

Elite interview, urban tourism governance and post-disaster recovery: Evidence from post-earthquake Christchurch, New Zealand

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Abstract

Despite the long tradition of fieldwork and qualitative research practice in tourism studies, the reporting of methodological notes and reflections is limited in the literature. Many excellent methodological remarks in research reports and graduate theses find few outlets in academic journals and those few contributions that are eventually published often emphasize the novelty of the method rather than crucial aspects such as positionality and embeddedness. This is further evident in urban studies with regards to post-disaster recovery research. This article seeks to fill the current gap in the field by providing a reflective methodological account on fieldwork and elite interviews in post-earthquake Christchurch, New Zealand. It does so by implementing a framework addressing key points in the elite interview process, with emphasis on access to fieldwork sites, power relations, positionality, rapport and ethical issues. The manuscript presents aspects of fieldwork, spatiality and power relations that tend to be overlooked in the literature. Albeit being context-specific, it is argued that the evidence from this study can also have relevance to the understanding of fieldwork in other post-disaster and tourism contexts.

Keywords: elite interview, fieldwork, governance, qualitative methodology, post-disaster; urban tourism

Introduction

Since the pioneering work by Riley and Love (2000) and the identification of ‘moments’ in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), research in tourism has addressed relevant methodological aspects on the issues and challenges in conducting sound phenomenological fieldwork (Hall, 2010e; Nunkoo, 2018; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Tourism scholars have provided insightful observations and remarks on the positionality of researchers and their engagement with fieldwork, particularly on topics such as work inequality, sexual exploitation and indigenous communities (Chok, 2010; Leopold, 2010; Sanders-McDonagh, 2016). Despite the long tradition of fieldwork in tourism studies, and in cognate disciplines such as anthropology, ecology, geography, management, and sociology, there is only limited reflection on the role of fieldwork in tourism in academic journals. The majority of insightful methodological remarks in doctoral dissertations are never published (Hall, 2010e, 2018), and the many handbooks on research methods for students and early career researchers tend to emphasize research techniques rather than on the methodological challenges of conducting fieldwork (Richards & Munsters, 2010; Smith, 2010; Veal, 2011).

Elite interview refers to the targeting and access to expert participants (Littig, 2009) that “are likely to have had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public” (Richards, 1996, p. 199). Whilst there is a degree of acknowledgment on issues associated with interviewing managers and decision-makers in tourism policy and planning (Stevenson, Airey, & Miller, 2008; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bramwell, 1999), research on tourism policy-making based on elite interviews is still scant and “often ... conducted without an appreciation of the specific constraints ... to the research process” (Darbi & Hall, 2014, pp. 832-833). There are substantial methodological and ethical aspects on elite interview and fieldwork in tourism that are far from being fully addressed (Hall, 2018; Khoo-Lattimore, 2018). This is especially evident in tourism policy and planning and governance (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011a, 2011b; Hall, 2010b, 2010c). Interviewing elite sources in government provides some significant advantages in understanding policy and decision-making processes as compared to non-elites (Prayoga, 2017). As insiders, elite participants can enhance data validity (Delaney, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and are likely to grant the researcher access to confidential information (Schoenberger, 1991). Moreover, elites are aware of their role and influence in the social, political and economic spheres and appreciate the role of research better than non-elites (Robson, 2008).

One of the major issues with conducting elite interviews concerns gaining access to prospective participants (Costa & Kiss, 2011). This is especially evident in post-disaster and crisis contexts, where the climate of uncertainty, sense of urgency, issues of accountability and sensitivity over actions and

policies, and the top-down approach of recovery authorities (Hall, Malinen, Nilakant, Vosslander, Walker & Wordsworth, 2016; Johnson & Olshansky, 2013) narrows the decision-making process to a handful of prominent managers and politicians. Oftentimes, the nature of the information sought and the confidentiality on insurance claims and economically relevant projects “may mean that the best policy stories are often left untold” (Hall & Wilson, 2011, p. 134). Additionally, the discretion of chief executives and government ministers can withhold crucial policy information from the public (Amore, Hall, & Jenkins, 2017), thus making it difficult to ascertain recovery and redevelopment processes as they unfold (Amore, 2019). Nevertheless, this should not prevent researchers from approaching prospective elite interviewees. On the contrary, it is vital to engage and reflect on the post-disaster policy environment to shed light on relations and forms of power between the *researcher* and the *researched* (Darbi & Hall, 2014).

This article examines the processes of recruitment of and data collection from elite interviewees as part of a wider study on the governance and metagovernance of urban tourism spaces in Christchurch, New Zealand, following the 2010-2011 Canterbury earthquakes (Amore, 2017). The aim is to provide a reflective and critical appraisal of the methodological solutions adopted during interviews with prominent local and national stakeholders involved with recovery projects for leisure, culture and tourism in the Christchurch city centre. The manuscript consists of five sections. The first section pinpoints the relevant literature and the dimensions at the heart of the methodological reflection. The second section illustrates the preparation and implementation of the research strategy in post-earthquake Christchurch, while the third section provides a reflection on the challenges and precautions with elite interview throughout the fieldwork phase of the research. The last section provides a summary of the manuscript and notes the constraints and the opportunities of the research strategy deployed for this study in light of the current academic debate on qualitative research in tourism policy and planning.

Current trends in elite interview

Elite interviews target senior management, politicians and corporate heads or others (Darbi & Hall, 2014; Harvey, 2011) who are “either key decision-makers and/or had a major influence” (Mikecz, 2012, p. 485). Elite interview is a distinctive feature in qualitative research that is often associated with research in policy-making, corporate governance and urban studies (Cochrane, 1998; Thomas, 1993; Woods, 1998) that presents a series of key methodological challenges that the researcher can

overcome by mixing positionality (Calgano, 2010), ingenuity and reflexivity (Darbi & Hall, 2014). According to Darbi and Hall (2014, p. 832) “the conduct of elite interviews suggests that there are qualitatively different aspects in interviewing ‘up’ as compared to interviewing ‘across’ or ‘down’”. These include access to fieldwork, power relations, positionality, rapport and ethical issues (see Darbi & Hall, 2014 for details).

The accessibility and availability of participants represents a key methodological challenge in elite interview. Usually, institutional barriers and commitments hinder access to elite participants (Hertz & Imber, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Robson, 2008; Shenton & Hayter, 2004). Even when interviewed, elite participants may be unwilling to disclose sensitive information and leave potentially key questions unanswered. Researchers agree that the use of gatekeepers can overcome barriers and ease the recruitment and openness of selected interviewees (Mikecz, 2012; Stephens & Dimond, 2019; Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2002). However, when the option of gatekeepers is unfeasible, it is up to the researcher to build a directory of contacts and roles of prospective elite interviewees (Lilleker, 2003; Robson, 2008). Subsequently, the researcher has to carefully draft the fieldwork strategy, including the identification of relevant profiles, the right timing of the interview stage (Costa & Kiss, 2011; Desmond, 2004; McDowell, 1998) and the right questions to ask (Leech, 2002).

One of the main issues with elite interviews concerns the embedded power relations between the researcher and the participants. According to Darbi and Hall (2014, p. 241), “the power balance is always tilted in favour of the researched”, with the likelihood of the researcher successfully completing their fieldwork often being heavily dependent on the willingness of elite participants to be involved in a study (Hall, 2010c). Such dependency is often expanded in some jurisdictions where ethics policies allow or even encourage participants to revise verbatim copies of transcripts or be able to withdraw their interview from a study at any time. Accounts from previous research indicates that elite participants may seek to dominate the interview, thus jeopardizing the validity and reliability of the information collected (Kezar, 2003; Leech, 2002; Lilleker, 2003). The positionality of the researcher can potentially help overcome the positional asymmetry that may arise during the interview. The emphasis on gaining insider’s knowledge can ease a more open rapport with the interviewee that, ultimately, favours the researcher (Sabot, 1999; Welch et al., 2002). The latter condition is likely to occur when the positionality of the researcher as a stranger grants a certain degree of distance and objectivity (Simmel, 1950). The researcher should conceive the relationship with elite participants as fluid and complex and move beyond the static and asymmetric misconception of power. This approach

reiterates the Lukesian notion of power as a two-way process (Lukes, 2005) in which the researcher and elite participants exercise some influence over each other.

The schedule of an interview with a prospective elite participant implies “that the interviewer at least retains some power” (Darbi & Hall, 2014, p. 841). However, it is during the actual interview that the researcher must succeed in developing a trustworthy rapport with the participants. Some challenges are likely to arise: for instance, elite participants may pose the official position of the organization rather than their personal view or judgement when asked a ‘hard’ question (Darbi & Hall, 2014). Even when the researcher is able to gain a degree of openness and adhere to participant confidentiality protocols, the statements of high-ranked politicians and managers can be easily identified (Tansey, 2007). The reporting and triangulation of findings through case studies methodologies (Yin, 2009) can help in overcoming this issue. In addition, the researcher may withhold institutional affiliations or positions of elite participants, a practice that is common in governance and spatial planning studies (see Healey, de Magalhaes, Madanipour, & Pendlebury, 2003).

To overcome these barriers, the researcher should first dedicate time and resources to prepare and be able to show in-depth knowledgeability of the research topic (Darbi & Hall, 2014) and delve deep into the background of prospective participants (Costa & Kiss, 2011; Mikecz, 2012). Moreover, the researcher should utilise their institutional affiliations and attire to give participants a perception of professionalism and expertise in the field (Costa & Kiss, 2011; Welch et al., 2002). It is also important to develop a quasi-colloquial rapport during the interview (Jennings, 2005; Smith, 2010), be flexible with interview location (Darbi & Hall, 2014; Mikecz, 2012), and leave more sensitive questions towards the end of the interview process (Mikecz, 2012; Robson, 2008). Lastly, the researcher should adopt a rigid protocol when recording the interviews and make sure the identity of elite participants is kept confidential throughout the different stages of fieldwork.

The final aspect of elite interview concerns ethics and ethical issues. Academic research in most English-speaking countries requires mandatory adherence to the guidelines and regulations of university ethics committees (Hall, 2010a, 2010c). The latter can force the researcher to amend interview outlines to avoid any legal action from the participants. Moreover, the researcher must be cautious in defining the clearance conditions from elite participants. In fact, it is likely that elite participants may detract from recorded statements when given the possibility to re-read the transcript (Kezar, 2003). On the other hand, researchers “have to walk a fine line between behaviours that lead to easier access to quality information and those that border on the unethical” (Darbi & Hall, 2014, p. 842). This includes pausing the record device to gain information off-record (Gillen, 2010).

Fieldwork strategy in a post-disaster context

Christchurch is the second biggest city of New Zealand after Auckland and the largest urban centre in the South Island. Before the earthquakes, the city was home to more than a third of the people residing in the South Island and contributed to two-thirds of the island's GDP (CDC, 2010). The earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 severely affected the city of Christchurch and the wider Canterbury region (Hall, Malinen, Vosslander, & Wordsworth, 2016; Parker & Steenkamp, 2012), particularly in the tourism sector (Orchiston, Vargo, & Seville, 2012, 2013). The rebuild of Christchurch and of its city centre has been very controversial, with many episodes of political tension between the national government, local authorities, private stakeholders and the residents (Amore et al., 2017; Brand & Nicholson, 2016; Johnson & Mamula-Seadon, 2014; Johnston, 2014). As Johnson and Olshansky (2013) highlight, decision-making in post-earthquake rebuild in Christchurch saw a strong, top-down approach to the recovery of the city, with the establishment of the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) in April 2011. This resulted in a climate in which the voice of relevant tourism stakeholders was manipulated or left unheard (Amore, 2020; Amore et al., 2017). From the early stages of research, therefore, it was clear that the politically charged context of post-earthquake Christchurch would influence the formulation of research objectives and, in turn, the approach to fieldwork. The exclusion of the public in the key phases of design, funding and implementation of projects precluded participant observation. Moreover, formal research could only commence at the end of 2013 following ethics approval, while two electoral campaigns (October 2013 and October 2014) required the recruitment and interview of elite participants to take place over a relatively short period of time outside of election periods (April to November 2015).

The aim of the research was to identify and understand the forms of power with regards to planning and governance for urban tourism spaces in contexts facing recovery from natural disasters. Three research objectives were identified for the study, namely: to analyse land-use policies for urban tourism spaces in pre-and-post-earthquake Christchurch; to examine the environmental and institutional factors that influenced the decision-making process and implementation of tourism-relevant redevelopment projects in the Christchurch city centre and; to analyse the urban regeneration policies adopted in the Christchurch city centre before and after the earthquakes (Amore, 2017). The rationale behind the aim and research objectives was threefold: first, the study of post-earthquake Christchurch and its recovery as a tourist city represented an important empirical subject that needed to be analysed in detail in order to fill the social theory 'gap' in tourism knowledge

(Tribe, 2004). Second, Christchurch provided the ideal context to address the aim and objectives of the study, as the research began around the same time preliminary agreements on the redevelopment projects in the Christchurch city centre were unveiled. Finally, the city of Christchurch had been the object of research in the field of tourism in the years before the earthquakes (e.g. Hall, 2008; Pearce, 2011; Thorns, 1997), but the published material consisted of content and policy analysis from reports and development plans of the city centre. The need for direct qualitative data from elite interviews was justified in response to the increasing body of knowledge in post-disaster in urban contexts at the time of fieldwork (Gotham & Greenberg, 2014; Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Olshansky, 2010). Unlike other studies on post-earthquake governance and recovery of Christchurch (Cretney, 2017; Johnston, 2014), the methodology designed for this study explicitly addressed the power dynamics with the elite interview process.

One of the major issues concerned the necessity to narrow the units of research to a feasible number of projects, stakeholders and episodes of governance. As a result research became focused on the recovery of central Christchurch and to adopt a comparative case study methodology on three tourism-relevant site-based projects: the Arts Centre of Christchurch, the Performing Arts Precinct and Town Hall recovery and the new rugby stadium. Finally, it was important to set a temporal framework of reference common to all the projects while keeping other stages of the recovery outside the study. It was therefore decided to implement the data collection and analysis only to the period until September 2014. The case study methodology was replicated for each of the projects. Figure 1 illustrates the case study protocol developed for the case studies in question.

>>INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE<<

A second issue was the definition of the ideal interview protocol. On the one hand, it was important for the researcher to minimize the likely power unbalances with elite interviewees. On the other hand, it was important to allow participants explaining complex topics while granting a high degree of reciprocity between the researcher and the participants throughout the interview process (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Jennings, 2005). Semi-structured interviews proved to be a valuable solution, as they enabled the researcher to gain valuable information whilst establishing a conversation-like style that would have eased participants' attitude towards the researcher (Jennings, 2005). The definition *ex ante* of an indicative number of participants to reach saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) is a key aspect in qualitative interview research, as the latter "is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothesis statements" (Mason, 2010, p. 1). However, when it comes to interviewing political and

economic elites as stakeholders in decision-making, “the number of participants who may be interviewed is likely to be relatively small” (Yuksel et al., 1999, p. 352).

A final aspect concerned the conditions to reach data saturation. Rather than looking at a predetermined number of participants to interview, the research strategy adopted for this study sought to gather together as many participants as possible and determine the achievement of saturation as fieldwork went on. For the purpose of the research a map of relevant stakeholders was developed ahead of the interview stage (Yuksel et al., 1999). A total of 177 possible participants were identified, of which 47 were regarded as a priority. The decision was to contact first those prospective participants that were directly involved with the identified redevelopment projects.

Reflections from elite interviews in post-earthquake Christchurch

A series of contextual factors eased the access to elite participants in post-earthquake Christchurch. The first one was tied to the result of the local elections in 2013, with the incumbent Mayor of Christchurch, Bob Parker, announcing his decision not to run for a third term (O'Callaghan, 2013). The election of independent mayoral candidate Lianne Dalziel and nine new councillors eased accessibility to local politicians who had been outspoken against Parker and his administration. Around the same time, CERA, the national government and the Christchurch City Council (CCC) had announced a cost-sharing agreement for the delivery of the anchor projects included in the Christchurch Central Recovery Plan (CCRP). It was during this period that the lead researcher finalized the draft of the research proposal, with the identification of the aforementioned site-based recovery projects.

Gaining access

Timing for the fieldwork was based on insights from previous research on elite interview methodology (Bochaton & Lefebvre, 2010; Ward & Jones, 1999), with the interviews originally scheduled to take place at the beginning of 2015. However, contextual circumstances like the restructuring of CERA under the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) and the resignation of key figures from CERA and the Christchurch Central Development Unit (CCDU) (CCDU, 2015; Davison, 2014; Kirk & Fulton, 2014) postponed the interview stage to April 2015. With hindsight, these shifts were crucial in accessing participants and getting a successful interview turnout. Moreover, the lead researcher took

advantage of the progressive demise of CERA and of the CCDU to get in contact with officers and managers that had worked or were in contact with recovery authorities during key episodes of governance.

With hindsight, right timing was crucial in gaining access with six elite participants. Access to one elite respondent was possible thanks to a local reporter and personal friend. The latter reassured the participant on the purpose of the study and even provided the researcher with his mobile contact. Another respondent was about to move to another job in Wellington the month following the interview and proved to be rather informative and opinionated. Another participant, instead, had just begun working for a new organization when contacted, yet he was willing to be interviewed with regards to his previous role. Finally, there were three local and national politicians who were rather vocal at the time of fieldwork and showed interest and willingness to take part to the study once they secured their seat in the Christchurch City Council and the New Zealand Parliament.

Getting in contact and interviewing the participants was a mix of luck and pragmatic use of gatekeepers (Costa & Kiss, 2011; Darbi & Hall, 2014; McDowell, 1998). Throughout the fieldwork, informal introductions were forwarded through both influential (Herod, 1999; Welch et al., 2002) and personal acquaintances outside the University. In some circumstances, the affiliation of the lead researcher to the local university played an important role (Darbi & Hall, 2014), as several participants were alumni or collaborated with the institution on an occasional basis. One of these respondents had been a classmate and friend of the local MP for Christchurch Central during their years at the local university. Similarly, three respondents had ongoing collaborations with the university and were approached by the lead researcher when on campus. Finally, two relevant local advocates and gatekeepers were approached via a personal acquaintance based at the same university.

An important aspect of the interview recruitment process concerned the prioritization of participants to contact during the fieldwork. As mentioned above, getting access to respondents involved with more than one of the recovery projects was paramount in terms of data saturation. Access to these respondents appeared to be a success compared with similar research based on elite interviews (Yuksel et al., 1999). Figure 2 reports the participants by stakeholder group. Overall, forty respondents agreed to record the meeting, while twelve other participants only took part in the first round of informal encounters. As the fieldwork went on, it emerged that at least five of the selected participants would not be available to allocate reasonable time to the interview due to their duties. Nonetheless, it was possible to meet with individuals that were directly involved in key decision-

making phases or worked closely in designing and implementing the recovery projects addressed in the study.

>>INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE<<

Power relations and positionality

The conduct of good quality interviews is strongly dependent on interpersonal skills, experience, and the positionality of the researcher (Bailey, 2008; Darbi & Hall, 2014). The positionality of the lead researcher as a foreigner was stressed in some of the conversations with elite participants. This was the case with one interview on the recovery legislation and its effects on the demolition of heritage listed buildings.

[*Researcher*] From an Italian point of view I'm probably the last person to ask if glass is better than brick or masonry. But with respect to this, do you believe that the way the CERA Act, particularly Sections 38 to 41, and the orders in Council for the definition of "safe" buildings listed for demolition were to some extent used in a way to ease demolition?

[*Respondent*] Definitely. Because I know insurance companies who had private houses demolished, that were heritage listed, because using Section 38, so this is a long time after the earthquakes, outside the central city, and because the insurance companies didn't want to repair a heritage building and the owners didn't care either, Section 38 was used to... So, there was definitely a lot of collusion, I think. If you wanted something knocked down, it was very easy with the CERA, with the Act, to do that.

In another case, the nationality of the lead researcher was brought during the conversation on restoration and recovery of heritage buildings.

[*Respondent*] You mentioned [name of person], before, who was the engineer, the tutor here isn't he? Is he from Milan too?

[*Researcher*] He's from Pavia, it's fifty kilometres from Milan.

[*Respondent*] Have you talked to him about these things? [...] I mean, coming from a country that has a lot of stone buildings, brick buildings? Stone buildings more, isn't it? I'm trying to

remember. It was 1986 when I was in Italy. You know, there'd be more of an understanding of how to deal with these buildings from there than there would be from our engineers.

Finally, there were moments in which respondents sought to shed light to the lead researcher by comparing the New Zealand sport politics with those of Italy.

[*Respondent*] So, the question of public welfare to professional sports is a major question for New Zealand. And the reason why it is so important in New Zealand is because it is important to us as a question of what is the role of welfare for professional sports? Because we don't have the population to get the TV rights that other countries around the world would give. So, maybe, in Italy the top football team would have TV rights and they would make hundreds of millions of dollars from these TV rights.

The participation rate of targeted respondents turned out to be rather high, with only two cases of interviews being explicitly declined. This underpins Sabot's (1999) remark on eased access to foreign elites and the respondents' willingness to allocate time for the interview. Moreover, the interaction with a foreign researcher gave scope for the inclusion of odd, yet controversial, questions off the interview schedule. These ranged from mountain-biking and travel tips to Italy to comments on food and sports.

Finally, the background of the lead researcher as a young scholar in urban planning with work experience as political analyst proved to be decisive in establishing a rapport with elite participants (Darbi & Hall, 2014) and thus gain credibility. This was particularly evident with participants with backgrounds in urban planning and destination management.

[*Researcher*] Yeah exactly. I mean I also talked to other people and their feedback has been very instrumental. But all these elements that, especially the ones that you are providing, are justifying the point of my dissertation

[*Respondent*] I have done a similar exercise by recounting of the works since the early 70s until now. [...] In 1975 and 1976 I prepared the indicative plan for Canterbury and then through the late 1970s that was the implementation of that. I was involved in the future distribution plan of the city. And that led to new ideas of urban design and strategy. So it is quite interesting because, again, I am probably one of the few survivors who has been there and been virtually involved all the way through.

In considering the role and influence of elites in power structures and modes of governance (Healey, 2006; Hunter, 1993; Mills, 2000; Williams, 2012), the literature recommends the adoption of flexible, semi-structured interview schedules that allow researchers to gain specific knowledge from privileged interviewees (Bailey, 2008; Williams, 2012). With respect to the interview outline, the decision was to opt for open-ended questions “in order to gain more spontaneous opinions and to avoid the potential bias from restricting responses to the researcher’s own fixed categories” (Yuksel et al., 1999, p. 355). In developing the outline for the case studies, it was important to schedule the contentious topics towards the end of the interview (Williams, 2012) and allow participants to make a personal, conclusive statement on the recovery projects addressed in the research (Tansey, 2007). Moreover, it was acknowledged that not all participants would have the same knowledge on key decision-making phases for the three projects. Pre-interview preparation (Mikecz, 2012), therefore, proved to be crucial to arrange the outline of interviews for each participant.

The fieldwork experience in post-earthquake Christchurch reflects previous observations on interviews as an “historically, politically and contextually bound” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 695) research method embodying “the complexity, uniqueness and indeterminateness of one-to-one human interaction” (Scheurich, 1995, p. 241). As Yuksel et al. (1999, p. 352) further suggest, interviews like these “are an opinion collecting technique” to gain findings from individuals. That being said, it should be noted that the extracts from the interviews were not always at “the forefront of the normal consciousness of the respondent” (Ryan, 2005, p. 9), as some of the questions dealt with confidential information on personal or professional aspects. It was up to the research team to look at the many layers of *truth* between the overt and the covert dimension of decision-making (Hall, 2010c; Ryan, 2005; Ryan & Hall, 2001).

Research situatedness and reflexivity (Hall, 2004; Jensen & Glasmeier, 2009) proved to be crucial throughout the fieldwork. A major concern was to avoid spontaneous judgement to comments and opinions collected during the fieldwork phase of the study in order to conduct objective sound research. Occasionally, the main researcher found himself in the middle of situations where confidential information had to be kept in accordance with the rules of the University and not be brought into conversation with colleagues and friends. In a couple of circumstances, participants openly asked the interviewer to comment on specific episodes of governance in post-earthquake Christchurch. In response, the interviewer excused himself from giving any comment or judgement to reinforce his positionality as researcher and outsider.

Throughout the fieldwork, the lead researcher found himself embedded in a dynamic process of interrelationships between organizations and participants, with the latter often being in a dominant position (Darbi & Hall, 2014). As Darbi and Hall (2014) further observe, elite participants tend to check and eventually amend the content of the transcription. To overcome this problem, clauses that would permit participants to ask for the transcription of the interview were not explicitly inserted in the consent forms although respondent rights were noted as per ethics requirements. Additionally, during the interviews, the lead researcher sought to keep a conversational tone with elite participants a way to minimize power relations between the *researcher* and the *researched*.

Developing rapport

During the fieldwork, it was crucial to develop a rapport with participants and gain their trust (Darbi & Hall, 2014). This was achieved by reviewing local media information, social media profiles and informal introductory meetings. During the interviews, the researcher noticed how participants developed their thoughts in answering the questions and the positionality behind their statements. Key discriminants were their affiliation with the organizations at the time of research and the use of a recording device during the conversation (Gillen, 2010). It emerged that some participants were particularly open to disclose personal thoughts off the record when they were no longer working for or about to leave the organization. Conversely, those participants that had still ties with the key authorities around the projects deployed a distinctive public relations style in interviews that was hard to overcome. In a couple of occasions, the unwillingness to meet or grant interviews was explicit.

Reflexivity was also crucial in developing a rapport with the participants. Given the research topic, it was important to allow participants to have a look at the interview outline and assure them on the confidentiality and the ethical integrity of the interviews. The aim was to give participants the option to read the interview outline beforehand and arrange an official recording meeting in accordance with their schedule in the forthcoming week. Nevertheless, there were four circumstances where participants would accept to do the interview immediately or the very next day. In these circumstances, the lead researcher was able to be flexible and schedule meetings at the convenience of participants.

The experience in dealing with elite participants improved as the fieldwork went on. There were moments during the interviews where the sequencing of questions had to be flexible in order to get

the opportunity to access confidential details that emerged during the conversation. The researcher was aware of the dynamic relationship with elite participants and the tendency of researchers to become the 'supplicant' in the process (Hughes & Cormode, 1998). It was therefore important to play the role of the good listener (Welch et al., 2002) and show genuine interest on the conversation, especially when the respondents went off topic during the interview.

[Respondent] ... Because we design buildings, but buildings influence us. And cities are defined by the buildings. If you think of Auckland, you think of the Sky Tower. Think of Sydney it's the Harbour Bridge. If it's Paris it's the Eiffel Tower. If it's New York it's the Empire State Building. And those buildings, they influence us. If you think of Italy, the major... the main towns in Italy, they... we design those buildings, but they influence us. So, you have to have the community involved to know this. Because that's who we are. We can't have a government group of people that say "This is what you are going to have" I mean, this is not North Korea. [Laughs]

[Researcher] It's not, I am afraid it is not [Laugh]. So, further on... what is going to be the likely impact of the project in terms of leisure and tourism for the new city?

Ethics

In observance of local ethical research practice, the researcher reminded participants that the extracts of the study would be embargoed for at least one year. Moreover, the researcher justified in writing the use of a recording device to overcome language barriers and guarantee the accuracy of the information collected. There were nevertheless moments where the participants asked to pause the recording to provide confidential information. The literature highlights the importance of off the record information (Gillen, 2010), and the conversational nature of the interviews made participants comfortable and generous with their insights and experiences throughout the interview process. During the first round of informal interviews, there were situations where respondents showed enthusiasm over the research and expressed interest on the outcome of the study. Conversely, there were moments where selected participants raised eyebrows about the study. The researcher had therefore to clarify the genuine scholarly intent of the research to gain trust.

Interviewing elite participants in post-earthquake Christchurch had important privacy implications. Keeping the identity of participants confidential was therefore crucial. Issues emerged, however,

when participants were individuals with a highly exposed social identity. Moreover, the University Human Ethics Committee requested the interview schedule as a mandatory condition of ethics' clearance. The researchers argued that this request was *de facto* an infringement to the privacy of participants as it would have enabled the Committee members to identify some of the potential respondents from just reading the outline of the questions. To overcome this issue, a note was included on the applications sent to the Committee members which specified that:

The following outline of the unstructured interview is a summary of the topics that the researcher might ask participants to answer. The questions do not all apply to the participants identified for the interviews as they vary depending on the participant's role in the organization/institution involved in the recovery of [project]. This process is meant to guarantee the confidentiality of participants, as some of the questions are addressed to a very limited and easily identifiable group of people.

To reinforce the adherence to the recommendations of the Human Ethics Committee, the research team agreed that the final report of the research would be placed under a two-year embargo before publication on the University of Canterbury archives. Several aspects of the project remained confidential within the research group, including scheduled appointments with elite participants. The lead researcher, in particular, committed to never mention the name of participants during the recordings and to store records in encrypted folders and locked storage units.

Conclusion

This article has provided a reflection on an episode of fieldwork and qualitative research practice in tourism studies. As noted in the introduction, the reporting of methodological notes is much rarer in tourism studies than it is in other disciplines such as geography. Nevertheless, such information can generate significant insights into the real-world nature of research practices and the challenges that are faced. It was the purpose of this article to provide "an important and very worthwhile tool for learning, reflection, and the building of better knowledge for tourism planning and policy" (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011, p. 6) specific with research methodology design in post-disaster contexts.

The present example of elite interviews occurred within an urban and post-disaster context which created specific challenges. However, as noted, reflexivity, the development of appropriate interview protocols, and the identification of gatekeepers all assisted in the data gathering process. As such

substantial attention was given to working through the different spaces of fieldwork (Hall, 2010a) and, in particular, understanding the political and power context in which interviews were situated. An important insight from the research process was the value that was gained by the lead researcher being an “outsider” to the study location which helped provide a perceived neutral position in the interview process.

It is the belief of the authors that “tourism and tourism research is inextricably linked to issues of politics” (Hall, 2010c, p. 39). The recommendation is for research to acknowledge the influence and role of the embedded policy environment in shaping hegemonic, covert, and overt forms of power. The latter, in particular, determine the positionality of the researcher in the fieldwork and the rapport with prospective elite respondents. This paper, therefore, recommends scholars to go beyond “the dominance of rationalist and apolitical conceptualisations of tourism-related decision-making” (Hall, 2010c, p. 41). The fieldwork reflections from this study acknowledge the importance of researcher subjectivity in the understanding, access, and rapport with elite interviewees. The lead researcher’s background in spatial planning and their positionality as a foreigner not directly affected by the consequences of the earthquakes also helped provide a degree of distance and objectivity in drafting the research and in selecting the participants to contact. This helped with establishing rapport with elite interviewees that participated in the study. Most likely, interviewees did not perceive biases when asked sensitive questions or probed their argument with complementary findings.

Although each research moment is unique, the provision of reflexive accounts is an important element in the understanding of the different spaces of fieldwork and the research process not only by individual students of tourism but also by those who are preparing themselves to enter the field for the first time. The reflections from this study encompass “methodological variabilities that are not amenable to overly generalised solutions, but how we respond to them will affect whether we open up or limit the scope of tourism inquiry.” (Hall, 2010a, p. 9). Sound preparation in terms of understanding relevant documentation and context, clear processes to identify interviewees, the development of clear ethical and interview protocols, and retaining a positive relationship with gatekeepers can all assist in the generation of rich data for the writing up of research.

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