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## Problems of Access in the Study of Social Elites and Boards of Directors

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The problem of access is basic to all field research. How do social scientists obtain entry to organizations to observe, interview, or otherwise collect data? How do they persuade individuals to let themselves be visited or interviewed? The problem of access, moreover, is not resolved upon entry into a social setting or upon securing an interview. Researchers then have to acquire and maintain access to the activities, beliefs, and experiences of their informants. How do they get "behind the scenes"—that is, beneath personal and institutional public fronts? How do they penetrate the inside workings of organizations and the private perceptions of individuals? This selection examines some of these problems of access, drawing on my research experience in a study of hospital boards of directors and their upper-class members.

English-speaking hospitals in the province of Quebec were originally founded by groups of socially prominent, wealthy citizens who contributed land and money for their construction and then conducted regular fund-raising campaigns among themselves and in the community to support their subsequent operation. These hospitals were administered by boards of directors made up of these same citizens or their appointees. Over the years, the provincial government came to assume the entire operating budget of these hospitals, but the institutions remained under the administrative direction of the community elite. In 1973 the government ended this private administration and broadened the membership of hospital boards of directors to include individuals representing such new constituencies as patients, nonprofessional hospital employees, nurses, community organizations, and so on. About one-third of the new board positions, however, were retained by the "old guard" membership. My

research attempted to assess the social consequences of this reorganization. A major focus, of course, was on the social organization of the former board system, which meant the study of how the old elite boards operated and the nature of the participation of the top-level executives and professionals who comprised their memberships.

The relative scarcity of literature on society's higher social strata and on such organizational settings as boards of directors is doubtless related to difficulties of access. Board meetings are typically closed to nonmembers and proceedings are kept confidential, like other high-level decision-making processes, they are conducted more outside the boardroom than within it. Moreover, directors and other members of the community's financial and professional elite are often extremely busy, fast-paced individuals who have very little time to spare and who give low priority to being studied by social scientists. Business executives and senior professionals, furthermore, are protected by secretaries or junior personnel, who divert, discourage, or refuse those requests on their employer's time that they deem illegitimate or irrelevant. In other words, researchers cannot just attend a board meeting, note pad in hand, and expect to observe what boards do. Nor can they reach a company president by simply calling and requesting an interview.

My initial approach to the field research illustrates these difficulties. Introducing myself as a sociology graduate student, I had very limited success in getting by the gatekeepers of the executive world. Telephone follow-ups to letters sent requesting an interview repeatedly found Mr. X "tied up" or "in conference." When I did manage to get my foot in the door, interviews rarely exceeded a half hour, were continuously interrupted by telephone calls (for "important" conferences, secretaries are usually asked to take calls), and elicited only "front work" (Goffman, 1961), the public version of what hospital boards were all about.

My access problem was thus twofold: obtaining an interview in the first instance, then penetrating beyond what anyone could have read in the hospital's annual report.

## ACCESS AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

By chance during one interview, my respondent discovered that he knew a member of my family. "Why didn't you say so?" The rest of the interview was dramatically different than all my previous data. I was presented with a very different picture of the nature of board work. I learned, for example, how board members used to be recruited, how the executive committee kept control over the rest of the board, how business was conducted and of

what it consisted, and many other aspects of the informal social organization of board work.

The sudden richness of this data, once my informant discovered that he "knew" me, signaled the importance of the researcher's *identity* in field research. Who I was or was perceived to be influenced the information to which I would be given access. The management of my identity thus became an important aspect of my research strategy.

### *Sampling Based on Social Ties*

Abandoning my original intention of interviewing a representative sample from different institutions, I began to choose my subjects on the basis of social ties, seeking interviews with all those board members who personally knew me or a member of my family. I usually wrote a letter first, outlining my interests in a formal, businesslike fashion consistent with the customary approach to executives. Most of these people must cope with large volumes of correspondence, much of which is nonbusiness in nature, soliciting time, money, cooperation, information, or whatever. Unless something attracts their attention as they skim through the daily mail, executives are quick to refer correspondence to the waste basket or to a subordinate to handle. In order to catch attention or to compete with other requests, I included personal references in my letter (such as, "I hoped you might have the time between fishing trips . . .," where I knew the board member often went fishing with a member of my family) and made certain my surname was written largely and legibly for them to recognize. In the letter, I usually stated that I would telephone to make an appointment. (Without such a preceding letter, a telephone call rarely reached its destination, because my name meant nothing to the secretary. The letter, however, could be marked "personal" and be assured of being opened by the board member.)

Having exhausted these direct personal contacts, I asked those board members I *did* know to refer me to others whom they felt could help me. Sometimes they would call a colleague directly on my behalf. In other cases, I found that "Mr. X suggested I come to you" obtained for me an interview; if I delayed a few days before the interview, I generally found that my new informant had made inquiries about me in the interim and established my identity.

The methodological use of personal social ties yielded substantially more informative and insightful data. Referral interviews were less productive than those drawing on direct social contacts, but they remained superior to those where I was an unknown sociologist encumbered by the variety of stereotypes associated with such a label (such as

radical, or socialist, or someone likely to disapprove of the traditional elite board system). The following examples from my field notes illustrate the nature of the data obtained under these different identities:

*Response to an Unknown Sociologist*

BOARD MEMBER A

*Q. How do you feel in general about how the board has been reorganized?*

I think the basic idea of participation is good. We need better communication with the various groups. And I think they probably have a lot to offer.

*Q. How is the new membership working out? Do they participate? Any problems?*

... oh yes, Mr. X [orderly] participates. He asked something today, now what was it? Sometimes they lack skill and experience, but they catch on. There is no problem with them. We get along very well.

*Response to a Known Individual*

BOARD MEMBER B

This whole business is unworkable. It's all very nice and well to have these people on the board, they might be able to tell us something here and there, or, describe a situation, but you're not going to run a hospital on that!

Mr. X [orderly] hasn't opened his mouth except for a sandwich. But what *can* he contribute? ... You could rely on the old type of board member ... you knew you could count on him to support you. You didn't have to check up all the time. But these new people, how do you know how they will react? Will they stick behind you? And there is the problem of confidentiality. Everything you say you know will be all over the hospital ten minutes after the meeting. You can't say the same things anymore. You have to be careful in case someone interprets you as being condescending or hoity-toity.

*Q. On the subject of administrator-board relationships*

The board never does anything without first going through the administrator.

I met X [board member at another hospital] at the club once and broached the subject with him. Once I got a general agreement I approached Y [the administrator].

The contrast is marked. Replies from board member A are heavily "front" work, a bland commentary reflecting what the board member thought he ought to say or what I wanted to hear, and revealed little of the complexity of the social situation. Board member B's answers were franker, less self-conscious, and exposed some of the more subtle aspects of the board's social organization. The differences are not just due to a difference in the opinions of my respondents. In a second interview with member A, this time under a "known" identity, I established that "backstage" he shared most of member B's views.

Another indication of my improved access was the off-the-record comments in which informants told me things with the caution "You don't need to write this down, but ...," a gesture of confidence absent in earlier interviews.

I am suggesting, then, that the use of social ties as a research tool improved my access to hard-to-reach persons and their experiences. Why?

*Friendship and Membership Factors in Access*

Friendship norms were factors in my new-found access. In general, the closer the friendship tie with members of my family, the less frequently informants postponed or canceled interviews and the more inside information they allowed me. Two aspects of friendship may have elicited this receptiveness: obligation and trust. Undoubtedly, certain of my respondents felt unable to refuse me because of their personal acquaintance with my family. This sense of obligation was sometimes reinforced by other social commitments, such as returning favors (a close relative had once found a job for a board member's son) or ongoing business situations (one board member was in the midst of a business deal with a member of my family). A second element, trust, also helped explain the influence of friendship ties. Douglas (1976) suggests that suspicion and conflict of interest are inherent in all research situations and that people do not spontaneously bare themselves to anyone who asks. Clearly, if respondents are to reveal backstage information about themselves, they need to be confident that it will not be used against them in any way. Friendship ties reduced the perceived risk associated with confiding in me

by acting as a form of security that information would not be misused or that boards would not be portrayed in an unfavorable light.

A second factor in my improved access was my quasi-membership status in the social group I was studying. Instead of a clearly delimited occupational or organizational group, such as schoolteachers or workers on an assembly line, the relevant social unit here is, I suggest, social class. Although the question of class consciousness has been debated and members of upper social strata have been observed to deny class issues (Domhoff, 1971), most of the elites in my study did perceive their board work and reorganization in class terms, although not always explicitly. (For example, consider the evidence of group consciousness in the pronouns of this board member's comment: "It is very different now [after democratization]. *We* just don't speak the same language as *they* do.") I grew up in the same social environment as most of the board members; my parents were part of the same social circuits, having gone to the same schools, or grown up in the same neighborhood, or belonged to the same clubs, or attended the same parties, or done business together, or even sat together on other boards. Although I myself was not a board member, or a businessman, or even of the same generation as my respondents, I reaped some of the benefits of insider status by virtue of belonging to their social class—an attribute the data indicated was central to their role and function as board members. As with friendship, common class membership increased the level of trust in our relationship over any that I could create as an unknown interviewer. I do not say, of course, that I had their *entire* confidence, only that my inferred class background lowered the perceived risk of information being misused. Because I came from a known social milieu. I was more predictable to them; board members felt more able to anticipate how I would feel about certain issues and react to certain confidences. Common social class membership also increased the likelihood that I would "understand" their perspective and would present their points of view "fairly."

### *Membership as a Research Strategy*

Neutrality and the elimination of bias are basic methodological concepts in sociology, a discipline striving for scientific legitimacy. Membership and the application of one's own cultural experience and understanding to research problems are often frowned upon as too "subjective" or "slanted." Some very penetrating social analysis, however, has been carried out by researchers who were members of the organizations or social groups they studied. For example, Roth (1963) was himself a patient in the tuberculosis sanatorium he studied; Dalton (1959) was a manager in the organization whose leadership he studied. It is also

perhaps noteworthy that, among the few who have studied the upper classes, two of the most valuable contributors I know of came from an upper-class background (Baltzell, 1964; Ross, 1954). In my study, I felt that the advantages of inside status outweighed the risk of bias. I did, however, make a special effort to remain constantly aware of the possible influence of such a status on my data and my analysis.

My most fundamental research strategy, then, was the management of my social identity in order to maximize the benefits of social ties with my respondents. A number of other tactics, however, complemented this strategy and further increased my access to backstage action and belief.

## ACCESS AND INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE

A major objective of my research strategy was the suppression of "front work." One tactic, as I have just discussed, was the use of friendship and social class ties to foster trust. The nature of the interaction at the interview itself, however, also influenced the kind of information I received. Here, careful management of cues, impressions, leads, innuendo, and other means of communication encouraged respondents to share inside information. Two tactics were particularly useful: deflection and tracking.

### *Deflection*

It sometimes proved useful to camouflage the real research questions, to "deflect" informants' attention from the main targets of study. Because it reduced self-consciousness and perceived threat, deflection was a useful technique for subjects who were anxious about personal exposure. Many of my respondents became reticent when they perceived themselves to be the object of study—that is, when I told them that I was interested in how the old elite board system worked. I found, however, that they were prepared to offer their views more freely on "external" topics, such as reorganization policy or problems of the new membership. With respondents who appeared defensive about the old system ("I'm not saying the old way was perfect, but . . .") or who countered direct questions with front work, I presented myself as being interested in the consequences of reorganization or organizational problems rather than in the board as a social group or in board work as an elite social institution. Ostensible concern for the new board structure deflected attention away from the elite system *per se* and made my respondents feel more at ease. At the same time, however, I was still able to elicit the kind of data I sought since it was impossible to discuss the consequences of reorganization without

constant comparison with the past. Discussion of the new board structure proved an excellent cover for investigating the former system. Indeed, many aspects of the "old guard" boards were never explicitly recognized until reorganization disrupted taken-for-granted patterns of behavior. One example was the issue of the confidentiality of board proceedings. Because the former socially homogenous boards had closed ranks, it was only when newcomers began to "leak" information that the implicit norms governing board behavior became manifest. In my research, then, deflection reduced the self-conscious and at times defensive posture sometimes evoked by a more direct approach and provided a *reflected image* of the real research target. Chosen thoughtfully, the "dummy" interview issues may even, as in my case, provide access to information unobtainable through direct questioning.

Another way in which I deflected attention away from the main unit of analysis was to avoid displaying too much interest in information that was "juicy" from the perspective of my analysis. Rather than raising my eyebrows and risk having respondents think they had been indiscreet, or that there was something unusual or bizarre about their behavior, I tried to create the impression that the information was neither surprising nor of *intrinsic* interest to me.

A final technique for deflecting attention from the main research target was through the judicious use of note taking. I never wrote continuously during interviews, recording only key words and phrases to jog my memory later.<sup>1</sup> Occasional note taking, however, made the movement more conspicuous and appeared to signal information of value. Thus, I worked so as not to indicate the importance of certain data by immediately recording it.

### Tracking

While I sometimes found it useful to obscure what I was most interested in, it was sometimes more constructive to do the opposite. "Tracking" consisted of putting informants *on* rather than *off* the track; it attempted to elicit desired information by using cues that clarified rather than concealed the research objectives.

Tracking did not mean, however, outright disclosure of working hypotheses. Rather, it referred to the communication of selected information about the research that suggested to informants the *kinds of things* I was looking for. The most direct tracking device, of course, was explicit questioning. However, particularly in semistructured or unstructured interviewing, where the researcher follows only a rough question schedule, too many questions were sometimes disruptive, and less conspicuous tracking mechanisms were needed. Positive feedback was one such

tactic. Expression of interest, such as nods, appreciative comments, note taking, and so on reinforced desired topics or directions and had the effect of gradually aligning my informants' inputs with my analytic categories.

I also tracked by using previously learned inside information. By incorporating bits of fact, or a name or incident into my questions or comments, I communicated a number of messages to my respondents. First of all, respondents learned what I already knew and were less inclined to waste time going over familiar points. (I used inside information in this way only when the relevant analytic categories were "saturated" [Glaser and Strauss, 1967]—that is, when I no longer *needed* repetition.)

Secondly, dropping inside information made my informants better able to appreciate my level of analysis and hence to make more appropriate responses. For example, most board members were businessmen, lawyers, or financial men who were not accustomed to providing the kind of information I sought. They presumed that facts and figures were wanted and tended to perceive their own ideas and experiences, as well as many backstage details, as either irrelevant or too trivial to bother mentioning.

In contrast to the strategy of deflection, where subjects were seen as suspicious and reluctant to reveal backstage information, this tracking method assumed that informants were basically willing to talk and that this cooperativeness could be fostered by proper guidance. The strategic use of inside information was also effective when respondents felt ambivalent about talking too freely. First, respondents learned that I was "in the know," that I had penetrated through the public veneer to the underlying social reality. Front work was discouraged because they knew that I could distinguish it from backstage information and because it might look as if they were covering something up. Second, the use of insider details possibly acted to reassure reticent informants. I often had the impression that respondents felt relieved by the knowledge that they were not the only persons to make such disclosures, that initial responsibility lay with someone else, and that this person must have had reason to trust me in the first place.

An example of the use of inside information to get backstage data was the following interview question about membership criteria in the elite boards:

Tell me a bit about how the old board chose its members. I have been told, for example, that you try to get people with specific skills, or that sometimes members of families who have contributed a lot to the hospital are invited to join. What other considerations might there have been?

This approach used a bit of inside knowledge to (1) reduce repetition (by eliminating the need to elaborate the official recruitment policy of "skills and experience"); (2) illustrate the nature of the information I sought (the informal bases of recruitment); (3) discourage front work (by indicating my awareness of another level of reality); (4) and imply that others had been telling me such things, so why not they too?

The use of inside knowledge in this way, however, did have limitations. First, when I had assured my respondents that what they told me was confidential, the display of too much inside information might have caused them to doubt my sincerity. Consequently, I took care never to use sensitive details or those that could be identified too readily as coming from particular individuals. Second, while my appearing "in the know" reassured some people, others felt less threatened when I appeared to be rather naive and harmless.

### *Choice of Strategy*

Deflection and tracking, then, were two techniques that improved my access to backstage information in elite hospital boards. The former tried to divert attention away from my basic unit of analysis, the latter to highlight it. Both attempted to control front work and reduce the extent to which respondents felt threatened or distrustful. The tactics of each, however, had their pros and cons. The use of "dummy" research targets may have alleviated self-consciousness and allowed reflected images of otherwise inaccessible phenomena, but it sometimes precluded the advantages of direct questioning or of such tactics as the manipulation of insider knowledge. The use of inside information, in turn, generated trust but at times also eroded it. Playing the boob may have reduced suspicion, but it also encouraged front work. I found I had to remain constantly on the alert to avoid wasting the techniques' potential (using deflection with an uninhibited, cooperative subject); employing them in inappropriate places (displaying inside knowledge in conflict situations); allowing them to undermine each other (revealing inside information while playing the boob); or pushing them to the point of diminishing returns (deflecting attention so far from the unit of analysis that the data became irrelevant).

Few specific rules govern the application of these and other interview techniques. It is primarily a question of judgment and experience; the researcher learns instinctively which tactic might be effective in drawing out an informant.

At the beginning of every interview, I spent time chatting on a very general level with my informant, starting perhaps with "Tell me a bit about your involvement with this hospital." The question was relatively innocuous but, because it centered on the person, it allowed me to get a

"feel" for his personality, the nature of his involvement, and his probable response to various approaches. I never commenced the interview in earnest until this was established, preferring to "waste" time on peripheral matters than risk choosing the wrong approach.

Interview strategy, however, must constantly evolve. Throughout the session, the researcher must always be prepared to test tactics, alter approaches, patch mistakes, jump at sudden opportunities. After the interview, it is essential to go through the field notes and to review the event in its entirety in order to assess what went right or wrong and why. With each subsequent interview, researchers find that their instincts become more accurate, which maximizes the effectiveness of their tactics and improves their access to the desired level of social experience.

Douglas (1976) has criticized classical field research for assuming that informants will be essentially open and cooperative in imparting information and sharing their experiences. He proposes an "investigative" paradigm based on the assumption that "... profound conflict of interests, values feelings and actions pervade social life. . . . Instead of trusting people and expecting trust in return, one suspects others and expects others to suspect him." (p. 55).

Essentially, I agree with him. In my research, the act of board reorganization itself implied that something was lacking and undemocratic about the old system. This implicit accusation naturally put many of the "old guard" board members on the defensive. Failure to appreciate such inherent conflict would have prevented me from achieving the trust and frankness essential to the study. For example, some of the details that interested me the most—such as informal decision-making processes and the significance of social homogeneity for how the former boards worked—were those which my informants were the least disposed to reveal. Recognition of this conflict of interest meant a more appropriate choice of interview strategy.

At the same time, however, I think Douglas goes too far in rejecting the notion of cooperation. To assume that certain individuals want to keep their beliefs or behaviors private is to make just as many a priori judgments as to assume that they will willingly expose themselves. For example, one reason boards of directors have not been widely studied may be that researchers *assume* their activities are private and that board members will be tight-lipped. I found, however, that much of what went on at the board level was "private" only because no one on the outside ever expressed any interest in it. Similarly, as I have already mentioned, many board members talked in general, noncommittal terms not because they were trying to conceal what was going on but because they simply had no idea what kind of information I wanted. To assume conflict of interest in this case would have led to the use of deflection tactics where

tracking techniques, which assume a cooperative posture, might have been more productive.

In other words, the researcher must be cautious about making a priori assessments of what "ought" to constitute a conflict-suspicion research situation. The will to cooperate cannot be taken for granted, but its absence may be due to factors other than conflict of interest or fear of exposure. Moreover, individuals are not *either* trusting *or* suspicious. They may be frank and open in one instance, evasive and deceptive in another. Researchers should not prejudge what areas of their respondents' knowledge or experience is private or public. This information must be established empirically through trial and error or important data may be sacrificed.

### SUMMARY

This selection concerns the problem of access in field research. Drawing on my fieldwork experience in a study of hospital boards of directors and their elite membership, I secured interviews with high-ranking community leaders and enhanced my access to backstage data through the use of social ties and membership status and through such interview strategies as tracking and deflection. These strategies were based on the recognition that interviews are *social encounters* in which respondents are influenced by how they perceive their interviewer and the nature of the research.

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## Discovering Amorphous Social Experience: The Case of Chronic Pain

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Amorphous social experiences are those facets of everyday life that are unique to individuals and not specific kinds of settings. The sociological study of these existential experiences of self, rich in their social forms and implications, requires innovative strategies for "getting in," since the researcher cannot expect to locate them (or representative examples of them) in any one setting, as would be possible in the examination of bureaucratic or organizational behavior. Whereas the entry into a single setting can be accomplished through a one-time effort of locating the appropriate setting, negotiating and selling the project to the hosts, and so on, the researcher of amorphous social experience must be prepared to encounter numerous and various entry situations, especially if the experience in question transcends age, sex, occupation, ethnic, and status categories. The experience of health and illness is a good example of an amorphous phenomenon that is more fully understood sociologically if the researcher is not restricted to the constraints of a single setting.

Traditionally, sociologists of health and illness have located their subject matter within normal medical settings. This "sociology in medicine" approach (Strauss, 1957:203) denotes a situation in which "the basic concepts utilized by a researcher as well as the primary research problems are taken from authorized professional or organizational officials" (Kotarba, 1975:150). In effect, general explanations of health and illness experiences are implicitly grounded in only one facet of the experiences—namely, the situational involvement with official medical interventions. Little attention is paid to coping mechanisms in operation during the vast majority of time not spent in the doctor's office or hospital.

My own research on the chronic pain experience has clearly demon-