consent of interviewees and by maintaining a commitment to interviewee anonymity, a digital voice recorder was used. Some questioned the purpose and some international civil servants refused me a permission to use direct quotes from the recorded data, but many respondents consented. Some instructed me to pause recording at various points, either when they were giving some sensitive information or when having a brief phone or face to face conversation with an interrupting third party. Yet most interviews went by smoothly with the presence of a recorded. Only one, a former high-ranking diplomat, who has been an influential figure in Cyprus peace process, directly reported that he will speak differently if the recording device is present. His bold and frank approach let one wondering whether others had also spoken differently under the presence of a recording device without a disclosure. Peabody et. al. (1990, p. 454) also warns that "the more sensitive and personalized the information, the less appropriate is the use of a tape recorder." Therefore, one must be aware of an unspoken yet potentially distorting or limiting impact of using a recording device when communicating sensitive matters. Here, good notetaking skills comes to rescue a peace researcher that desires to inscribe on sensitive matters, since avoiding a recording device increases the likelihood to capture free-spoken accounts.

3.3 Reluctance to Go Beyond Official Narratives

Every interviewee is different in their knowledge and readiness to articulate valued information. In post-conflict and divided societies, it is common that some interviewees display reluctance to go beyond the already known official narrative embraced by their side (see McEvoy, 2006), while some others might be characteristically more reticent than others. Although difficult to make broader generalizations, over the course of the interviewing process, I observed that the asymmetric power balance of adversaries, that is perceived strength-weakness of their position, played a unique role in influencing the way respondents answer questions. Meaning that more resistance, or tendency to stick to official narratives was displayed by Greek Cypriot interviewees and Serbian interviewees in Belgrade since, relatively speaking, these actors are having the upper hand in the conflict. Unexpectedly, I also found that international bureaucrats and civil servants are far stingier with their words. Interviewees serving for international missions are the only group that refused me a permission to use direct quotes from the

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interview or asked to see what I plan to use prior to publication. Members of international community that involves in conflict resolution are expected to sustain the delicate balance that is hard achieved amongst the former warring parties. Therefore, they are stingy with their words and often tend to follow the institutional narrative and the principle of neutrality. Doing otherwise may upset the delicate balance and erode the trust that the mediating parties already gained.

Still there are a few remedies to avoid gathering data that replicates publicly known official narratives. First and foremost, I found Berry (2002) and McEvoy's (2006) suggestion of probing particularly effective. Either when in desire to add more depth to the discussion or against the interviewee' tendency of reiterating the same old narrative or with reticent individuals, skilful employment of probing proved fruitful. In many instances, I presented a challenge with a follow up questions that outlines the opposing views by delegating responsibility to an outsource, such as a newspaper, or another party who does not shy away from speaking publicly. Such challenge often triggered a desire of interviewee to provide further clarification. Secondly, although prevailing tensions may draw a veil over, elite structures in post-conflict societies as well are composed of multiple and overlapping groups (Cochrane, 1998). Hence, as emphasized in the section over sampling, one should recognize the multiplicity of position and variations in understanding and interpreting the conflict. Adopting a broader definition of the term political elite, which composed of influential journalist, academics or civil society members, with less hesitance to criticise official narratives or discuss sensitive matters, will enrich the data set. Thirdly, starting interviews with those who are likely to share more helps researchers to get equipped with detailed knowledge prior to arduous encounters. Lastly, accept that no matter what technique adopted, it may not be possible to move beyond the official narratives with some, as these individuals may be intrinsic believer or even the source such narratives.

Since its entirely voluntary to accept being interviewed, it may come as a surprise that in rare occasions, some interviewees are utterly uninterested to disclose much. Much time was wasted over interviews that ended prematurely'. In one encounter, a high-ranking international civil servant declined to answer every single question he was asked, even the ones directly related to the tasks of the unit he was leading, by oddly declaring his lack of knowledge. In another encounter, a high-ranking politician skipped every single question he was asked in haste and asked to meet another time due lack of time. Such encounters are possible since busy individuals may not always plan their schedule in the best possible way. Yet the second meeting with the interviewee in question was no different than the first. Each round lasted approximately ten minutes, yet all persistent efforts of overcoming interviewee's reluctance to answer questions borne no fruit. In such cases, the best option is, as advised by Peabody et al. (1990, p. 454) is to "be professional and polite; thank your source and leave".

4. Positionality of the Researcher

Interviewing is a process of social interaction where positionality of the researcher -the way interviewee perceives the researcher and the researchers own identity traits- will have a certain impact on its conduct (see Cameron et al., 1992; Hermann, 2001; Herod, 1999; Höglund, 2011; McEvoy, 2006). Although there is no ultimate remedy, a reflective account of the researcher's positionality, which has only been exaggerated by the dynamics of conflict/post-conflict societies, might ease some of the negative consequences (Hermann, 2001). The researcher's positionality is a multifaced phenomenon (Sabot, 1999), yet in my encounters with elites in

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post-conflict societies, ethnic/national identity and relating insider-outsider issues has taken the lead. Much of the early debate on the insider-outsider dichotomy that weights advantages and disadvantages of each position, treats them as separate categories (Cohen & Aireli, 2011; Hermann, 2001; Merriam et. al., 2001). Yet, congruent to the rising critique in the literature (see Herod, 1999; Höglund, 2011), my fieldwork encounters provided evidence to support the debate on fluidity of researcher's positionality.

My ethnic origin/nationality was an introductory part of most interviews, where interviewees could not hide their curiosity to know the person interviewing them. As a young and female researcher carrying an ethnic affiliation to one of the adversaries under study, I predicted that my identity would have an impact on the interviews I conducted in Nicosia with Greek and Turkish Cypriots, yet not necessarily in Belgrade and Pristina. My surname makes it pretty clear for anyone who has an acquaintance with Turkish language that I am of Turkish origin. In northern Nicosia, my first name and my accent left no doubt to Turkish Cypriot respondents that I am a fellow Turkish Cypriot, with no need for further clarification. Whereas with other groups, I found myself giving a slightly different response to the very same question regarding my origin. I was compelled to distinguish myself as Turkish Cypriot, particularly as a response to questions posed by Greek Cypriot respondents whereas in Belgrade and Pristina, I simply defined myself as a Cypriot researcher.[4]

Even before meeting you, interviewees position themselves regarding their premade assumption of who you are (McEvoy, 2006). For instance, based on our shared ethnic affiliation some Turkish Cypriot interviewees assumed me to be on their side, evident from their use of non-verbal communication of hand gestures, facial expressions etc. Whereas some others had a desire situating me in their broader network by asking about my family background and unearthing any mutual acquaintances. Premade assumptions also impacted some Greek Cypriot interviewees' decision to accept meeting me. This was not simply a curiosity of meeting someone from other side of the divide, they were also expecting certain returns in the form of information. Many asked about my evaluations of authorities in the north, Turkish Cypriot's relations with Turkey and of Turkish settlers. Particularly those who did not to travel to north after opening of the check points in 2003 were especially curious. I even had one interviewee showing me a location in google maps in Kyrenia -a coastal city in the north-, asking whether I have ever been to that street and can tell them about the condition of the house that his family was forced to flee in 1974. While I was interviewing them, occasionally, it felt as if I was the interviewee.

In terms of data quality, particularly those with opposing views on reaching a federal settlement with Turkish Cypriots, exerted efforts to convince me that they take such stance due to numeric superiority of Greek Cypriots, not because they are xenophobic or see Turkish Cypriot as a threat. In one example, I vividly remember the effort of an opponent to the proposed federal arrangement between two communities to convince me of his sincerity by telling a lengthy story of how he fell in love with a Turkish Cypriot girl in his youth. The interviewees may have specific aims to "present themselves in a good light" (Ball, 1994, p. 97), so style and such excessive effort of looking good let me wonder whether some softened their tone intentionally because of begin interviewed by a "Turkish Cypriot" researcher.

In Belgrade and Pristina, my encounters have confirmed that the researcher does not need to share the same ethnic roots with either side of the divide to be place in certain categories.

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4   Herod (1999, p. 321) talks about the potential of researcher to "shift her/his positionality in a self-conscious way" in playing the social distances up or down with interviewees to manipulate the way interviewees perceive them.

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Political elites often perceive the rest of the world and their relations to it through the lenses of the conflict, and develop corresponding categories of sympathetic or unsupportive groups (Höglund, 2011, p. 124). Most interviewees that I encountered in Belgrade assumed that I am a citizen of Republic of Cyprus, being one of five EU member states that does not recognize Kosovo's independence. This added a layer of comfort to the way they responded to me. Whereas those in Pristina, further questioned my claim of Cypriotness in an act of understanding whether I am sympathetic or hostile to their position. If I declare that I am of Turkish origin, some draw parallels between the stories of Turkish Cypriots and themselves with an effort to gain my sympathy to their cause.

Being a peace researcher does not make one immune to having personal ideas, political sympathies and emotions. Though interviewees may often ascribe certain political belief/position base on researchers' ethnic/national affiliation, being biased does not solely originate from one's ethnic/national identity. For avoiding any personal traits to impact the research process, Becker (1967) advices on avoiding sentimentality and employing research techniques impartially, while Cochrane (1998, p. 2130) proposes adopting "an active process of self-reflection" as core aspect of the fieldwork. However, from the perspective of peace research, the issue of bias is an ordinary part of the process. Unlike those who takes side in conflict, bias of peace researcher is a normative one. "[A]s opposed to that of the strategist", peace researcher cares about the interest of both parties in conflict (Høivik, 1983, p. 267). Meaning that, similar to that of a medical scientist who is "in favor of health rather than disease", peace researcher is unashamedly in favour of peace (Galtung, 1985, p. 144). Hence, remaining loyal to the true aim of the discipline minimise the impact of any bias that may originate from personal traits.

5. Subjectivity of Collected Data

Literature on elite interviewing widely acknowledges the unreliability of the method in establishing the truth since conversations with elites renowned for providing interviewees' subjective account of the subject under scrutiny (Berry, 2002; Fujii, 2010; Richards, 1996). As Berry (2002, p. 680) rightfully argues "it is [in fact] not the obligation of a subject to be objective and to tell us the truth". The degree of subjectivity intensifies in a conflict situation where adversaries cling on their mutually exclusive beliefs. Therefore, it is likely that most being interviewed will share their insights, their understanding of the conflict or persistently attempt to prove moral, legal and/or political rightfulness of their position.

Data that is naturally rich in contradictory answers and gathers conflicting perspectives may seem to render the analysis stage challenging and complicated. Yet, regardless of the subject matter, collecting conflicting and contradictory data enriches the research findings and prevents a narrow conclusion.

Rich, in depth, subjective perceptions collected through elite interviewing is a strong tool to gather and analyse the extent of adversary parties' divergent perceptions and informs the researcher about discrepancies, misunderstanding, misinterpretations in these perceptions. In this sense, subjectivity presents itself as data.

However, there is a difference between subjective perceptions and distorted information. But how can one recognize if the interviewee is talking about his/her subjective perception or distorts information? Intensive background research about the case and an interview sample that disclose the extend of heterogeneity of opinions will enable the researcher to check out any inconsistencies and omissions within and between interviews (also see Rubin & Rubin,

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2005, p. 73). Additionally, probing through trying to pick up inconsistencies in a single interview by rephrasing the same question differently on a matter that one suspects of any distortion and utilising multiple sources for a crosscheck are suggestions that are abound in the literature (Berry, 2002; Harvey, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

6. Conclusions

This article provides a reflective account of the researcher's encounters with political elites to provide some guidance for those that plans to utilise elite interviewing to gather data on post-conflict societies. The article has revealed that characteristics of post-conflict societies either pose challenges specific to the context or intensified the issues that are already ascribed to the method of elite interviewing. Particularly the issue of political instability and accompanying volatility of elite systems, the researcher's terminology, the use of recording device, some elite's reluctance to go beyond official accounts of the conflict and positionality of the researcher can impinge on the process and the data.

Researchers need to take volatility of the post-conflict societies and its impact on exacerbating the change in elite systems into consideration. Adopting a broad definition of a term political elite and mapping out social structures, actors, and changing elite systems over time to identify and gather data from different segments of society is likely to improve the quality of the data set. In doing so, collected data will capture heterogeneity of political perceptions and marginalised voices.

For the issues related to sampling and gaining access, partial remedy can be found in combined use of judgemental and snowballing sampling and issuing direct calls in addition to standard written invitations. Judgemental sampling through online search provides some basis, while snowballing assist to supplement the recruitments wherever volatility of the post-conflict societies exacerbated the change in elite systems, and renders it difficult to track down and recruit potential interviewees. Snowballing is also highly efficient in identifying and accessing marginalised segments of societies.

Intensive pre-interview preparation is also essential to gain familiarity with actors, positions, and the language/ terminology in use. Using a carefully crafted neutral language and avoiding the use of recording device that will increase the chances of having interviewees opening up on sensitive topics and gathering data does not replicate the information that is already public. Also, some issue rising from positionality of the researcher can be mitigated by meticulous application of adopted methods that requires peace researcher to remaining devoted to the aim of understanding conflict for seeking ways to build peace.

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