

Say My Name?

Anonymity or Not in Elite Interviewing

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Say my name? Anonymity or not in elite interviewing

Abstract:

This article discusses anonymizing elite interviewees. Based on our experiences with interviewing professional elites and ultra-elites in different research projects, we describe how the types of conflicts involving analysis and publication change when interviewees are not promised anonymity. We discuss how contextualizing the elite positions of anonymized interviewees becomes increasingly difficult in interviews with persons who hold prestigious positions of authority and are interviewed in their official capacity. Masking interviewees can create conflicts with regard to the researcher's presentation of results, the transparency of the research and the ability of interviewees to talk back. We show how working with non-anonymized interviewees – and even using excerpts from interviews on public radio – can be an option in qualitative research. However, non-anonymized interviews with elites should be considered only in some instances and may seriously hamper the validity of the material in other cases.

Introduction

“I'm only member of a VL-group [informal business leader forum]. That cannot have any interest to you”, was the initial response from a corporate chairman, when asked to participate in an interview. The Chairman was in fact amongst the most well-connected in the Danish elite network (Larsen and Ellersgaard, 2017) and held more than 20 positions on boards of top corporations, private equity firms, state owned enterprises, universities, foundations and public committees. He was replying to an email, inviting him for an interview ‘about how key individuals use and reflect on networks, career, power and influence... to understand how influence and

networks are perceived on the inside... [and] in practice'. In the end, the Chairman agreed to participate. He insisted that he did not have any 'network', which he seemed to understand as 'nepotism'. Any type of important connections - through family, university or corporation, mentioned as settings in which important ties were formed by *all* other interviewees - was rejected. At one point, when we asked about the importance of him living in *the* most elite neighborhood in the country, the Chairman replied: "As a matter of fact, all around the street, totally ordinary people are living in many different occupations. All the way from public school teachers...". This statement is equivalent to a British corporate leader saying the same about their neighbors in Kensington or Chelsea or an American describing the other residents at their condominium on the most exclusive addresses of the Upper East Side. This experience of an interviewee constructing the social reality in an almost absurd way was rare among the other 35 interviews with ultra-elites. After the interview, we discussed how this type of reluctant interviewee would never have said something like this in public. He would probably have become a public laughing-stock for being out of touch with 'ordinary people'. While the aim of our interviews were not, as it would have if done by an investigative journalist, to hold the interviewees accountable for privilege, anonymity in this case perhaps helped the interviewee construct a narrative specific to the research interview setting which would be close to meaningless in other social situations. Further, it raised another important issue: how to contextualize his rejections of being privileged with his actual positions in society without making him recognizable; a completely anonymized version of the interview would be close to meaningless to analyze.

The Chairman was one of six interviewees, who had requested an anonymized interview (31 ultra-elite members were interviewed by name). When another anonymous interview with a top lawyer followed the same pattern as with the chairman, it started some reflections on how interviewing in public in some instances might change interview dynamics, in particular put other limitations on how reluctant ultra-elite interviewees could construct legitimate narratives in the interview setting.

The first and third author, who had made the interviews with members of the ultra-elite, discussed these experiences with the second author, who had interviewed professional elites under anonymity in interviews where negotiations about anonymity had become a key issue for the most prominent interviewees. The second

author had an experience equivalent to the one described above in which a high ranking executive had blamed employees for being unwilling to fulfill a task, when asked about a structural shortcoming in the organization. A statement unlikely to be made in public and which made it difficult for the interviewer to learn more about the problem in question. We realized that the types of conflict that arises from ‘anonymity’ in qualitative elite interviewing needed more systematic methodological reflections and that our experiences could be of value to others. In particular, our methodological experience of how anonymity seems to become increasingly conflictual, as well as problematic, when one tries to contextualize and understand the position-taking of interviewees holding the most prestigious positions in society.

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Researchers have discussed the potentials of ‘studying up’ (Nader, 1972), with particular focus on how to get access to (see e.g. Empson, 2017; Goldstein, 2002; Harrington, 2017; Rice, 2010) and how to specifically deal with interviewing prestigious people including the need to be both polite and extremely well-prepared (Ostrander, 1993; Zuckerman, 1972). The power imbalance, even of the ultra-elite towards a junior researcher, is never a one-way hierarchical relation as power is not transferred directly to the interview space (Smith, 2006), but rather a complex relationship embedded between individuals, organisations and institutions. However, this only ‘heightens demands for transparency in the research process’ (Conti and O’Neil, 2007: 65) and the need to provide context of the interview (Thuesen, 2011). Thus researching elites requires particular strategies (Harvey, 2011) with particular focus on positionality of elites and the researcher (Mason-Bish, 2019). The elite researcher is thus placed in a dilemma, how to both account for context of each case and complex power relations and at the same time avoid offending individuals in powerful positions, who presumably have a lot to lose. However, this dilemma has not led to more systematic discussions on how to deal with confidentiality and anonymity in interviews with elites. While masking the identity of interviewees is a well-established convention - albeit under varying practices, which generally involves using pseudonyms and changing identifiable details such as occupation, location or demographic characteristics (Moore, 2012) - in qualitative research, this practice in now being discussed (Guenther, 2009; Lahman et al., 2015). Some researchers suggest strategies of how to deal with anonymity without losing contextuality (Saunders et al., 2015), while others maintain that the ethical

principle of anonymity leads to problems about contextualization and dissemination of findings (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011). Jerolmack and Murphy (2017) argues that masking is an obstacle to constructing
75 cumulative social science, because researchers can neither attempt to replicate nor revisit the sites and individuals described in previous studies. Thus using names can increase transparency in qualitative research (Reyes, 2018).

Anonymity may be a goal that researchers are not always able to reach in practical research, especially as removing context to avoid exposing identities runs at risk to reduce meaning (van den Hoonaard, 2003).
80 Interviewees who know one another increases the risk of unintended breaches in confidentiality (Farquharson, 2005; Tolich, 2004). Lancaster (2017) describes the balancing act of protecting confidentiality when interviewing elites within a well-connected policy field in which interviewees often speak about or refer to each other, with also leads to reflexive self-censoring by interviewees and the researcher removing elements that could expose the identity of interviewees. Furthermore, using verbatim quotations increases the risk of breach of anonymity
85 (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006), which may become particularly pertinent when interviewing ultra-elites about and by whom much is known and plenty of written material already exists. Reyes (2018) distinguishes between anonymizing primary participants and those who speak to us in an official capacity in which understanding of that capacity is of key importance to understand the positionality of the interviewee. Interviewees speaking in their official capacity may still hold on to the official line and ask for something not to be reported even while
90 being promised confidentiality (Duke, 2002).

While the above mentioned challenges to the conventions of confidentiality requires researchers to be more reflexive about their practices of masking, it remains unclear how the masking of interviewees changes the complex power relation of the elite interview. By using our experiences from studies interviewing elites, mostly in their official capacity, this paper attempts to qualify the reflection of researchers considering if and how to
95 mask interviewees. To do this, we first distinguish between professional elites, interviewed about their practices as primary participants; and professional elites and ultra-elites in prestigious positions speaking in their official capacities. Then we recount our experiences with the types of conflicts arising when interviewing professional elite confidentially and ultra-elites both confidentially and with full disclosure of names and affiliations. We

argue that conflicts about the handling of confidentiality seem to be less of an issue when interviewing some
100 professional elites, while confidentiality and the politics of what can be disclosed seems to become more
conflictual and contested in anonymized interviews with ultra-elites and professional elite persons holding
executive positions. We end the paper by discussing the implications and potential of unmasking elite
interviewees.

Professional elites and ultra-elites

105 Elites have been defined as ‘those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource’ (Khan,
2012: 362). When interviewing elites, however, the amount of resources and not least the prominence of elite
individuals and the organizations she is affiliated with, both within their own field and generally, is of
importance when selecting strategies for anonymity. Therefore, we distinguish between professional elites and
ultra elites (see also Stephens, 2007). Key to both groups is that they through their elevated position in society
110 and access to resources reverse the traditional power asymmetry of elite interviews (Puwar 1997) and create
more complex power relations in the interview setting (Smith 2006).

By *professional elites* we refer to individuals who hold positions near the top of at least one societal hierarchy, for
instance wealth or expertise, often tied to having educational credentials giving access to a high-status
profession and having a well-paid job associated with moving up the career ladder within the profession. These
115 groups may be characterized as ‘elite professionals’, the ‘elite’ or the ‘upper class’ in the contemporary class
structure (see e.g. Empson 2017; Savage et al., 2013; Toft, 2018). These professional elites are ‘in the know’
(Mikecz, 2012: 482) and have the linguistic and cultural resources, and the expertise, to pose a strong challenge
to the power balance of the interview (Richards, 1996). Their professional position is not, however, mainly
dependent on their public image. Often, they are likely not to have ‘a public image’ outside of their own
120 professional circles and colleagues and in this sense, they do not act in an official capacity on behalf of their
organization. As these professionals in total compose somewhere between the top one percent and the top five
percent of the societal hierarchy, they live a privileged life in relative anonymity. Thus, their prestige is primarily

associated with their profession and not their person or organization. Professional elites will rarely be known by their name, but mainly by characteristics ascribed to their role, position or job. While the reputation of their organization among customers, clients or patients is of course of key concern to them, disclosing the organizational identity is often not key to contextualizing statements nor something that could disclose the identity of the professional elite individual. Thus, these elite professionals can often easily be anonymized, as key traits needed to contextualize the interviewees (e.g. as general practitioners) are shared with plenty of others. In contrast, when interviewing the ultra-elite contextualization will often lead to a strong possibility of recognition from others. The term *ultra-elite* is used by Harriet Zuckerman (1972, p. 159) to describe ‘a thin layer of people who exhibit especially great influence, authority, or power, and who generally have the highest prestige within what is a prestigious collectivity to begin with’. In Zuckerman’s case: Nobel laureates in science. This definition is akin to those defined as elites as top leaders, often interlocked in social networks, of key societal organizations (see e.g. Mills 1956; Scott 2003). In contrast to the professional elite, a person holding an ultra-elite position either by their own prestige or by holding a position of authority in a prestigious organization has a strong strategic interest in how their field is portrayed through the research conducted by the researcher. Furthermore, their narratives of the field have their position and trajectory through the field as point of departure. While it may be possible to conceal the identity of the interviewee, promising not to disclose their organizational affiliation will lead to an extremely decontextualized description of the interviewee. Furthermore, ultra-elites more often speak in an official capacity of, or are extremely close associated with, a certain organization or institution.

To give two examples on conflicts related to masking elite individuals: when we interviewed general practitioners (professional elite), it was possible to create an anonymized identity of a general practitioner (GP) as ‘Tom was a GP in a provincial town with many years’ experience’ and still portray his dispositions and position accurately. However, when we wanted to describe the constraints and opportunities provided to a member of the ultra-elite such as the President of the Danish Union of Metalworkers, anonymizing him without seriously jeopardizing the reader’s ability to contextualize the narratives would be close to impossible. First, describing the size of the union would be necessary. This would leave very few other possible sources.

Furthermore, any mention of the unique position and strategy of the Danish Union of Metalworkers in the Danish political economy (the most pragmatic, well-connected and centre-right leaning union (Ibsen, Ellersgaard, and Larsen, 2021)), would disclose the identity of the interviewee to everyone with a more than superficial knowledge of Danish labour market policies. This information, or using quotes describing strategies unique to this particular organization based on their particular position, would also de facto disclose the identity. Not using the information would greatly limit our ability to use the material and to tie the narratives provided to the organizational position of the interviewee in the power structure. Thus, each interview with ultra-elites in particular should be treated as a particular case (in the case selection logic of Small 2009), in which position taking should be understood in relation to their particular position in the power structure.

Empirical experiences with anonymizing interviews with elite groups

Based on the reflections above, we wish to use our methodological experiences from different research projects to analyze the problems of anonymity in elite populations. In doing so, this section will highlight different conflicts and challenges when interviewing people from Danish elite populations based on three cases:

- 1) Healthy Weight Behaviour for Toddlers in Families of Diverse Ethnic Background (2012-2015). A qualitative sociological investigation of early interventions on childhood overweight, which included 10 interviews with general practitioners (professional elite because of their expertise). Interviewees were anonymized.
- 2) Replacement of the use of animal models in research (2017-2018). A qualitative sociological investigation of barriers and facilitators for replacing animal models with non-animal models in scientific research, which included interviews with nine scientists (professional elite because of their expertise) and three executives from public universities and private companies (professional elite because of their authority and power position). Interviewees were anonymized.

3) Networks and careers for leaders in the core of the Danish elite network (2018-9). A mixed method exploration of how elite networks provide strategic opportunities and structural restraints which included 37 interviews of the most central executives and chairmen across business, business associations, unions, state administration, politics and academia (ultra-elites because of their position of authority, broadly recognized prestige and due to them speaking in official capacities). 32 were not-anonymized, six anonymized at their own request.

The following descriptions will focus on conflicts and challenges that emerged during the research phases recruitment; interviews; analysis, and; publication.

Interviews with professional elites defined by expertise

General practitioners

While investigating early interventions to prevent childhood obesity, the second author interviewed ten general practitioners (GPs) about their understanding of childhood overweight and their professional abilities to help prevent it. GPs hold a key position in preventive interventions. The group is at the same time often a hard-to-reach population and recruitment was also in this case challenging (Ditlevsen, 2015; Ditlevsen, Lund, and Lassen 2018; Ditlevsen, Reventlow, and Nielsen, 2016). This led to a change of the research design (described in detail in Ditlevsen, 2015), including a shortening of interviews.

During interviews, of which some were as short as 13-20 minutes, two aspects were notable: 1) a special style of answering became evident and 2) the content of the interview were sometimes contested. Many GPs answered briefly, determined and in closing sentences. Few of them shared their reflections during the interviews, but went straight to conclusive statements. For a professional group used to having exclusive expertise on a field (health and disease) and used to ascribing diagnoses under time constraint (consultations lasts 10 minutes), this may not be very surprising. Nevertheless, it resulted in interview situations quite unlike other interview situations, and in interviews in which it was difficult for the interviewer to get statements elaborated or debated. GPs were interviewed in their capacity as experts and asked about their perceptions of

a health issue and the role of general practice. As a group with exclusive expertise as well as a strong professional identity as medical doctors, some GPs expressed strong opinions on the correct disciplinary approach to a problem and this meant that the content of the interview could be conflictual, yet informative. 200 Some of them opposed the social scientific approach expressed in the interview questions, or questioned whether early interventions on childhood overweight was a job for GPs. In one background interview, the researcher was told that the research design was not addressing the real problem and ought to be changed. Some, but not all, GPs apparently meant that the questions asked were irrelevant or even misrepresenting of their professional work. Being an elite group with professional authority, most GPs had no problem expressing 205 their opinion and assessment (Thuesen, 2011). The GPs were polite and friendly and the interviews were conducted in a pleasant atmosphere, yet interviews with this professional elite were characterized by some conflicts over control of the content of them. GPs did not necessarily accept the sociologist researcher's agenda setting nor her attempts to facilitate an explorative semi-structured interview (see also Stephens, 2007). In this case, the interviewees were not offered an opportunity to read the transcripts of interviews or to 210 comment on the analysis; and neither of them asked about it. The results of the research (articles and PhD thesis) were sent to the interviewees after research was concluded, but no GPs commented or gave feedback.

Scientists

While conducting a sociological investigation of barriers and facilitators for replacing animal models with non- 215 animal models in scientific research, the second author interviewed scientists working in a public university and in two private companies. These scientists were interviewed because of their expertise within different branches of animal experiments and scientific research in medicine, human biology, pharmacology and veterinary science. All scientists were recruited through a key person at their workplace, most often an executive, who in some cases had the power to decide whether lower ranking employees should prioritize participation. This set-up was 220 only possible because we had influential associates as gatekeepers, who granted access to an otherwise relatively closed world. Again, the participants are to be considered a hard-to-reach group. Anonymity and a guarantee

that the interviewees could see and accept the final report of the results before publication was a requirement for participation, according to the gatekeepers particularly among scientists employed in private companies.

The interviewer's authority was less challenged during these interviews, compared to the interviews with GPs.

225 Still, the premise of the interview, which was defined by the 3R principle, an international ethical guideline for animal studies, that less use of animal models is a goal which should structure scientific research practices, were contested in some interviews, mostly in the public research environment. Few privately employed researchers voiced disapproval of the goal. Most of them accepted it, apparently because it was part of company politics and the strong hierarchical structure in companies did not facilitate opposition (cf. Nielsen et al., 2017). A key
230 aspect of the interviews was that interviewees shared their expert knowledge with the interviewer, and as thus the power was balanced with the interviewer facilitating the interview and the interviewee having the expertise to explain how things worked. All the scientists were given the opportunity to review the quotes used in the final report as well as all mentions of them. None of them asked for changes and no conflicts over the research output occurred.

235 *Interviews with professional elite defined by authority and power position*

In the Replacement project three executives from a public university and a private company were also interviewed. This group of people is categorized as elite because of the authority they hold in the organization in which they are employed. They all hold superior positions, but none were in the top of the hierarchical and large organizations. This group of people have more prestigious and powerful positions than the two groups
240 mentioned above. Whereas the scientists are recognized as having expertise within certain scientific fields, the executives hold positions that make them recognizable for a wider public through their job titles. The interviewed executives all represent their firm or organization, even though they do not regularly appear in the wider public. Access to these interviewees were also granted through gatekeepers with influence and authority and anonymity and control over interviews were granted before the interviews were agreed upon.

245 Only three interviewees belong to this group. Despite the small number of participants, we include the case here in order to illustrate the specific conflicts we have experienced when interviewing elites defined by

authority and power position and at the same time promising anonymity. We do not think that the number of participants per se determines the usefulness of qualitative research, but one should of course be careful not to generalize the cases.

250 In one interview situation one executive acted impatiently and signaled to have a busy schedule waiting ahead, which created a somewhat tense ambience through some parts of the interview. This interviewee was unwilling to discuss potential problems or organizational barriers in relation to the research topic. Further, this interviewee also corrected the interviewer for what he saw as misinterpretations of what scientists under his authority experienced and of the interview subject. This interviewee was interviewed together with another
255 executive, who was his subordinate in the organizational hierarchy, and who showed a great deal of interest in the interview topic and who answered all interview questions willingly. This second interviewee abstained from interfering in tense situations in the interview. The double interview was required by the interviewees before agreeing to participate. Since recruitment was difficult and their participation was essential for the research, the requirement was met despite it being different from the original design.

260 The other interview situation was not conflictual. Before the interview started, the interviewee asked several questions about data safety in relation to storage of interview recording and transcript, and required to see transcript and to accept the final report before publication. After control was granted, the interviewee engaged in the interview in an informative and enthusiastic manner.

After the analysis of all interviews, the interviewees in this group received the parts of the report in which they
265 appeared, so they could fact check it. Two of the executives asked for changes in some of the analytical points drawn from their interviews and in the quotes reproduced in the report. The researcher rewrote smaller parts of the analysis to clarify the text in accordance with the comments from the interviewees and, at first, rejected to make changes in interview extracts. The executives initially declined to accept the revised text, and the final wording was negotiated in mail correspondences during a couple of weeks. At one point, the conflict over the
270 analysis heated and one participant threatened to withdraw from the project unless the text was changed so that the interviewee felt it expressed the correct message. One interviewee required control over the outcome with reference to the anonymity, the interviewee had been promised. This interviewee (rightly) stated to be

recognizable in the report and therefore would the quote be transferable to this person and the organization represented. This led to the conflict over the outcome and it also led to a simplified presentation of interviewees (hard anonymization), who were masked as A, B etc., and only described with reference to their job (scientist/executive) and sector (public/private) in the final report.

These interviewees were clearly used to 'being the boss' and to have the authority to decide on the action of others. Further, as highly placed associates, they are likely to feel as representatives of the firm and may have incorporated the 'corporate identity' in their interpretations of the world (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2005; Schultz, 2014). While the two former groups, the professional elites defined by their expertise, have an interest in positioning themselves as experts within a certain field, these executives' interests are the interest of their organization, which, in this case, is to be represented as ethically responsible, competent and proactive.

Interviews with ultra elite

The interviewees from the ultra-elite were, as part of a mixed-method approach, all identified as holding positions in the core of the Danish elite networks through social network analysis (Larsen and Ellersgaard, 2017). Furthermore, we strived to identify as diverse perspectives within this group, leading us to select elites with different careers paths (as identified through sequence analysis in Ellersgaard et al., 2019) and positions across the Danish field of power (as identified through multiple correspondence analysis, see Lunding, Ellersgaard, and Larsen 2021). All 37 interviewees are current or former executives or chairmen within business (12), business associations (8), Unions (6), Science and education (5), State administration (3) or politics (3)¹. Interviewees were recruited through emails and follow up phone calls with the premise, that 'we do not expect interviews to be anonymous'. However, if interviewees declined², we replied with an option to be being interviewed in confidentiality and before interview we stressed to all participants, that we could handle both participation and quotes with confidentiality. In total six of the 37 interviews are confidential. Reasons for

¹ Nine of the 37 interviewees have had executive positions in top organisations in more than one sector

² In total 27 declined to participate. In particular interviewees from the national political scene, of whom eight of nine refused, were reluctant to participate. Also around half of the corporate leaders and senior civil servants originally approached did not choose to participate.

295 anonymity included discretion towards clients, unease with how statements could be misinterpreted and just a general wish ‘to fly under the public radar’. Early in the process we landed an agreement with the Danish national public radio station *Radio24syv* to bring excerpts from the interviews, along with our preliminary analysis, in a weekly radio program called *Magtens Stemmer* [The Voices of Power] produced and hosted by us. During interviews, the position of us as researchers were often negotiated by interviewees. Our mapping of the

300 core of the Danish elite network (disseminated in Larsen, Ellersgaard, and Bernsen, 2015) were already known by - or at least rang a bell with - most interviewees, since they had been named in it. Since part of our work also challenges elite legitimacy, we could not assume to be able to take the role as neutral researchers in the eye of interviewees. Rather, they would likely see us as critical public intellectuals or something similar. The public nature of the interview, both due to our previous research and the fact that excerpt were being used on public

305 radio created conflicts around the content of the interviews. Often these evolved around wording with interviewees taking particular issue with the use of the term ‘power’, interpreted as coercion, preferring to describe themselves as having ‘influence’. Another point emphasized by many interviewees was to challenge the importance of ‘networks’, interpreted as nepotism, focusing on how recruitment to position were based solely on merits and qualifications. In this way the conflictual interactions between researcher and interviewee

310 highlighted the ways in which elites can account (Scott and Lyman, 1968) for their power. However, with a couple of exceptions, interviewees were far from hostile or rejective. Their skills, honed by many years in boardrooms, in managing to create compromises between different interests were evident in interviews. Most very likeable, friendly and much more appreciative of our research than we would have expected. Conditions of confidentiality were clarified at the start of the interview. As were the fact that interviews primarily were

315 research focused and that any part could always be treated in confidentiality. Naturally, the use of interviews for radio only happened with clear permission from interviewees and request for keeping parts of the interview ‘off the record’ were always respected. That led some interviewees to underline, that we would get the corporate line and that they would ‘change their wording... or not come with hypotheses about mechanisms which [they have], but cannot prove and hence would be reluctant to publicize’ as one interviewee put it. In these cases, we

320 underlined the option to ‘turn off the microphone’ either during the interview or if they choose afterwards to

avoid interviewees withholding information that could be relevant for our negotiation of how elite networks were navigated. In total, some information was asked to remain confidential in 14 of the 31 public interviews. In more than half of these cases this was due to interviewees fielding negative statements towards others in, or in the vicinity of, the core of the elite network. Other reasons for having parts of the interview in confidentiality 325 included speaking about their family, criticizing their own organization or legal issues. Our impression was that most interviewees, were used to journalistic interviews from their official capacity, and had little trouble negotiating the line between being on the record and giving information for background only.

While analysis of the interviews was still ongoing, interviews were analyzed and published for a wider audience on the radio program and podcast. This has led to some negotiations about publication of content. As the radio 330 program runs for 55 minutes we are able to quote interviewees with a lot of context and we have received no push-back on our use of the material. Before interviews, a couple of interviewees have had their public relations officers curate some of our quotes, but otherwise we have managed to use the material, usually through sending audio clips to interviewees for approval, if requested. Several interviewees have praised our willingness to air their critique of our analysis or tweeted links to the program, suggesting that they do not feel completely 335 misrepresented. However, when we used a quote, actually aired already, in an opinion piece in a newspaper, a business association leader approached us - on Twitter - to tell of his dissatisfaction with being framed in this way. He saw this as a borderline breach of our agreement, suggesting that an informal understanding on what the material could be used for was in place. Thus, even if interviews are public, interviewees have expectations of how they are used and framed³. Overall, our experience was that while ultra-elite interviewees were perhaps 340 inclined to give us the corporate line, as experienced actors in the press, they were very skilled in taking on their public persona in interviews.

To summarize, the challenges and conflict arising from interviewing elites, in particular with regard to confidentiality, differs according to the position of authority and prestige of elites, see Table 1.

³ After clarifying the quote on our twitter account and expressing that we tried to make a more general point in the opinion piece and not frame the interviewee, we were left with the impression that the interviewee no longer held any grudges about our use of the material.

<Table 1 about here please>

While the types of conflicts with professional elites defined by their expertise often revolved around the content of the interview during the interview situation, conflicts with this small group of elite persons with positions of authority was over the content of the analysis and publication. However, when ultra-elites were interviewed without the promise of anonymity, these tensions played out in the interview setting, often in an illumination and productive manner. While this led to conflict over interview content, these conflicts also highlighted key aspects in how elites legitimize their positions of power. Letting interviewees stand by what they say with their name changed and de-escalated conflicts about analysis and publication, because their role, close to that of the subject of a journalistic interview, was much more familiar to ultra-elites.

Discussion and conclusion

These experiences with interviewing professional elites and ultra-elites suggest that researchers and review boards should not automatically regard anonymized interviews as the only ethically sound solution. As one moves to the very apex of society, masking individuals becomes increasingly difficult. In particular as elites are often embedded in complex power relations, meaning that masking elites could lead to decontextualizing their statements to an extent in which the reader cannot access to validity of the interview material. Further, the promise of anonymity can be very hard to fulfill completely and, as we have seen, can lead to conflicts between interviewees and researchers over the results of the interviews. While masking participants by only referring to them as a number (hard anonymization) may hamper the contextualization of interviews, soft anonymization (name and personal details 'blurred') may be useless in the case of the ultra-elite and professional elites defined by authority, because these participants would still be recognizable. For some elite groups anonymity is almost

an illusion. Promising anonymity in some research interviews may therefore create tension. The relevant question here is therefore – what is gained by the promise of anonymity?

370 This question is also a question of scientific assumptions. We tend to have an idea that granting participants anonymity will let them speak freely as ‘their true self’; to reveal their real ‘backstage’ rather than the polished ‘frontstage’. Nevertheless, as already Goffman (1990) pointed out: while we may perform a role in accordance with norms and expectations, there is no authentic self behind the presentation of oneself. While anonymizing interviewees may lessen the pressure of and protecting interviewees from social control, a phenomenological
375 idea that we can reach the person as she really is, do not take into consideration how we construct identities in a complex interplay with the context. The interview situation is in itself an interpellation (Althusser, 1992), in which the participant is subjectivized as a specific position in society. In the case of elite populations, the participant is interpellated as ‘elite’ because of her professional position in a field in which the person has invested in. This investment is subjectivization and the personal identity is likely to be interwoven with the
380 identity of a discipline or a profession or with the identity of a firm or a position (Butler, 2011; Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2005; Schultz, 2014). When interviewing people who act in official capacities in particular, this assumption that anonymity will give access to something that was otherwise hidden, do seem naïve. Our experiences, at least, show how the representation of the organization is still an issue despite anonymity: Scientist and GPs were interviewed because of their expertise, but did in general speak as individuals, while
385 executives and the ultra-elite experienced themselves as representing their organization in interviews. Working with non-anonymized interviews, in particular when use in broader research dissemination such as our radio program, restrict researchers to get ‘the corporate line’. However, it is also exactly in this social identity ultra-elites perform their power.

Furthermore, non-anonymity may be a strategy to better let the reader understand the context and flag the
390 ‘attitudinal fallacy’ (cf. Jerolmack and Khan, 2014) and distinguish between ‘what people say’ and ‘what people do’. As experienced by Khan and Jerolmack (2013) elites tend to downplay their privilege and focus on their merits. In the case of the anonymized corporate chairman described in the introduction, the ability to name and situate their narratives can be a valuable tool to validate data. However, while anonymous interviewees may

deal with uncomfortable questions by delivering various forms of evasive or sidestepping talk, the non-
395 anonymized interviewee may instead choose to answer the same questions with silence. Unmasking informants
will not only change what they tell the researcher, but also how they deal with issues they prefer not to talk
about. While we should not expect access to an authentic self in any interview situation, we here only discuss
the potentials of non-anonymized interviews with certain elite groups in certain circumstances. For most other
groups in society anonymization may serve a highly important purpose of protection of interview participants
400 from social control, negative peer-feedback, potential media interest or sanctions from executives or society.
While the executive, who blamed his subordinates for an organizational shortcoming, described in the
introduction, may use anonymity to avoid a question, it likely that his subordinates would never have talked
about their experiences if they had not been anonymized.

One important question is: would our participants have participated if it had not been for the anonymity
405 promised? While this is obviously difficult to determine, the willingness of the ultra-elite to participate in
interviews by their name is notable. This group is recognizable for many more people than the professional
elites are, and this could be a sign that it is possible to recruit elite interviewees without anonymity, at least in
the case of a high-trust society with tradition for low power distance such as Denmark. Unlike Naidu (2018)
we, in neither project, encountered individuals insisting on being named as a condition for participating,
410 something which would open yet more ethical and methodological dilemmas for the researcher.

As ultra-elites and some parts of the professional elites are used to deal with the press in their official capacity,
qualitative elite researchers could consider more openness towards journalistic methods (see also Nikunen et
al., 2019). Duneier (2001) discusses the difference between ethnographers' use of pseudonyms and journalists'
insistence on using real names as a way of validating information and allowing the field to speak back to the
415 researcher. By naming interviewees, they also get the opportunity to speak up or letting journalist or other
scholars take contact to interviewees increasing opportunities for reproducibility and revisits (Jerolmack and
Murphy, 2017) and thus challenge researchers allowing for a much more open co-creation of knowledge. While
confidentiality and anonymity is often used as the research standard based on ethical considerations, others
argue that automatic anonymization and imposing of confidentiality is not always in the best interest of

420 interviewee and should thus be subject of ethical reflection from the researcher and not just applied automatically (Macleod and Mnyaka, 2018). Furthermore, the protection of privacy is tied to a perception of relative powerlessness of the research subjects and are thus not as applicable when interviewing elites (Alvesalo-Kuusi and Whyte, 2018). Elite interviewees are able to speak back, as our empirical experiences show us, and giving them a name may actually give them a better possibility of doing so. As Guenther (2009, p. 413) argues
425 'because names are powerful, choosing to use – or to alter – them is also an act of power'. Extending this, the ability to disclose sensitive information, and to choose whether elite informants can attach their status to their responses further add to the power plays of elite interviews.

Our argument here is not that the higher interviewees move up the ladder with regard to prestige or authority, the more one should consider doing non-anonymized interviews. There may be many cases in which ultra-elite
430 interviewees are extremely sensitive and in which the validity of the material would be greatly enhanced by being confidential. If one, for instance, strives to achieve a phenomenological analysis of how being in positions of power and public scrutiny takes emotional or personal tolls, it is obvious that some interviewees would prefer to keep some experiences outside of public scrutiny, and perhaps even more so the more well-known interviewees were. Rather we hope that our experiences may allow other researchers to more carefully discuss
435 the potentials and pitfalls of given name and voice to interviewees.

Lastly, we would like to make two points on anonymity and the role of sociological research on elites.

First, the potential to disseminate findings to a larger public - and thus take on the endeavor of public sociology (Burawoy, 2005) - increases strongly by being able to put a name (and maybe even a face and a *voice*) on power. In elite studies, such as the one which served as the foundation for our interviews with ultra-elites (Larsen,
440 Ellersgaard, and Bernsen, 2015), using quantitative methods putting names on individuals while mapping their career, social position and networks is standard practice. The experiences of the first and third author from doing live research on radio by playing extracts from interviews were that it made the material come to life in ways we could not have done in writing. The laughs, insecurities, the provincial dialect or extremely confident and eloquent upper class prose which is usually lost in transcription (Collins et al., 2019; Myers and
445 Lampropoulou, 2016) come to life on tape.

Second, it can add to transparency to show how researchers are positioned vis-à-vis the elites. Having important and powerful people taking time off their schedule, in our experience, creates a sense of gratitude and sympathy towards interviewees. Lancaster (2017, p. 101) points out the researcher enters a highly contested field, in which ‘respecting participants’ concerns about the use of particular data, or choosing not to report sensitive issues, can maintain and perpetuate the very power relationships participants may fear or seek to uphold.’ Entering a position as confidant of elites can limit the critical ability of the researcher, but more importantly privileges the researcher towards the public and other scholars by leaving the researcher as the only one ‘in the know’. Thus naming interviewees diminish the researcher’s gatekeeping power (Lahman et al., 2015). While this is of course true for all qualitative researchers, the heightened stakes in the power games with elite interviewees makes the social ties created through confidentiality much more problematic.

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Table 1: Summary of types of conflicts experienced in elite interviews

Informants	GPs	Scientists	Executives*	Power elites
Type of elite	Professional (expertise)	Professional (expertise)	Professional (authority)	Ultra (prestige + authority)
Promised anonymity	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Hard-to-reach group	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Types of conflicts over interview content	Challenging professional legitimacy	Few contested the premise of the research question	Productive exchanges on content/contest of content	Productive exchanges on power and influence narratives
Accept interviewer as agenda setter	No	Yes	Yes/No	Yes
Types of conflicts over analysis	None	None	Representation of interview contested	None
Types of conflicts over publication	None	None	None/dissemination of analysis contested with reference to anonymity	None, but indicates when speaking 'off the record'.
Promised control over output	No	Yes	Yes	No

*This group consists of only three persons, who acted differently in interviews