elite and specialized interviewing

introduction by Alan Ware and Martín Sánchez-Jankowski[1]

Elite and Specialized Interviewing, which was first published in 1970, meets the three most important criteria for a scholarly book being recognized as a "classic". First, its author was a pioneer in an area of research that has remained of central importance. Secondly, the book itself made a unique contribution to that area, and, finally, it can still be read today as an authoritative work on the subject. Indeed, in the case of Lewis Dexter's book it is not clear that there is any other work published since 1970 that rivals it as a guide to how researchers should use interviews in studying topics that involve social and political "elites". Yet, paradoxically, not only may most of the younger European scholars reading the ECPR Press version of Dexter's book be doing so for the first time, but so also may many senior academics. The fact is that, especially in Europe, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* was not that well known in the years immediately following its publication. The explanation of this paradox lies in two factors.

One consideration is that the book was published by a well-respected, but relatively small, American university press (Northwestern University Press) at a time when there was much less trans-Atlantic marketing by presses. It was only later that even the larger university presses took to establishing their own publishing offices in Europe. Word of mouth, prompted by favourable reviews in scholarly journals, was the main means by which knowledge of a new work was communicated, and many books failed to gain the attention they deserved outside the continent in which they were published. *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* fell into this category.

Another factor was that the peculiar path of Dexter's career made him much less well known outside specialized research communities than his contemporaries. His career path differed from that of most leading academics in that he did not reside for extended periods at major research universities, spending his time training successive generations of PhD students with whose own successes he might also be identified. For example, most European based scholars lecturing on the American Congress today would know well the works of Ralph K. Huitt, Richard Fenno, David Mayhew and Nelson Polsby, but would be less familiar with Dexter's work. Yet, along with his co-authors, Dexter had won the American Political Science Association's Woodrow Wilson Prize in 1963, for the best book on American politics.[2] There were several unusual aspects of Dexter's career

which were to contribute to his being much less well known than his contemporaries.

In the early stage of that career he undertook a good deal of policy research, as well as academic work, during which he accumulated much of his experience of interviewing. Unlike many individuals in the academic community, he seems to have worked on the assumption that his experience on contractual research could inform, in significant ways, his academic research. One consequence of this was that his academic career was slow in getting started. For example, his highly influential and much reprinted article "The Congressman and his District" was not published until he was 42; at that age most scholars have long since made their name. Moreover, in addition to spanning the worlds of practical and academic research, Dexter refused to conform to disciplinary boundaries within academia. He conducted research over a wide range of the social sciences, and he published in the leading journals of sociology, anthropology, political science, and management studies–and even this did not exhaust the breadth of his interests. Yet, with respect to peer group recognition, his ability to cross disciplinary boundaries meant that he never developed the kind of reputation that a specialist within a discipline can. Incidentally, his refusal to recognize these kinds of boundaries was also one of the reasons he had so much difficulty in obtaining a PhD; he failed his general examinations eight times at the University of Chicago and was forced to transfer to Columbia University, where he proceeded to argue with Paul Lazarsfeld who eventually did approve his dissertation combining sociology and political science. Then, when he no longer needed to demonstrate that he was an "accomplished professional", he chose to spend most of his career teaching in universities that were not usually recognized as being in the first rank of world universities, and he seems to have preferred holding visiting positions rather than tenured ones. There was to be no "Dexter school" of graduate students who could extend his research agenda. Indeed, the two authors of this essay, one a sociologist and the other a political scientist who both took a graduate course with Dexter at Dalhousie University in 1969, do not personally know of any other of his students who have been active academic researchers in the social sciences.

A good account of this rather distinctive kind of academic life, distinctive at least for the mid 20th century, is provided by Polsby and Schickler. In an extended essay reviewing "landmarks" in the study of the United States Congress since 1945, they write:

> Lewis Anthony Dexter (1915–1995) was an immensely prolific maverick. Although his BA from the University of Chicago was dated 1935, his sociology PhD from Columbia was delayed until 1960 because of a conflict with his supervisory committee. He never stayed long enough at one teaching job to accumulate a body of students, but his writings about Congress, many of them employing a quasi-anthropological style of observation and exhaustive interviewing, were held in very high esteem by the next cohort of scholars who passed his unpublished manuscript (which later was accepted as his doctoral

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dissertation), "Congressmen and the People They Listen To", around among themselves samizdat-style, or excavated his early articles in out of the way journals.[3]

Pursuing his intellectual interests in this way meant that, by the time *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* was published the response of those European social scientists on whose "radar screen" the book actually appeared would largely have been "Lewis Who?". Yet its author had not only greater experience of interviewing than virtually anyone of his generation, in the early 1950s he had also pioneered the use of interviews in the study of the United States Congress–a development that truly revolutionized research into one of the central institutions of American government.

Unlike many of those who have been innovative in the use of a new research method, Dexter was not a proselytizer on its behalf. He believed interviewing to be an important research tool for the social scientist, but he always emphasized that there were numerous circumstances in which interviews either were not an appropriate method at all or when other methods might be better for revealing the information required. This is one of the reasons why *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* has proved so useful over the years in the research training of graduate students; Dexter was not engaged in any kind of methodological war with others, and he was not in the least interested in converting the uncommitted to employing the techniques he had developed. Rather, in effect he was saying–"if you want to use interviews, this is what you might be able to do with them, this is a good way of thinking of going about doing them, and these are the pitfalls to avoid".

Dexter was also quite explicit that the focus of his book was restricted to the interviewing of those who required "nonstandardized treatment" (p.18). In standardized interviewing "the investigator defines the question and the problem; he is only looking for answers within the bounds set by his presuppositions". By contrast, with "elite" or "nonstandardized" interviewing, "the investigator is willing, and often eager to let the interviewee teach him what the problem, the question, the situation is–to the limits, of course, of the interviewer's ability to perceive relationships to his basic problem, whatever these may be" (p. 19).

Nevertheless, if *Elite and Specialized Interviewing* remains in the 21st century a work that is still an intelligent, thought provoking, and comprehensive guide as to how to conduct interviews with "elites" of many kinds, it has to be recognized that any author would probably have written the book differently if he or she were starting 35 years later. The main purpose of this New Introduction, therefore, is to reflect on the issues that Dexter might have felt he should confront were he engaging in the exercise of writing the book anew. In essence what we are doing is asking the following questions:

1. Have there been developments in methodologies that are different from, but related to elite interviewing, that require this form of interviewing to be set in a slightly different context to the one in which Dexter set it?
2. Have there been either changes in technology, or changes in the relative

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cost of existing technologies, that have affected how elite interviewing can be undertaken?

3 Have there been changes in cultural norms or in professional rules that affect the relationship between interviewer and interviewee?

Neither of the two authors of this essay knew Dexter sufficiently well, or know how his ideas changed subtly over time, to be able to say with any confidence how Dexter *would* have handled these issues. Instead, what we can do is suggest how they *might* have been addressed by him, and say whether we think his approach would meet the issues raised. The point of engaging in this type of exercise is to allow the reader to turn to Dexter's prose with an appropriate contemporary "lens" with which to understand the arguments of several decades ago. We hope that this will make the relevance of his arguments for today's researchers even clearer.

1. NEW METHODS OF RESEARCH

Undoubtedly the main development since 1970 has been in the use of focus groups. Like the elite interview, a focus group involves both participants from whom information is sought and also a person directing the discussion where necessary–the equivalent of the interviewer. This method allows the researcher to ask a group of people open-ended questions in an effort to obtain specific information and some idea of how this information was thought about by other participants. It enables the researcher to probe a sample group of respondents in an effort to ascertain the full range of ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes and opinions on various topics of interest to him or her. This particular approach is thought to have the advantage of obtaining the "collective wisdom" of the group because members would be inclined, and stimulated, to respond to the ideas being expressed by other members. In addition, it has the advantage of being economical in obtaining the data because it could be gathered with fewer visits to each of the respondents. Often focus groups involve the payment of participants, something that is not normal in elite interviewing. It must be said that, for many purposes, they are really a substitute for standardized interviews, with which Dexter is unconcerned, but they have been used in non-standardized situations as well. How might Dexter have responded to this development?

Although he saw the interview primarily as "a two-person relationship, a conversation" (p.122), Lewis Dexter recognized that for some purposes it was more useful to have more than one interviewee present. As he remarks:

> It may well be, as some anthropologists tell us,…that under some circumstances interviews with several persons can be as rewarding as or more rewarding than with one person. It is quite probable…that in reconstructing a military action it is better to have as many participants as possible present, and it may well be there are other occasions…where several interviewees are preferable to one. (p.48)

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Nevertheless, Dexter would probably not have thought this was an attractive approach for a number of reasons. First, he would have thought it more difficult to get a group of elites together at any one time given their busy schedules–he might have even described this as a nightmare for researchers interested in gathering information from elites.

Secondly, Dexter would have been afraid that the elites that he needed to get information from would be offended that they were not the center of attention. It should be remembered that Dexter mentions more than once the fact that elites often are willing to provide information because they are able to expound on a topic that they believe they are the only expert on; and often they are the only person to know specific information on a particular issue or topic. Many times Dexter intimates that it is the interview that is making the elite feel more special and willing to give information that they might not give under different circumstances.

Thirdly, Dexter was also aware that many elites might be willing to give some information, but not if there were a group of witnesses around who might judge the entire interaction in a negative way that could hurt the elite professionally, politically, or personally. Peer groups have a way of inhibiting individuals and Dexter did not want that to occur.

Fourthly, he saw a strategic advantage to allowing the elite interviewee to take the conversation in the direction they wanted because often the interviewer did not have the knowledge to be certain what was an important question, or area/topic of inquiry. In this way the elite interview would be educating the interviewer while providing important information. This would not be allowed to occur with a focus group.

However, arguably, what this also exposes is that Dexter did not really explore the "grey area" between the standardized and the non-standardized interview. He posited a clear distinction between the two types, whereas in practice there are likely to be some circumstances where the interviewer is wanting to have "the interviewee teach him what the problem" is (p.19)–but only to a limited degree. A colleague cites the case of a focus group among high taxpayers to see how they approached the recent availability of self-assessment forms. This was a case where there was no difficulty in getting the group together, nor did Dexter's second and third objections apply. The case was "standard" in the sense that there were limitations on what the interviewers wanted from the interviewees–they weren't interested in their attitudes to the tax system or to form-filling, merely in how they had proceeded to use a given form. But it was "non-standard", in that within those constraints, they wanted to know exactly how they could go about filling it in, and more could be learnt about the problems of the form by making the "interviews" interactive than by face-to-face interviews. Similarly, some interviews with individuals who are undoubtedly "elites" may be designed primarily to obtain structured information–for example, of a retired civil servant, the interviewer might be concerned mainly with the issue of establishing in what order a particular series of issues were raised at a meeting. If the individuals' definition of the situation about which they are being interviewed is of little concern to the interviewer, the

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more it then resembles a "standard" case. In the "grey area" it is the balance between the different types of objective that the interviewer has that determines to what extent the guidelines for elite interviewing should apply. In the civil service example, and assuming that Dexter's first, second and third objections did not apply–and in many instances they would probably, of course–there is no reason why the required information might not be obtained in a group context.

2. TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND THE REDUCED COSTS OF TECHNOLOGIES

Lewis Dexter was well aware that the availability of new technologies, their growing acceptance among potential interviewees, and the reduced costs of such technologies could change optimal interviewing practice. He notes (p.56) that his views about the use of a tape recorder had changed during the time he was writing *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*. Today most interviewees would expect an interview to be tape-recorded–and, in many cases, they would welcome it, because there was less danger that what they were saying might be misunderstood. However, there are still a few circumstances in which the interviewee might refuse to have at least part of an interview taped. For example, a politician might more plausibly deny that he or she had said what they were reported as having said, if the interviewer had been allowed to take only written notes during the interview. It is for a similar reason that elite interviewees might well ask to see subsequently the transcript of an interview–so that they can correct any mistakes and misunderstandings, or hide something that might have occurred during the interview. For the interviewer it is important to establish these "rules" before the interview is conducted, so that disputes do not arise later about the conditions under which the interview was granted–a point we discuss again later.

One change since 1970 that has been important in relation to the use of tape recording for research, is that it takes much less time, and hence is less costly, to transcribe interviews from tape. The rule of thumb that Dexter employed, that an hour of interview would take 9 hours to transcribe accurately, no longer holds. It is now more feasible for all of the taped interviews in a project to be transcribed, and with voice-recognized computer software it can be done quickly. As Dexter noted (p.56) recording has at least one advantage, in that "other people may listen to interviews and note things which a given interviewer takes for granted about himself". Yet, for him, the availability of transcriptions could not be a substitute for the writing up of notes by the interviewer shortly after an interview. He believed that the interaction between interviewer and interviewee produced a response to what was being said, to which the interviewer had access but the transcriber did not, and the interviewer's notes would likely be different from the writing up of notes derived solely from what was available in a recording. The writing up of notes by the interviewer involves the addition of evidence, and some elementary form of analysis, two things that are always missing from the standard-

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ized-question formats embodied in surveys. In essence, crucial information about the interaction, and hence how what was said by the interviewee is to be understood, would be lost if these two processes (writing up notes and transcribing) were conflated. That the writing up should be done as soon as possible was vital so that the interviewer could reflect on it and carry "over that reflection to the next interview" (p.57). Dexter would likely have regarded research projects in which interview notes were not examined after each interview as missing out on part of what was useful about interviews as a research technique.

Another respect in which reduced costs have made other techniques possible has been the dramatic decline in the cost of long-distance telephone charges. It would not cost that much now to interview persons for a considerable period of time by telephone. Yet, here too, Lewis Dexter would have regarded the telephone interview as inappropriate for elites, even though it has become commonplace for many forms of mass interview. As always his objection would have been a practical one. Elites are more likely to have specific, technical, and sensitive information. Not being in direct contact with the person conducting an interview would create an environment of caution for the elite interviewee. Using the telephone does not allow the interviewee to know who is listening, and therefore who they may be talking to. Dexter thought personal interaction was so important, and he makes a point of stating that he liked the Symbolic Interactionist approach developed by Hubert Blumer; it allows the researcher to ask and consider the importance of researchers' presence as an influencing factor, as well as the fact that that interaction is how unique forms of information is exchanged. Elites needed to be made to feel special and, for Dexter, a telephone interview was too "common" for that–anyone can use the phone, but not everyone is given an audience with a particular elite member–so an in-person-interview creates the optimal conditions for quality information.

Given these considerations, the telephone is not something that would be beneficial to the in-depth interview. Of course, there are advantages in its use for the mass interviewer: the fact that the interviewer's personal characteristics would not have an impact on the responses of the interviewee–for example a white interviewer and a non-white interviewee–thereby reduces bias. Moreover, that the interviewer can enter the data directly into the computer, and save time and potential error in reading another interviewer's record, is a further advantage for the mass interviewer. Yet, for the elite interviewer, these advantages are not relevant, and the nature of the in-depth interview's data itself is not conducive to the telephone. The answers to questions are long and involved because of the open-endedness of the questions. They do not fit neatly into the programs that require only a nominal, ordinal, or interval level numeric entry.

Many of these points would apply also to "conferencing" using televisual equipment; even when interviewer and interviewee can see each other, the form the conversation takes is radically different from the person-to-person interview. The effect of the presence of the one person on the other is not the same in the two situations.

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Along with "video conferencing", another new technology of possible relevance to interviews are computer-assisted programmes for analyzing data. While their development has put a useful tool at the researcher's disposal, it must be admitted that, in part, their widespread adoption in academic research projects also seems to stem from two factors. On the one hand, there is a desire among researchers to be systematic in the way that survey researchers seemingly are. On the other hand, social scientists who undertake qualitative research often feel inferior to those that are engaged in survey research. Even in Dexter's time many quantitative social scientists regarded only the kind of work they did as being "scientific", and there has been an increasing drive within the various disciplines to make sure that all social science conforms to some supposed notion of scientific rigor. A common belief is that qualitative research should conform more closely to the methodological underpinnings of quantitative research. (For example, King et al's much cited book might have taken as its signature tune the well know tune from My Fair Lady–"Why can't a woman be more like a man".[4])

Dexter's view of the use of these computer-assisted programmes would likely have been ambivalent. He no doubt would have found such programmes useful, but would have been frustrated by, and resistant to, those that were designed in a hierarchical way (i.e. Nudist) because they would force the interview into the programme's logic rather than that of the interviewee and researcher. Of programmes developed in a non-hierarchical (FolioViews or Atlas) manner, he would have been more supportive, though he would have cautioned that each of these programmes required that care be taken, like traditional transcription to paper, to transfer the data in as precise and nuanced a manner as possible to reduce error.

3. RELATIONS BETWEEN INTERVIEWER AND INTERVIEWEE

Although his interviewing career was confined to North America, Lewis Dexter was well aware that cultural differences could affect how the interviewer went about arranging, and then conducting, interviews on particular projects. Despite the growth of some "mid-Atlantic" norms in business and politics, the contemporary researcher still has to be sensitive to these differences. For example, in Europe it remains more common than in the United States for senior politicians and administrators to expect the initial contact about a requested interview to be made in writing by the interviewer than by telephone. There are exceptions, of course, and sometimes written requests for interviews made through official channels go unanswered. Yet this exposes a crucial point Dexter always recognized–the need for the interviewer to know as much as possible about the interviewees, and the environments in which they operate, before deciding how to make contact with him or her.

Where there has been more significant change in the interviewing "environment" since 1970, concerns the expected behaviour of the interviewer towards the interviewee. Dexter's principal discussion of the ethics of interviewing related to

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the need for confidentiality (pp.61–2); today there are much broader ethical issues about, and also much more wide ranging rules on, the treatment of human subjects by researchers–rules that form part of the codes of conduct of various professional associations and which are often enforced by employing institutions, such as universities. There has been a growing concern that the public be protected from any harm associated with participating in a research project.

Ironically, in the United States this concern about the safety of the public did not begin with medical research, but from an experimental psychology study conducted at Yale University by Professor Stanley Milgram on the social sources of obedience to authority.[5] This research used deceptive techniques to study under what conditions someone would obey a person in authority and kill a third party. Although no one was actually killed, a number of the subjects in the study were stricken with mental health maladies as a result of believing that they had severely injured or killed their "victim". This prompted the US government to become more actively involved in protecting members of the public who participate in research projects. Legislation was passed requiring all institutions conducting research using federal government money to create a 'Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects' to develop a set of regulations that would protect and inform subjects from potential harm during their participation in a research project. Institutions not doing this would be subject to financial and legal penalties. Every institution in the United States has such a committee and the regulations coming from them have grown over the years. Most researchers must provide the committee with a detailed plan as to how, before the subject consents to participate, they will inform the subject of (1) what the research is substantively about, (2) how much time will be required of them, (3) what benefits might come from it, and (4) what potential harm they could expect if they were to participate. They must also obtain, and be prepared to present if asked, the consent forms that every subject is required to sign.

In addition to the US government, most professional associations in the United Staetes have also established their own set of ethics governing research. Most of these codes of ethics encourage researchers to conduct themselves in accordance with the government's regulations and carry out their research with a commitment to the safety and privacy of their subjects. While other countries did not have such a high-profile case prompting them to take action in this area, over time they too have moved in the direction of greater regulation of research on human subjects–usually through employing organizations requiring compliance by their researchers with the standards set by the relevant professional association.

All of this concern with protecting subjects would not have much impact on what Dexter proposed in his book. First, Dexter's subjects were elites, who in many cases had sensitive information,and were well aware of its sensitivity. Thus, they would be hypersensitive to any research that would leave them vulnerable to political or legal harm.

Secondly, elite subjects, such as union leaders or military personnel, who might be subject to physical harm if they divulged information that compromised

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the interests and physical safety of others, would have been more aware and reticent to participate in the interview, thereby making informed consent unnecessary.

Thirdly, even with the present regulations, most researchers using in-depth interviewing provide the respondent with a written explanation of the research that includes the nature of the research and its benefits, and a commitment to protecting their anonymity and/or confidentiality. Since most in-depth research will not involve harm, this is rarely a part of the "inform consent document" presented to the potential subject, so the new regulations have only a marginal effect, if any, on the research strategy and techniques involving elites suggested by Dexter. The regulations may, however, create more work for the researcher at the planning stage of a project, in showing that the work he or she intends to undertake will not infringe legal or professional guidelines.

So far this discussion has been concerned with changes in how the interviewer may treat the interviewee–but what about the reverse, what the interviewee may want or expect from the interviewer? One point to be emphasized is that amongst those who are in employment, working hours increased during the second half of the 20th century, which meant that some elites had less time to devote to interviews than previously.[6] Even if they are interested in being interviewed, it is now more difficult for such elites to find the time to do so. For this reason, for example, it is quite common for participants in focus groups to be paid for their involvement. However, perhaps more worrying for the interviewer is the control that the interviewee may wish to have over how he or she reports the research that draws on the interview. It is arguably the case that increasingly some elites are using their roles as gatekeepers to information to control the conclusions the researchers may draw, at least in the public arena. The authors know of at least one project in which, as a condition of being interviewed, the businesspeople and politicians concerned wanted to see, and comment on, a draft of the book that the researchers were preparing for publication. Clearly, there is a problem of where to draw the relevant boundary. It is entirely proper for an interviewee to see a transcript of an interview, and to make corrections of mistakes he or she had made in the interview; it is also appropriate for the interviewer to accept these corrections. Moreover, when, for example, a single individual is the only source of information as to a particular sequence of events, it is appropriate for the interviewee to ask for assurance that his or her account has not been misrepresented. The danger, in allowing pre-publication scrutiny of the results of research, lies in the threat of vetoing publication should the interviewee disagree with the researcher's conclusions or what was actually said. All that can be concluded here is that these are issues that researchers need to resolve before they enter into any agreements with their subjects.

This book is a classic precisely because none of the changes we have discussed over the last 35 years would have required Lewis Dexter to modify very much what he said in *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*. What he says about such interviewing remains as good a guide to the subject as the 21st century researcher can possibly find.

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NOTES

1 The authors wish to thank Helen Margetts for her helpful comments.
2 Raymond Bauer, Ithiel de Sola Pool and Lewis Anthony Dexter, *American Business and Public Policy*, New York, Atherton, 1963.
3 Nelson W. Polsby and Eric Schickler, “Landmarks in the Study of Congress Since 1945”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 5(2002), p.340.
4 Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1994.
5 See, for example, Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, New York, Harper and Row, 1974.
6 For example, on the increased working hours in the United States, see Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American*, New York, Basic Books, 1992.