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Studying Elite Professionals in Transnational Settings

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How should we study hyper-mobile elites such as the transnational professionals featured in this volume? Little has been written about the methodological challenges attendant upon such research. All the usual difficulties of studying elites apply, including the physical remoteness of gated communities and private islands, the prevalence of gatekeepers, and other obstacles to data gathering (Mikecz 2012; Ostrander 1993). But when the subject of research includes work taking place across numerous sites around the globe, the difficulties of gathering data are multiplied by distance and complexity. This chapter proposes ethnography as a practical solution to many of these challenges.

Indeed, ethnography may be one of the only practical methods for producing knowledge about elite professionals. Quantitative data notoriously underrepresent the wealthy and powerful (Davies et al. 2008); this is a major limitation even in datasets such as the US Survey of Consumer Finances, which oversample at the top of the socioeconomic spectrum (Budria et al. 2002; Kennickell 2009). By the same token, archival material – such as public records or corporate documents – is sometimes tainted by efforts to sanitize or even deliberately distort professionals’ decisions and actions (Davies 2001).

One of the privileges elites enjoy is the ability to exempt themselves from surveillance in the form of data collection efforts. This may be motivated by concerns about privacy, or the desire to avoid exposure or embarrassment (Gilding 2010). Among professionals in particular, the desire for discretion can be linked to the knowledge-control issues discussed by Seabrooke and Henriksen (editors of this volume). In addition to those problems, it can be difficult as a practical matter to persuade individuals who bill hundreds of Euros per hour to spend time answering research questions.

Given these constraints on gathering quantitative data from elites, it is surprising to find evidence that some – including busy professionals – are willing to engage face-to-face with social scientists (Gilding 2010; Thomas 1993). This may be the result of a kind of Hawthorne effect.
(Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939): the attention provided by the social scientist renders implicit homage to the professionals’ status and expertise. Being acknowledged publicly as someone worthy of scientific attention is a form of flattery. Thus, if research is to be conducted at all on these groups – if we are to answer anthropologist Laura Nader’s (1972) call to “study up” the status ladder – then it may need to be done through the face-to-face encounters characteristic of ethnographic research.

The following sections elaborate on this claim. First, the chapter defines what is meant by the terms “professional elite” and “ethnography,” since both are the subject of some scholarly disagreement. Next, the chapter details how the study of transnational professionals amplifies many of the challenges present in other research on elites, including practical matters, self-presentation, and ethics. Finally, the chapter argues for what can be gained analytically from an ethnographic approach to these professionals.

What Is a Professional Elite?

“Elite” is an undertheorized term (Harvey 2011; Richards 1996), making the notion of a “professional elite” even more difficult to define. McDowell argued that it is a “class-specific” (1998: 2135) phenomenon, involving not only a particular set of skills, knowledge, and prestige but a set of cultural practices and norms transmitted through families, networks, and exclusive educational institutions. McDowell’s study, which focused on merchant bankers in the City of London, highlights a tension in the application of the term “professional elite” in an international setting: while elite status is often the product of local meanings and social structures (and can be unstable over time), the emergence of transnational fields such as finance has elevated certain status markers to the global level. The hyper-mobility (Beaverstock et al. 2004) of contemporary elites has contributed to the diffusion of a system of valuation in which being an Oxbridge graduate, or a Swiss banker, carries positive significance virtually everywhere.

As an emergent classification, the term “professional elite” casts a wide net, broad enough to include celebrities, economists, lawyers, political leaders, and even clergy (Stephens 2007). Zuckerman (1996) further subdivides the term to distinguish an “ultra-elite,” composed of professionals who possess extraordinarily high levels of expertise and status not only relative to the social structure as a whole but relative to their own elite milieux. Among scientists, this could include the Nobel laureates Zuckerman studied. In other domains, this could include CEOs of major corporations or heads of state (Mikecz 2012; Useem 1984).
Professionals involved in transnational governance are elites in terms of their locations within the global political, economic, scientific, and legal structures. What Conti writes of the World Trade Organization (WTO) lawyers he studied also holds true of the professionals described in this volume: “their actions influence the daily activities of millions of people around the globe” (Conti and O’Neil 2007: 64).

The extent of these professionals’ status and influence may not be accurately reflected by their formal titles (Harvey 2011). Indeed, the process of globalization has meant that some of the most influential professionals and forms of expertise are fragmented spatially and organizationally, engaging through networks that transcend the boundaries of traditional institutional forms, such as the university, the corporation, or the nation-state (Parry 1998). In the context of transnational governance, strategic positions within the cartographies of power and knowledge are more significant than positions within particular organizations or institutions (see Chapter 1, Chapter 18).

What Is Ethnography?

While there is disagreement among scholars as to what constitutes an ethnography (Sanday 1979), it is typically grounded in data gathered from observation (participant or nonparticipant), interviews, and material culture, including documents and objects of significance to those being studied (Harrington 2002, 2003). Analytically, the focus is on meaning, interpretation, and interaction. This approach is based on a distinct philosophy of science derived from the work of Max Weber, who advocated for “a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding [Verstehen] of social action” (Weber 1968 [1925]: 4).

The emphasis on interpretation, which is shared by disciplines such as history and anthropology, stands in distinction to the focus on explanation (erklären) found in the natural sciences, such as physics and chemistry. While explanation-oriented research seeks to define universally valid laws of causality, the objective of studies oriented to interpretive understanding is to create historically contextualized typologies of action. From these differing goals stem different approaches to research design: “the emphasis on verstehen encourages more inductive research designs and demands that developments at the macro-level are explained with reference to their micro-foundations” (Beckert and Streeck 2008: 19).

Thus, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz described ethnography as “a form of knowledge” (1973: 5) rather than simply a method for obtaining data. He continued:
Doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is (1973: 5).

That effort involves synthesis of minute observations and other data points into a coherent whole. As one of the founders of classical anthropology put it, “[t]he Ethnographer has to construct the picture of the big institution” (Malinowski 2003 [1922]: 84). The promise of insight on micro–macro linkages has driven the diffusion of ethnography from its origins in anthropology to its present position as a well-established approach among sociologists and organizational researchers.

A central tool of the ethnographic approach is a positioning that Wacquant (2004) has termed “observant participation.” That is, researchers embed themselves in a setting for an extended period – Sanday (1979) defines one year as a minimum, but such projects are now almost unheard of – during which they “subject themselves to the life contingencies of our subjects … [in] a kind of deliberate experiment of the self” (Mears 2013: 21). The objective is not only to witness what is happening in the research site but to experience it. This provides insights that cannot be reproduced through other methods.

Research embeddedness of the kind implied by ethnography is particularly useful in studying the practices of elites such as transnational professionals. This is because the sophistication of these participants and their organizations can pose a serious threat to the researcher’s ability to gain insight (Richards 1996). For example, executives are often adept at rebuffing efforts to access information that might undermine the public image of themselves and their firms. Indeed, many receive training to polish these impression management skills for media appearances and testimony before government agencies.

In the same way, documents may prove a disappointing source of data, since they can be created to give an intentionally superficial, if not outright misleading, record of events (Davies 2001; Glynn and Booth 1979). Through observation and embedded experience, ethnographers can gain “privileged – however fleeting – glimpses into the private domain” of elites who are otherwise surrounded by barriers to access (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 315). And while interviewing alone may collect only “canned” responses from professionals, ethnography can reveal how things really work: negotiations, decision-making, and discussions often unfold along lines that may differ considerably from the official version presented after the fact, whether in interviews or documents.
Thus, while ethnography may include interviews and archival research, those data sources cannot be substituted for “observant participation.” Skilled professionals can mislead an interviewer, or confound an archival researcher, but it is harder to keep up the charade with an embedded ethnographer. A performance cannot be sustained indefinitely: masks slip. Furthermore, the trust and rapport established in ethnographic encounters can open doors to new and valuable data sources, from introductions to other informants to the provision of information otherwise unobtainable or previously unknown. In these ways, ethnography can access “information not ... available (if ever) for public release” (Richards 1996: 200).

Challenges: Access, Obstacles, Self-Presentation, and Ethics

Access has always been one of the major challenges facing ethnographers (Harrington 2003). While the obstacles loom particularly large in the study of elites, such as transnational professionals, they can arise anywhere that scholars seek information that could be compromising to participants. Even getting nonelites to discuss matters that would ordinarily be private, such as their personal beliefs or what they do with their money, demands a careful and time-consuming approach (Harrington 2008). With professional elites, those difficulties are amplified by the addition of highly specific challenges connected to geographical location, class, time, and the presence of gatekeepers, among others. The following sections will address these practical problems in detail, along with the implications for self-presentation and research ethics.

Practical barriers to access. As Nader put it in her seminal paper on “studying up,” powerful people are “out of reach on a number of planes: they don’t want to be studied” (1972: 302). Elites make themselves inaccessible in part by interposing an array of secretaries, personal assistants, bodyguards, and other service personnel between themselves and the rest of the world (Gilding 2010; Marcus 1983). These “human shields” present a considerable challenge to access, even in the age of email and mobile phones (Conti and O’Neil 2007). When the objective is to study elite professions, securing the cooperation of potential research participants requires first gaining access to their gatekeepers; this may entail engaging in the same processes of identification and rapport that will later be repeated with their employers (Harrington 2003). Cultivating these relationships requires patience and time – often on a scale not compatible with the publish-or-perish rhythm of academic careers.
For those researchers able to overcome the barriers to entry presented by gatekeepers, there are often difficulties surrounding elites’ (un)willingness to be forthcoming with data. With professionals, there may be even more at stake than concerns about personal exposure or embarrassment. As Seabrooke and Henriksen (this volume) have observed, professional power and jurisdictional boundaries are maintained in part by information control. For transnational professionals in particular, those boundaries can be highly contested; disseminating expert knowledge through researchers risks losing control of some of that professional monopoly power.

Thus, Australian sociologists Smart and Higley, setting out to examine their nation’s power structure from the perspective of those at the top, wrote of “doubts about whether many of the persons in the sample would grant us interviews on these subjects, or, at least, interviews of sufficient length to be worthwhile” (1977: 249). But they, like a number of other researchers (e.g., Kogan 1994), discovered that a surprisingly large number of busy professionals welcome the chance to talk with an attentive listener. In addition to the status acknowledgment provided by the research setting, Gilding (2010) surmised that elites regard the interview as a chance to unburden themselves, in a quasi-therapeutic sense, and/or to promote themselves and their agendas to an audience of scholars and policy-makers they might not ordinarily reach. The latter motive is particularly significant for transnational professionals, as Useem (1984) showed in his study of the “inner circle” of business leaders in the United States and the United Kingdom.

In transnational settings, an overlooked challenge connected with gaining access to elites is simply the high cost of making contact. Arranging and engaging in ethnography that spans several locations around the globe often require international phone calls and travel to far-flung or remote locales (Stephens 2007). Securing funding to cover these expenses, especially when the risks of being denied access remain high, imposes high costs on researchers themselves. Those who wish to study elites, particularly in transnational settings, must be prepared to spend a great deal of time on grant proposals and other fund-raising activities (Conti and O’Neil 2007: 63).

While these considerations may apply to any international research, they are accentuated in the study of transnational professionals by the necessity of multi-sited work (Marcus 1995). That is, an ethnography of a remote people in the South Pacific may incur considerable costs in terms of making arrangements and traveling to the site; but once the researcher arrives, she generally stays put – in classical ethnography, the researcher could be embedded for years. To study a hyper-mobile elite,
However, one must follow or visit the experts in multiple sites around the world. Many of them work in urban centers such as London or Zurich (e.g., Muzio and Faulconbridge 2013), where expenses for hotels, transportation, and other basics are extremely costly. On top of that, the need to travel from one research site to the next, in order to follow the transnational movement of experts’ work and influence, mounts quickly into significant expenses.

Such considerations are particularly relevant to the study of professionals, such as wealth managers (Harrington 2016, 2017b) and consultants (Momani, this volume), who travel frequently, and may be away on assignment for weeks at a time. This is more than just a matter of the professionals being “busy.” The global hyper-mobility of this group is part and parcel of their work: no study of transnational professionals can fail to gather data on this mobility and its significance in the practice of expert authority.

Self-Presentation. Researchers who overcome the initial barriers to accessing professional elites encounter a new set of challenges in face-to-face ethnographic settings. To gather data effectively, they must be able to establish rapport with participants (Ostrower 1993). This entails a self-presentation strategy that some researchers find difficult to execute: claiming a position as the status equals of those they are studying, at least for the duration of an interview (Conti and O’Neil 2007; Hermanowicz 2002).

Since most academics cannot realistically claim to wield as much power, influence, or wealth as elite professionals, the field of expert knowledge is usually the only terrain in which they can hope to meet as status equals. In the context of ethnography, then, presentation management entails the projection of authority. This task can be particularly difficult for scholars who are young and/or female. Concerns about rejection and embarrassment abound, particularly around the challenges of “modifying dress and appearance, and mastering specialized forms of knowledge,” including class-based manners and distinctions (Conti and O’Neil 2007: 63).

The complex, multilayered challenge this presents can make social scientists “timid” (Nader 1972: 302) about studying elites. Exceptions include a few notable scholars who were born into families of power and privilege. One of the best-known exemplars is E. Digby Baltzell, a scion of the Social Register who later became a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania; in this role, he coined the acronym WASP (1964) to describe the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant aristocracy which formed his milieu. Someone like Baltzell would be unlikely to feel intimidated in the presence of professional elites, many of whom might have emerged from more modest backgrounds than his own.
But unlike Baltzell, most social scientists are not trained in the *habitus* characteristic of elites (Bourdieu 1977; Harrington 2017b). They lack “the right credentials and contacts” (Odendahl and Shaw 2002: 306) necessary not only to gain access but to keep it. Without this background, it is particularly difficult to deploy “tone,” “gestures,” and “appropriate language” (Harvey 2011) when face-to-face with transnational professionals. The resulting uncertainty and awkwardness can be fatal to establishing the rapport necessary to collecting high-quality data; they can also be very distracting for the researcher (Thomas 1993). Indeed, ethnographers working with elite professionals often report intense anxiety and exhaustion in connection with research encounters (Gilding 2010; Conti and O’Neil 2007).

**Ethical Challenges.** To establish rapport with elite professionals, researchers must convey respect without appearing “too deferential” or “sycophantic” (Richards 1996: 201). The danger of the latter lies not only in losing the footing of status equality with participants but in impairing the researcher’s own ability to take a critical perspective on the data (Gilding 2010). Professional elites can be charming, persuasive, and charismatic – important factors in their rise to positions of power and influence. Researchers cannot ignore these traits without doing violence to their informants’ “complex personhood” (Gordon 1997). At the same time, they cannot let empathy become complicity, lest the research become an uncritical amplifier for the elites’ own agendas. This is particularly important given that highly placed political, business, and scientific leaders have been known to mislead and deceive interviewers (Davies 2001).

In addition to preserving their critical perspective, disclosing that perspective poses a separate set of challenges. Marcus (1983) argues that, to a greater extent than in any other domain of social science, research on elites is shaped by the political beliefs of the researcher. These “must be acknowledged and managed such that it avoids overshadowing the empirical claims” (Conti and O’Neil 2007: 66). This does not necessarily imply disclosure of those positions to research participants; rather, in their publications, ethnographers should disclose enough biographical and reflexive material about their work in the field that readers can assess the impact of those factors on the analyses.

But what of the ethics of honest personal disclosure to the research participants themselves? Many ethnographers recommend sharing personal details about themselves with informants as a form of reciprocity (Harrington 2003). But this strategy carries some special risks in studies of elite professionals. For example, while interviewing WTO lawyers, Conti wrote that he “feared that an honest display of my politics could
lead to an early ending of the interview if not provoking defensiveness in the respondent throughout" (Conti and O’Neil 2007: 75).

Sometimes, rapport can be maintained on this “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” basis. But professional elites linked to controversial practices—a common condition in transnational governance—often have an acute awareness of their fragile public legitimacy and their consequent vulnerability to criticism. In such cases, honesty and disclosure may be ineffectual.

I encountered this problem in my own research on wealth managers (Harrington 2016). Wealth management is a quintessentially transnational profession: practitioners specialize in creating cross-border structures to help high-net-worth individuals avoid taxation and other constraints on their fortunes. Though these practices are generally legal, the growing public antipathy toward them has brought negative reputational consequences to the wealth management profession (Harrington 2017a). This sense of being labeled the “bad guys” of the global economy is keenly felt as an injustice by many practitioners. As a result, several who participated in my ethnography of the profession sought to test my beliefs and ideological position vis-à-vis their work.

For example, one practitioner in the British Virgin Islands (a well-known tax haven central to wealth management practices) prefaced our meeting by stating that he had read two of my scholarly journal articles (Harrington 2012a, 2012b) and found them to be “left-leaning” and “disapproving of what the [wealth management] industry and wealthy people are doing.” He was unmoved by my truthful response that I didn’t see the profession as either good or bad, but was motivated primarily by curiosity about its workings. He concluded the meeting by suggesting that “you should be thrown off the island based on your writings” (Harrington 2016). I learned later that deportation has been used before to shut down researchers on tax havens (Goodman 2014). Given this individual’s position, I decided that the ethical response in this case was to thank him for his time and treat his comments as data, rather than making any further effort to change his mind.

**Analytical Benefits of an Ethnographic Approach**

Despite the many challenges described above, ethnographic methods can provide unique insight into elite professions and transnational governance. This is a consequence of the kind of information ethnography excels at obtaining. Specifically, this method yields concrete, actor-centered, relational data: the kind needed to understand how the events, decisions, and actions lead up to outcomes of global significance.
These characteristics are particularly significant to the study of transnational professionals because they provide insight on the sources of institutional change at the micro-level (Henriksen and Seabrooke, this volume). Detailed observation and analysis of the encounters professionals have with clients, peers, and policy-makers allow for the construction of multi-level models linking individual practices and decisions with global structures (Harrington 2015; Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013).

For the same reasons, ethnography is useful for shedding light on the shifting fields and power structures characteristic of transnational professions. As Foucault (1977) and Gramsci (1992) have shown, power is not a fixed property of individual actors, or something possessed only by elites. Rather, it flows from relationships and interactions – phenomena into which ethnography delves deeply, advancing social scientific knowledge on the dynamics of conflict and change on a global scale.

Ultimately, ethnographic studies of transnational professionals allow scholars to build models that challenge dominant perspectives on globalization, such as the “world polity” approach (Meyer et al. 1997), or theories that privilege structural relationships among states and classes (Poulantzas 2000; Skocpol 1979). Such perspectives have overlooked the negotiated encounters that make up the bulk of professional activity on a day-to-day basis. As a result, they can tell us little about how those interactions are connected to global norms, policies, and practices in the professions (Carruthers and Halliday 2006).

**Conclusion**

No matter what methods they use, researchers want access to the “back stages” of professional practice – the parts that “are carefully protected from outsiders and ... only known to insiders” (Mikecz 2012: 483). Ethnography allows scholars to break through the barriers surrounding access to elites, and to dispense with the readily available (but often superficial and misleading) data about them. It provides an effective means to observe and analyze the links between professional activities and transnational institutions.

Although every method has its limitations, the downsides of using survey, experimental, and archival data to study elite professionals are particularly pronounced. The absence of elites generally from survey or experimental research has been noted (Davies et al. 2008), along with the unreliability of public records and corporate documents (Davies 2001). In any case, these data sources are by definition retrospective and provide little insight into underlying processes.
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This is not to say that participants in ethnographies always provide honest and complete data. They don’t (Richards 1996). But the multiple data sources involved in ethnography, along with the embeddedness of the researcher, allow for triangulation (Jick 1979), leading to more reliable inferences.

The drawbacks to conducting ethnographic research on transnational professionals include the high costs in terms of time, money, and effort put into negotiating the demands of self-presentation and interpersonal ethics. To this list can be added a final challenge for researchers: the difficulty of publishing such research in the form of journal articles, which are increasingly the currency of professional success in the social sciences. Lengthy descriptive passages, which are the usual way of presenting evidence used to build theory from ethnographic data, often run afoul of the tight word counts and forms of argumentation used in such journals. It is also difficult to do justice to theoretical innovation within the discursive norms of journal articles, which rely heavily on citation and illustrations of how one’s work “builds on” or “extends” recent studies (Uzzi et al. 2013).

In spite of all this, this chapter will close with a call for more ethnographies of transnational professionals. The costs are high. But ultimately, there may be no better way to understand and analyze global governance than to embed oneself within the worlds of the professionals responsible for it.