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Interviewing policymaker elites: improving lessons for researchers at the evidence-policy interface

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ABSTRACT

The evidence-policy-interface is a two-way street: policymakers and researchers both benefit from sharing insights about the problems that governments face and how they seek solutions. Yet, too often, the response is one-way activity: investment in a research-to-policy infrastructure to help academics send evidence to policymakers. This engagement is ineffective unless academics draw on research to understand the policy process in which they engage. Most engaged academics are not policy scientists; they rely on policy sciences for knowledge of policy processes. While there is an impressive body of policy research, and some is based on interviews with policymakers, there is no equivalent-sized infrastructure for policy process researchers. Our knowledge of policymaking is insufficient because most policy scientists are not well supported to conduct elite-interview research. Then, this lack of capacity makes most academics ill-prepared to engage effectively in the evidence-policy interface. While we cannot solve this problem overnight, we can stimulate reflection-driven improvement, including by revisiting guidance to policy scientists conducting elite research. To that end, we review current advice to help formalize this guidance and provoke reflection on the state of interview-informed knowledge. We argue that elite interviewing has become logistically easier but politically harder when elites are disincentivised to share perspectives with outsiders. Overcoming this trust barrier may depend on practices beyond those outlined in standard qualitative research methods and ethics processes. If so, access to policy insights and knowledge might remain limited. We need better ways to facilitate academic-policymaker exchange.

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1. Introduction

An effective evidence-policy-interface requires two-way knowledge exchange: researchers can only offer meaningful policy-relevant evidence if they understand the policy process in which they engage. Yet, this interface is too often viewed as a one-way street, where researchers supply evidence for policymakers - to understand problems and generate solutions- in a "linear" way (Best and Holmes 2010). There have been major investments in infrastructure to help academics draw on more "relational" and "systems" approaches, or work with intermediaries such as knowledge brokers, but with a modest impact on engagement strategies and outcomes (Oliver et al. 2022). A key problem is that most engaged academics are not policy scientists or informed by policy science. Too few researchers or academic brokers gain enough knowledge of policy processes to know with whom they should cultivate relationships or how evidence-policy systems inform policymaking systems, often prompting naïve and ineffectual strategies for engagement (Cairney and Oliver 2020).

State-of-the-art policy process research is essential to filling these gaps in researcher knowledge, and current policy process theory and empirical research has the potential to inform the design of effective research engagement (Cairney 2016; Head 2010). However, when compared to the research engagement infrastructure, policy elite research is ill-supported. This lack of support and capacity undermines evidence-informed research engagement. While this problem may be most acute with

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early career researchers, most academics may struggle to know how to engage effectively in the evidence-policy interface.

While we cannot solve this problem overnight, we can at least stimulate reflection-driven improvement, such as by revisiting what support is available to policy scientists conducting elite research. Here, we focus on current guidance to budding elite researchers, to note: (1) a high reliance on informal advice, reflecting a patchy infrastructure of support, and (2) the limited ability of researchers to take it, reflecting key obstacles to conducting effective research.

First, early career researchers largely rely on academic texts to give them broad and often logistical advice. If they are lucky, they can access a wealth of informal guidance produced by experienced researchers who have learned the hard way and are in the process of adapting their approaches to online environments. Hence, our initial contribution is to formalize and share useful guidance gleaned from written and unwritten sources. This approach builds on a tradition of updating elite interview advice (e.g. Davies 2001; Lilleker 2003; Morris 2009; Richards 1996; Richardson 2014), such as to reflect the growing disincentives of elites to engage (Harvey 2011; Neal and Mclaughlin 2009). It also draws on experience of research and supervision to compare published and unpublished advice.

Second, we argue that – currently – too few researchers are able to take this advice: there are barriers to elite engagement, and only some researchers can overcome them. In some ways, this engagement process has never been easier: technological change facilitates connections, online conversation, and transcription. Yet, this relative ease is deceptive, because the main obstacles to meaningful knowledge exchange are not logistical. In more important aspects, this task is harder: elites are often unable or unwilling to share perspectives with outsiders unless they have some reason to put their trust in relative strangers. The rules or norms in many government agencies limit access for outsiders and incentivize elites to limit their engagement. They can be reluctant to participate due to government protocols and conventions, scrutiny on government through reviews and inquiries, and longstanding issues around workload and management of sensitive topics. Valuable elite reflections may enter the public record long after the event and as part of set-piece conversations (Boswell et al. 2024). On more pressing issues, they may provide bland general insights unless they can trust their interviewers enough to share the good stuff. Generating this trust depends on practices that go beyond a standard interview schedule and ethics template, prompting the need to identify and interrogate key ethical dilemmas in the politics of knowledge production, identify the incentives to take relative risks when seeking new knowledge, and consider the wider benefits – to the research-policy interface - of generating these insights.

We use three key examples to demonstrate these dilemmas that arise whenever elites need more than the standard assurance of confidentiality (from formal University human ethics processes) to reduce their concerns about risk and to feel empowered to speak freely. First, the importance of personal professional networks to secure access. Much informal advice is about working established connections with risk-averse interviewees who are often under pressure to be less public facing. If so, only connected elites may have relative access to elites. Second, whether to cede control of issues such as recording and anonymising. There are tradeoffs between providing high confidentiality for elites to obtain deep research insights on their experiences, versus the high precision and transparency of recording to analyze the data systematically in a way that can be externally scrutinized. Third, whether to perform in a deferential manner during interview. In the absence of trust, there may be tradeoffs between prioritizing a challenging stance during interviews (a common approach in social science) or a more placatory or deferential approach if it produces more forthcoming interviewees.

Hence, our review of advice on elite research should prompt reflection on the wider issue of the evidence-policy interface. If too few researchers can engage in the way we suggest, should there be a more supportive infrastructure to facilitate more continuous and open knowledge exchange, akin to the push for considerable investment in research-to-policy initiatives? Without this support for policy sciences, most researchers across many disciplines will remain ill-informed and ineffective when engaging with policy processes.

2. A review of guides to interviewing elites: from practical to political issues

A wealth of detailed case studies of policymaking rely on interviews with policy elites. Policy elites are the senior people making or influencing decisions in government or public sector. Their insights come

from "proximity to power or particular professional expertise," such as when actors enjoy "important social networks, social capital and strategic positions" (Harvey 2011; Lancaster 2017). They develop invaluable insider knowledge through experience, which can contribute to research-policy exchange – as well as institutional memory and wider public understanding of government - if harnessed in a systematic way.

Some valuable elite reflections are in the public record, but often long after the event or as part of set-piece conversations with relatively senior or high-profile policymakers following their departure from the post (e.g. Boswell et al. 2024). Other perspectives, on policy processes that are difficult for most people to understand, remain in the minds of elites unless researchers can gain access to conduct semi-structured interviews. This search for access has distinctive elements compared to other fields of qualitative interviewing, relating to the rules or norms in many government agencies which limit access for outsiders and incentivize elites to limit their engagement. They can be reluctant to participate due to government protocols and conventions, scrutiny on government through reviews and inquiries, and longstanding issues around workload and management of sensitive topics. For example, the confidential nature of advice given to ministers and Cabinet limits what civil servants can discuss. In such cases, the first task of ethical interviewing is to minimize the risk of harm to elite participants.

There is a long history of policymaking studies trying to incorporate such dynamics when interviewing elites and reflecting on the results (Berry 2002; Van Audenhove and Donders 2019). Some of this literature has tackled the longstanding practical challenges regarding the considerable time to wait for replies and agreement to meet, scheduling issues with busy elites whose calendars may change at the last minute, and the time and money required to travel to in-person meetings (Odendahl and Shaw 2002; Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003; Van Audenhove & Donders; 2019). Such guides have provided useful practical advice for postgraduate students or early career researchers not knowing where to start or not aware of the likely difficulties of securing time with elites (Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Harvey 2011; Lancaster 2017; Morris 2009; Odendahl and Shaw 2002).

In this context, any contemporary focus on practicalities may prove to be deceptive, since early career researchers may be witnessing a new age in which technological changes remove many historic barriers to making connections (such as via email and social media), holding conversations (online), and even transcribing the results. This relative ease is deceptive because the main obstacles to meaningful knowledge exchange relate to political and relational rather than technical issues. Political and relational dilemmas relate to the potential harms of interviewing and the assurances required to build trust in the interview process. Indeed, the absence of face-to-face discussion could present additional problems relating to trust if an initial face-to-face connection is essential (Cairney and Toomey 2024).

In other words, if the proposed interview process seems to be all gains for researchers but potentially profound losses for elites, why would the latter agree to help the former? One general answer is that interviewers have assured interviewees that they can trust in the process enough to minimize the risk of harm. For example, professional ethics processes help to ensure that participants can manage their participation and remain anonymous. However, elites may need researchers to go further to reduce their exposure, such as by:

- Interviewees agreeing to take part only if the interviewer is a known quantity, such as if they are known personally or through common networks.
- Interviewers agreeing to not record the interview, such as to allow a degree of deniability or focus on background information.
- Interviewers performing a stylized role to encourage interviewees to go beyond stock answers, such as by deferring to their authority or expertise.

If so, the results for most researchers may be patchy, prompting them to build their case studies on limited access and bolster them with other methods such as documentary analysis. We may be facing the streetlight effect in which researchers gather where there is most light, such as by speaking to whoever is easiest to identify and access or whoever feels the least at risk (Freedman 2010; Iyengar 1993). Clearly, the result is often valuable, but the challenges should prompt periodic reflection on how individual researchers engage in qualitative research and if a wider infrastructure would help to improve the overall quality of the results.

In that context, our brief review of this advice for researchers goes beyond (1) common technical advice on identifying participants, securing access, conducting interviews, and managing the data; toward (2) reflections on the political dimensions, tradeoffs, and dilemmas of modern elite interviewing that are often left implicit or underdiscussed in published advice. Relevant techniques could look quite different from the standard research approach of requesting interviews via an impersonal email, recording and transcribing each interview, and performing traditional academic strategies, such as to remain detached, or to challenge responses routinely. In each case, there is potentially a tension between seeking to maximize (1) academic professional accountability via a formal and standardized ethics approved research approach, promoting transparency, consistency, and repeatability, or (2) generating insights from well-guarded insider knowledge (too often dismissed as anecdotal), via responsiveness, agility and creativity in interviewing techniques. Therefore, with each example, we reflect on the unequal individual ability to conduct elite research, general advice on how researchers can respond, and how to support the more systematic production of policymaking knowledge so essential to the evidence-policy interface.

2.1. Using connections to identify and access the right policy elites

It is difficult to identify and secure interviews with senior public servants. Issues of access, privacy, and transparency vary between countries and across public agencies but there are some common themes (e.g. Davies 2001; Richardson 2014). Accessing elites for interview often comes down to existing networks and connections, but this insight is not a routine part of research write-ups and often arises in informal discussions during paper presentations at conferences or PhD viva reflections (when prompted, PhD authors often recount the importance of professional or even family connections). Different strategies are required depending on whether you have an existing relationship that can be leveraged (Feldman, Bell, and Berger 2003). If yes, use them for all they are worth. If no, it may still be possible to use publicly available information - about public sector organisations and their senior executives - to identify the right interviewees, and find further details that can assist in gaining interest and buy-in. In that context, the most sought-after practical aspect regards getting started: how can researchers leverage their networks, relationships, or expertise to make first contact?

General advice tends to focus on finding some kind of way to find and build on a personal or professional connection (or seek second-best solutions). The initial aim is to personalize a direct approach, to indicate during first contact that you have some connection to – or at least knowledge of – your potential interviewee. This initial focus on connections and quick wins is essential to further engagement. Snowballing helps to build on initial connections, especially in relatively closed settings where informal networks are essential (e.g. Davies 2001; Richardson 2014).

For example, public sector interviewees are more amenable to participating in research when they have a clear, existing connection to the researchers and/or policy topic (if outlined in a brief and clear email). There is no way to ensure that an existing relationship is in place in advance, but there are opportunities to build a professional connection with potential interviewees: identifying mutual connections; attending relevant professional events; or engaging with materials related to the prospective interviewee. Or, if the researcher does not have a direct connection with policymaking elites, the next-best options may be to identify mutual contacts using professional networks, from asking research colleagues to share their relevant connections, to signaling that you are researching for a well-recognised research organization or are working with senior researchers with a strong reputation in your field, or simply checking on LinkedIn if you have contacts in common. In some cases, it is possible to identify an amenable "connector" or "handler" who is adjacent to the policymaking elite related to your field of interest. This could be someone working in external relations - for example the media contact for a politician or government department – if you identify the names of those most likely to have insights (otherwise they may find someone more junior and available). Many government departments and agencies have publicly available organisational charts to help find a specific name and role. If a direct contact cannot be identified, check if relevant actors participate in publicly accessible events or have recorded online seminars, or if they are referenced in publicly available documents like articles, reviews or inquiries. Many policy fields will have a peak body

organisation that hosts policy relevant events (a key source of contacts), or policy-targeted publications which reference policy actors (e.g. the Mandarin in Australia and Civil Service World in the UK). Reviews, inquiries, and parliamentary processes also publish transcripts which can be a source of public sector actors. This homework also allows you to personalize the direct approach by indicating that you understand their subject matter expertise and will not waste their time.

2.2. "Doing your homework" and maintaining confidentiality to build trust

It is difficult to gain the trust of someone you have just met, especially in a context where they have a strong incentive to maintain insider confidentiality. Public sector organisations may also have codes of conduct that prioritise data and information security. Therefore, once you have secured a meeting with a policy elite, the objective is to draw on well-established ways to build sufficient trust for meaningful engagement. Much of the existing literature focuses on trust techniques in terms of three ways to project professionalism and credibility, while a fourth examines the dilemma of maintaining unusually high levels of confidentiality (Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Berry 2002; Desmond 2004; Goldstein 2002; Harvey 2011).

First, clearly re-state the purpose of the research and how you will comply with public sector expectations of confidentiality. Busy elites may not recall or read the information provided in advance. A brief summary can put people at ease, to help the interviewee to orient themselves. Further, reiterating that you do not intend to directly quote interviewees (and explaining how you will manage information) can reassure the participant that their involvement will not create a professional or organisational risk. Second, help the interviewee understand your role and position. There is an art to determining what will be most effective and appropriate. You could indicate that you are an impartial observer - "outsider" status – to offer some comfort on sensitive research topics. On other topics, you may indicate your expertise, connections, and research interest - "insider" status – in the policy area to indicate that you will understand the nuances of what is being discussed (Atkins and Wallace 2012). There are no hard and fast rules. They depend on the topic, interviewer, and interviewee contributing to a receptive conversational environment. Still, building trust and rapport is more challenging to establish for those new to research or who do not have public sector experience. Third, note that professionalism is inextricably linked with being organized enough to ensure a seamless experience for the interviewee (Baker 2013; Edwards and Holland 2013: 82; Goldstein 2002; Mikecz 2012; Walford 1994). Boost interviewer trust by showing familiarity with the current policy context and relevant publicly available information about the interviewee. There is likely to be more information available about politicians than senior bureaucrats, but policy reviews and public inquiries can often inform both. This preparatory work saves time in covering basic contextual information and allows you to move more quickly to substantive content.

Fourth, regardless of your level of professionalism, any discussion of the current context can often be challenging for policy elites facing scrutiny through the media or formal inquiries. Indeed, they may have been trained about how to reduce risk by sharing as little as possible and sticking narrowly to the question to hand (e.g. Mikecz 2012: 484 on "public relations" interviews; see also Duke 2002: 46-8 on turning off the recording to get beyond the "official line"). Some practical solutions are to reiterate the confidential nature of your interview, that quotations will be anonymized (or not used), and that the interviewee could have the opportunity to review the paper before it is made publicly available. Such assurances are particularly important for less senior officials (i.e. not departmental or agency heads) unsure about confidentiality requirements and public service codes of conduct. The level of perceived risk of participating in the research will influence how you frame the interview up front, and how you manage questions throughout.

At the start of the interview, it is typical to gauge the interviewee's comfort with recording. In the experience of the authors, policymaking elites will usually allow the interview to be recorded if given assurances of confidentiality (and the chance to not record some answers). However, in some cases, the "deal" may be that civil servants will talk if they remain fully anonymized and only offer background information (rather than pseudonymised with reference to a generic title – e.g. Cairney 2017; Cairney and St.Denny 2020). There is sometimes an early indication that the interviewee will only

tell you interesting details if there is no recording and therefore the ability to deny insider knowledge-sharing. In these situations, consider how to flexibly manage the situation. You can attempt to take detailed notes, but this is challenging in real-time while considering follow-up questions. Rather, capture brief bullet point notes, and sit down immediately after the interview to document your detailed reflections.

Clearly, this choice to record/not record highlights a tradeoff in terms of quality of responses vs quality of systematic analysis. Modern research training often emphasizes making a recording, then a transcript, then a structured analysis so that qualitative research can be interrogated systematically (although Rutakumwa et al. 2020 challenge the idea that non-recording is second best). This means that decisions around recording should be taken deliberately. If you believe that you cannot get genuine, detailed input from an elite interviewee, you will need to consider the potential implications for both the format of your output (e.g. can you manage without detailed quotes?) and any scrutiny of your work (e.g. if there are expectations from your institution that PhD research should include recorded transcripts for transparency).

Technological and social change also influences this calculus (Vaagland 2024). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the literature on interviewing elite informants mildly cautioned against telephone and online interviews if they reduced the ability to use social cues to consider how to adapt to the interview dynamic and foster trust-based sharing of insider knowledge (Van Audenhove and Donders 2019). More recently, there have been substantial technical improvements to videoconferencing to the extent that we may have reached a tipping point: the benefits of online interviews have increased while the costs have reduced. For example, arranging an online meeting can increase the chance that an elite will fit you into their schedule (as well as reducing logistical challenges), provided that the chosen technology meets the interviewee's security and software requirements. The online option is also more reliable in functionality, while recording and transcribing facilities are comparable to manual transcripts. Therefore, online interviewing may become the default option for many, which should prompt greater reflection on the implications for trust-building and power dynamics.

2.3. Performing interviewing approaches to navigate power dynamics

It is difficult to know how to perform in research interviews to generate the most useful insights from policy elites. Some of these issues relate to context, practice and practicalities. For example, most interviews will be semi-structured with some flexibility to follow specific threads depending on how each question is answered (or relating to their specific role). If so, it can be helpful in advance to role-play with another researcher to test whether the interview questions are clear and flow naturally, and to gain experience in pivoting between topics where required. It allows interviewers to become comfortable with uncertainty and practice taking a flexible and responsive approach to meet emerging expectations of the elite interviewee (who will expect flexibility given that they are providing their time for no cost, while making time to support your research despite their busy schedule).

A more profound issue relates to the power dynamics in interviewing policy elites, relating to the status, seniority, and demographics – such as the gender or race or ethnicity - of both parties. Talking online may mitigate some of these dynamics, such as if it helps to reduce the effect of government office security (especially if interviewees talk from home – Vaagland 2024: 4). The literature also includes some advice on how to cultivate a positive dynamic through adjusting communication styles (Harvey 2011; Lancaster 2017, Lilleker 2003; Li 2022), such as to "make interviews seem like a good talk among old friends" (Berry 2002). This approach seeks to establish a level playing field rather than a deferential approach, but this is a decision that should be taken intentionally, while recognizing that this dynamic is not in the control of the interviewer. For some elite interviewees, a detached and deferential tone may encourage them to be more open and generous in sharing information than if they feel they are speaking to a peer who may be more critical or judgmental. Decide which tone and mode of engagement is likely to yield the most detailed and useful data.

There are other considerations about positioning and performance when the researcher is more junior than the interviewee. Gauge your comfort with "performing" in a certain manner to build rapport and encourage interviewees to share information. For example, some argue that a deferential

approach can lead to being "talked down to" by interviewees (Conti and O'Neil 2007). Others may emphasize the potential benefits of having interviewees explain their decisions and experiences in greater detail in response to believing that the interviewer will need additional information to understand the context, but there is clearly a difference in each scenario. For example, performing the role of a visitor to the country may prompt some useful interviewee reflection on their specific context; while being expected to perform according to, say, a male interviewee's desire to talk down to a female interviewer may produce knowledge benefits but the costs associated with experiencing a lack of respect (e.g. McEvoy 2006: 185 on being called ""love," "dear" or "lass"" as if representing their daughter; Duke 2002: 53 on navigating a sense of being treated as "harmless").

More generally, an early career researcher will likely feel less powerful and go into receiving mode rather than being willing or able to create the conditions for a conversation between equals. Or, they may hide personal or political beliefs to anticipate interviewee concerns of being on different sides of a charged political debate. Examples include Whitty and Edwards (1994) on winning and losing from these perceptions of bias among each "side," and Ross (2001: 161) on using her political positions strategically to secure candid interviews whenever "seen as "one of them" ."

The emphasis in general advice is that, if possible, you should determine how directional you wish to be in your line of questioning. For example, Cunningham-Sabot (1999) proposes that interviewers should consider whether you want to take a *miner* approach seeking to "dig nuggets of meaning" from the interviewee's experiences without using leading questions, or a *traveler* approach where you lead the interviewee to tell their story through conversation. Still, the interviewee will play a large role in setting the dynamics of this interaction, which will shape the tone and direction of the conversation. There is an unavoidable need to take a flexible approach, given how many small choices must be made in adapting the interview approach to suit the needs of the elite interviewee and to generate more frank and detailed data.

Similar issues arise with general advice on ethics. They suggest that flexible approaches need to be managed sensitively to ensure an ethical approach, to avoid unintentionally manipulating the data collected (such as via leading questions) or contravening what was agreed via formal ethics approval (which does not really cover power dynamics or the need to pivot lines of questioning). There is a question of whether highly "flexible" interviewing challenges aspects of the formal ethics process (consent forms, standard interview request approaches, set interview questions), whereas the flexibility required to build rapport with elite interviewees could require creative approaches like sharing points of common interest and using humor (Marshall 1984). Ultimately there is a judgment call that researchers must make about how closely to adhere to the standard interview process as outlined in the formal ethics submission, and how to appropriately adapt to respond to the context of each interview. However, without much experience – or access to informal advice – it may be difficult for early career researchers to make such judgements.

Additional judgment calls arise during the analysis and communication of interview data, which presents more opportunities for researchers to exert their power via interpretation and – necessarily selective - presentation. The literature notes the likelihood that elites will want to exert some control over the research process and findings as well as how they are presented (Conti and O'Neil 2007; Lancaster 2017). Therefore, be transparent up-front around how data will be used, attribution will be managed, and the research findings will be disseminated (Harvey 2011). Still, researchers are responsible for balancing the need to respect the interviewees' autonomy in determining what contribution they make to the findings, and the overall quality of the research findings which may be impacted by such changes. Assertive communication between the researcher and the interviewee is all-important at this stage. If an impasse is reached in follow-up communication, there may be value in further online discussion to find a mutually acceptable outcome, albeit subject to the same power dynamics that produced such dilemmas.

Overall, these considerations suggest that interviewing policy elites requires reflexive, context-sensitive judgement in real time. Approach each interview as a substantive and relational task: prepare thoroughly, but expect to adapt; be clear about your ethical boundaries, but recognise that rapport often requires responsive, improvised communication. Practically, this means rehearsing flexibility (for

example, through role-play), being intentional about tone and positioning, and reflecting in advance on how you will respond to moments of discomfort or imbalance. Keeping brief field notes immediately after interviews can support ongoing reflexivity about what worked, what did not, and why. In this sense, developing interviewing expertise involves cultivating both technical competence and situational awareness, alongside a willingness to critically reflect on how positionality shapes the data that can be generated.

3. Conclusions

Policy elite research matters: not only to policy process researchers but also the far larger academic community that is reliant on their insights when engaging with policymakers. It deserves high respect and institutional support to ensure the continuous production of essential knowledge of policy processes and support the next generation of policy relevant research. In that context, our account of the dilemmas of elite interviewing are deliberately provocative, to shine more light on the potential for policy elite research to become an academic elite craft that goes beyond the standard policy process research toolkit. There are benefits to sharing and extending the practice wisdom of those academic researchers with sufficient levels of access, the ability to record, and the status to be trusted with sensitive policy insights from the elites in this field.

We still find a tendency for most researchers not to reflect on the politics of these imbalances in the research process, and for general guides to spend relatively little time on the questions of power and interview dilemmas that new researchers will face. Rather, these issues tend to arise in informal discussions and unpublished accounts which suggest that existing social and professional connections are key to access, that researchers make the most concessions (regarding recording and anonymity) to gain otherwise inaccessible information, and that the interview process and results are not in interviewer control. Honest accounts reflect on the value of preparation and some assertiveness, but also their lack of control over the proceedings or outcomes (at least compared to their control over subsequent interpretation). They inform an "on the one hand, on the other hand" problem in which key choices relate to tradeoffs outside of researcher control. For example, we may advise researchers to provide some degree of deference to build rapport and confidence in the process, but also ensure a degree of challenge to get beyond a bland official response of party line; and to record some interviews for transparent and systematic analysis but not record others if that helps to gain information that would not otherwise the given. If so, we may end up fostering individual researcher discretion (on the one hand) but also subject to strict rules on ethical conduct and professional expectations for analyzing the results (on the other).

These issues of elite interviewing have much wider implications: they undermine the chance to support a high-quality evidence-policy interface. A wealth of academic researchers have essential knowledge to share with policymakers, but too few know where to start or how to engage, partly because they have access to few systematic written guides based on insider knowledge of policymaking. Policy process research is essential and impressive, but also rather patchy when drawing directly on policy elite knowledge. The dilemmas that we describe have contributed to a wider academic professional inability to generate essential knowledge of policy processes and use it to design effective evidence-policy interfaces.

Without this insider-informed policy process knowledge, most engaged researchers have too often put their faith in linear approaches, transmitting evidence via reports that do not reach the right audiences or do not gain any traction (Best and Holmes 2010; Oliver et al. 2022). Or, some may be persuaded of the benefits of relational approaches but without knowing with whom to engage, in multi-level policymaking systems where the locus of responsibility and action is difficult to locate. Further, few will be able to make connections between the vague notion of evidence-policy "ecosystems" and the policymaking systems to which they somehow relate (Cairney 2024). Policy research is essential to this wider conversation, and it requires routine and systematic access to insider knowledge. If the systematic generation and sharing of academic research evidence is essential, then so too is a more systematic way to generate research on the policy processes in which academics and policymakers engage.

Therefore, we present two key messages from our review of advice for policy elite research. The first regards the quality of our knowledge of policy processes: the practices to emerge from formal and informal advice are unsystematic and the knowledge to emerge is shared selectively and unequally, producing patchy knowledge of policy processes. This problem is compounded by a tendency for our academic colleagues to note that they often get the best insider knowledge from their own informal conversations during research-policy-exchange, which is not treatable as research to be shared with others and merely boosts an informal economy of elite-to-elite insights that few can access. The second is that this need for systematic support for policy elite research is just as important as support for the evidence-policy interface. It is encouraging to see so much investment in the infrastructure to support researchers engaging with policymakers to share scientific knowledge. It is discouraging to see so much engagement built on so little knowledge of how policy processes work. If we are to take the evidence-policy interface seriously, it requires proper investment and support for researchers engaging with policy elites to understand and share knowledge of policymaking for the real world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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