

Continuing the theme of the direction of travel for sociology, Narzanin Massoumi, David Miller and Tom Mills say more research on elites is needed...

At this year's British Sociological Association's annual conference we are holding a special event on 'researching the powerful'. We want to encourage more direct research on powerful individuals, organisations and networks in sociology. This could include a wide sweep of studies, including research on the social background, education, milieu and identity formation of the super-rich, the corporate elite or state officials, and their direct role in business, politics, civil society and culture. We suggest that the bias towards researching 'downwards', evident in mainstream sociology, narrows our ethical and methodological imagination, and is in need of rethinking to better understand power structures in contemporary societies.

What is 'studying up'? In 1972, the anthropologist Laura Nader popularized the term 'studying up', suggesting that anthropologists should cast their eyes up from the exotic tribe overseas towards the institutions of power and authority that govern Western societies.

A similar argument was advanced by Bill Domhoff, perhaps the best known sociological advocate of studying up. He famously studied Bohemian Grove, the annual retreat of the Californian, indeed US, economic and political elite. In 1975 he reflected: "Where is the sociologist or urban anthropologist who will spend summers in wealthy resort towns instead of big city ghettos? Where is the linguistics student who will use his or her voice analyser to study ruling class speech instead of Appalachian dialect? Where is the social anthropologist who will study debutante balls, fox hunts, and ruling class rituals and displays instead of primitive initiation rites in the South Pacific? We need these studies too, but the people to do them have not yet materialised." (Domhoff 1975: 182)

Bohemian Grove has remained a subject of sociological interest, but to older groupings such as Bilderberg, the Trilateral Commission or the Mont Pelerin Society, we can add a host of newer ventures such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), the British American Project, the Franco-British Colloque, or the German Königswinter conference. These newer elite gatherings reflect to some extent the transnationalisation

We should aim our attention at powerful institutions and the super-rich

of business and politics, and we now have a significant number of studies of this form of elite social action, including on Wall Street, the WEF, the WTO, the IMF and the European Commission and Parliament. Few elite gatherings share the reputation for hard drinking and anti-social behaviour of Bohemian Grove, but they function in much the same way: as a venue for national and transnational elites to commune, to iron out arguments, muster support and to consolidate elite agendas and ideas.

How do we research the powerful? At one level the case for researching them is obvious: they are the people and institutions that take decisions that affect us all and reproduce the systemic inequalities and injustices of the contemporary world. But how should we conduct this research?

One might assume that we can simply adopt the same co-operative methods used in studying down. Karen Duke, who notes the "importance of switching the research gaze from the 'objects' of policy to those who are in the powerful positions of 'making' policy" (Duke, 2002), argues that a "qualitative approach" to fieldwork "offers distinct advantages in studying policy networks". By this she means that interviewing "those involved in the policy networks and engaging them in discussion [is] the only way to generate rich and detailed data on their perceptions and experiences".

This, however, neglects the possibility that the perceptions and reported experiences of

elites may not be a reliable guide. As Khan & Jerolmack (2013) put it, this may amount to the difference between "saying meritocracy and doing privilege". Perhaps equally of note, though, is the possibility of deception or misinformation in elite interviews. Co-operative methods, with their emphasis on cultivating a rapport, mutual respect and trust, can undermine the ability to examine or unearth deception, including elite self-deception.

Khan's well known (2011) study *Privilege* (on the upper class boarding school he attended as a child and returned to as a teacher) adopts an ethnographic approach. He writes that "focusing on the discrepancy between participants' accounts and their actions is one of the greatest analytical strengths of ethnography". In this he is in the company of a significant number of sociological and anthropological studies that have focused on powerful institutions.

But access is a major issue here. Powerful individuals and institutions are able, by virtue of their positional advantages, to control research access, and indeed to inhibit or disrupt the activities of those who would study up. The existence of state secrecy and the practical power of state, governmental and corporate bureaucracies to deny access to researchers who would tell the truth about, as well as to, power is a key reason why sociologists studying the powerful may need to look beyond co-operative methods. In the absence of ethnographic access sanctioned by

the body being researched, such as in the case of the ethnography of the WTO initiated by Pascal Lamy – then Director-General of the WTO (Deeb and Marcus 2011) – access to data needs to be secured in other ways.

One solution is to try and attend meetings, seminars, conferences or other events involving, or run by, the research subject. Thus, we have studies of the WEF (Garsten and Sörbom, 2017), the Earth Summit (Little 1995) and other global environmental meetings (Campbell et al 2014), based on the attendance at, and observation of, meetings and seminars. In anthropology there is interest in both ‘organisational anthropology’ (Niezen and Sapignoli, 2017) and in ‘meeting ethnography’ (Sandler and Thedvall 2017), and the latter is an important and, so far, under-exploited technique in sociology. But it is not the only way to access data on the powerful.

One alternative approach is investigative research. Rather than seeking permission to undertake research on the powerful, the investigative tradition sees direct investigation of powerful individuals, organisations and networks as something that citizens, including researchers, have a right to do, which needs no permission.

While investigative research is often associated with investigative journalism, and the two traditions share many techniques and skills, it is salutary to remember that there is also an investigative tradition in forensic psychology, in law and legal research and, of course, in the police and intelligence agencies. The political class also engages in investigation, which in the US is called ‘opposition research’ (Zilliox 2006).

The investigative tradition is exemplified in the first book to be devoted to the topic, written by sociologist Jack Douglas (1976). Douglas sums up the approach as follows: “Conflict is the reality of life, suspicion is the guiding principle” (Douglas, 1976: 55). Douglas has been criticised on the basis that necessary scepticism can “harden into cynicism and a contempt for those studied” (Lee 1993: 148). But assuming this can be resisted, it is perhaps sensible to encourage scepticism (or suspicion) in studying up, given the very grave nature of the problems faced by our society.

Investigative research uses a tool box of techniques, all of which can be utilised in combination with more traditional methods such as interviews, focus groups, surveys and ethnography. Techniques include the regular and systematic use of public records; advanced internet research to locate materials not easily accessible, including in the ‘hidden web’; the use of documentary evidence obtained from litigation, leaks and whistleblowers; and freedom of information legislation (Powerbase 2017).

The era of big data has, moreover, meant a further step change in the materials available on powerful institutions and organisations. There is now the possibility of accessing or creating datasets via scraping from public



online sources, including social media, but also from other sources of publicly available online data.

All sources of data can be used to triangulate against each other and build a picture of groups and networks that would have been unimaginable in previous decades, or would have taken many times longer to compile.

Is investigative research unethical? Perhaps a secondary point to make here is that in addition to the question of methods, there are also issues relating to research ethics. We think it is neither necessary, nor desirable, to treat the powerful as if they were like other research subjects.

Instead there are a series of questions about anonymity, duty of care and harm to respondents that oblige us to differentiate studying up from studying down. As researchers, we are obliged to protect research subjects from harm, especially in the case of vulnerable participants. But the powerful are different. We investigate or interview them in their professional capacities, and are not, or not usually, interested in their personal lives or preferences. Their accountability to democratic norms is a key issue, which rarely applies when studying down. We can offer anonymisation where necessary, but public officials should in

‘It is not necessary or desirable to treat the powerful as if they were like other research subjects’

Photos:

Above left: Tom Mills

Above: David Miller

(Image: Alamy)

Left: Narzanin Massoumi

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This topic will be presented by the authors at the BSA annual conference on April 10, 9am

principle be publicly accountable. Off the record interviews, of course, can be offered in the case of whistle blowers, or where the

official concerned may be vulnerable in their own work context, but such considerations should apply variably.

Another key issue here is academic freedom. Since the powerful are more likely to be able to disrupt research than most research subjects, it is imperative that institutions adopt policies that will protect academic researchers and their research.

So, in order to facilitate the investigation of government, corporations and other power centres, and the exposure of corruption, misconduct and mismanagement therein, we need to reorient our approach to research methods and ethics. Whilst co-operative methods usually endorsed in social science can be adapted for studying the powerful, alternative methods are often necessary.

In our view, studying up should become a concern across the discipline, and the expanded tool kit of methods it brings has the capacity to enrich sociological methods more generally. The reorientation on ethics in studying up also has the potential to enrich our discussions of harm and the positive sense in which sociology can and should be an ethical discipline.

Protecting vulnerable subjects, certainly. Protecting public office holders from unwarranted and unfair intrusions, yes, that too. But also holding power to account through a renewed and revalorised commitment to the public interest and democratic accountability: that is a sociology of which we can all be proud.

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