Case Study Research: Exploring National Variations in the Temporary Staffing Industry

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Abstract

In 2008, I began a PhD project funded by an Economic and Social Research Council studentship which sought to explore the different institutional contexts for the temporary staffing industry. This research sought to examine who were the key actors in the temporary staffing industry in different countries and the impact of wider national settings. This was part of a larger project contributing to the work of the Geographies of Temporary Staffing Unit at The University of Manchester. The research involved the use of three case studies in the countries, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Czech Republic in order to conduct a cross-national comparison of the temporary staffing industry within a European context.

This methods case provides an overview of the practicalities of carrying out comparative case study research. It documents the different stages of the case study research including document analysis, institutional mapping, and semi-structured interviews. The business-led nature of this research meant that many of the interviewees were considered as "elites," and so this case will also highlight some of the particular methodological issues involving this type of research participant. Using the experiences from my doctoral research, this case considers the challenges of conducting case study research, but also how research methods can be used in combination to form a clear methodological strategy in your research.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand the benefit of triangulation of data collection methods
- Understand the iterative and cyclical nature of research design and data collection
- Identify a range of strategies to try and conduct successful semi-structured interviews
- Have an understanding of the various issues associated with elite interviews

Project Overview

Since the early 1990s, the temporary staffing industry (TSI) experienced rapid growth in many areas of Europe, although the extent and rate of this growth varied across the continent. The existing literature on labor market intermediaries (e.g., Autor, 2009; Benner, 2003) and the TSI (e.g., Coe, Johns, & Ward, 2007; Forde & Slater, 2005) failed to adequately address the importance of national institutional arrangements on the activities of those involved. To try and address this research lacuna in 2008, I embarked on a research journey that would take me across Europe to explore the different national environments for the TSI. This PhD project was carried out at the School of Environment and Development in The University of Manchester in

the United Kingdom and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The methodological strategy that was developed involved the use of case studies in order to be able to sufficiently investigate the particular national environments in which the TSI operated, but also to be able to make effective comparisons.

The case studies chosen, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Czech Republic were selected on theoretical, empirical, and practical foundations. While it might have been tempting to travel the globe for a truly global comparative perspective on national institutional arrangements, one does have to consider the practical implications of research. Theoretically, these choices stemmed from academic discussions in political science around *Varieties of Capitalism* (see Hall & Soskice, 2001; Hollingsworth & Boyer, 1999). Undertaking fieldwork in three countries had the advantage of being able to compare across a range of different institutional environments, highlighting the diversity that exists within the European Union (EU). Considering the relative paucity of comprehensive data on the TSI in the three chosen countries, a research strategy was necessary that would generate both broad indicative quantitative data but also more context specific data about particular aspects of interest, illuminating relationships between actors in each case. This meant exploring existing data on the TSI in the forms of government data, industry reports, and any relevant media articles. These were used to create institutional maps (diagrams of the different actors involved in the industry) which were then used to inform the selection of interviewees. The combination of using secondary data alongside the data from semi-structured interviews allowed the formation of in-depth case studies.

Developing a Methodological Framework

The research sought to investigate the different institutional contexts for the TSI within a European context. As in most disciplines in the social sciences, researchers have a choice of a multitude of research methods, particularly when adopting a case study approach. Researchers are often pressed with a choice between using quantitative and qualitative methods, on one hand, and qualitative, on the other, depending on the nature of the knowledge they wish to produce. As an economic geographer, I wanted to use both to try and develop a holistic understanding of the activities in this industry. Therefore, analysis of quantitative secondary data was used as a tool to describe and contextualize the industry, that is, quantitative data were used as a method to "map" out the macro-view of the TSI in each country to act as an initial point of comparison.

The methodological framework was composed of three key components: document analysis, institutional mapping, and semi-structured interviews. Data collection took place in several

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stages, with semi-structured interviews being conducted between September 2009 and October 2010.

Document analysis involved gathering existing national data sets on labor markets and temporary agency work as well as any government reports, business reporters, trade union reports, and commentaries from the media. These informed the initial stages of institutional mapping. The preliminary institutional maps were then used to identify suitable interviewees. The business-led nature of this research project meant that the majority of interviewees were what is classed as "elite" as many held senior positions within businesses, unions, or government departments (e.g., a chief executive officer [CEO] or director). The methods case will now explore the use of the case study approach and its components for this research project.

Case Studies

A prime motivation for using case studies in research is that they are useful for developing an in-depth understanding about different phenomena. Some researchers see case studies as a particular method of gathering data, while others view it as a wider methodological strategy (for discussions of the differences, see Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). I took the latter view, where the case studies were used as a strategy to bring together the different types of data I collected. In order for a case study approach to be effective, it needs to have sufficiently detailed and in-depth data, and consequently, this often requires a multi-method approach to collect data and develop as full an understanding as possible; hence, I choose to collect both primary and secondary data.

Considering a Case Study Approach

There are a lot of definitions of case studies, but the one I find most useful is from Robert Yin (2009) who explains that a case study should be "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (p. 13). This approach not only allows a range of methods to be used but also supports the collection of different kinds of evidence.

What can be daunting for some researchers is that there are less clearly defined methodological guidelines with case studies that other methods such as surveys. How you go about forming case studies remains more of an art than a science, requiring experience and judgment, and will very much depend of what your research project is trying to achieve. The cross-national comparative nature of this research meant that the main unit of analysis was

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individual countries. However, as the chosen countries were part of a wider EU context, it was important that there was an awareness of the surrounding institutional environment too. This added a level of complexity that would not have necessarily been present if other countries had been selected.

Case Study Selection

The decision to adopt a case study approach was based on the premise that to fully explore and understand the activities of the TSI and its role in the wider labor market landscape, it would be necessary to use more than one data collection method.

It would not have been possible to investigate all the institutional contexts in Europe, as this would not have been practical for a study of this length; therefore, it was more realistic to identify cases based on types of countries which had been identified at the literature review stage of my research and initial research findings. I had identified three groups of countries that would be important to include based on the varieties of capitalism literature (see Hall & Soskice, 2001): neoliberal (United Kingdom), corporatist (Germany), and post-socialist (Czech Republic). It is important that you understand there was a theoretical foundation for the choice of cases, alongside empirical and practical considerations.

The selection, or sampling of individual cases as part of a case study approach, can be a difficult, but very important, aspect of the research design process. While some scholars would argue for different approaches to the selection of cases, most would agree that case study research should not be based on random sampling, but instead should be purposive and theoretically informed. Yet, the question of how many cases to select for study remains difficult. While it would be tempting to do as many cases as possible to improve the robustness of your research findings, there is the danger of going beyond what would be reasonable for your study in practical term. There is also a possibility of reaching saturation point, where adding further cases would not add sufficiently to the research conclusions. So, it is important to think both about what is feasible for your project, but also about what number of cases would be useful.

For my research, there were very few countries where temporary staffing industries had been investigated in-depth, so it was necessary to identify three suitable case studies which were significantly different to make the comparative nature of this study effective. The time and resource constraints on this research meant that an appropriate sample of three countries was chosen: the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Initial research on these countries confirmed their appropriate selection.

Methodological Triangulation

Some scholars have criticized the use of case studies, because they might not be rigorous enough because there is no blueprint for how you go about completing a case study. However, these criticisms can be somewhat overcome through the triangulation of methods, so using a combination of methods to form a more robust data corpus (see Stake, 2005). Triangulation can be in two forms—data triangulation (collecting data related to the same phenomenon) and methodological triangulation (use of different methods of data collection) were employed (see Yeung, 2003). Triangulation was used throughout my research, often by comparing data from organization reports and data gained from semi-structured interviews. In some cases, viewpoints would reinforce ideas outlined in reports, and in others, they would conflict therefore generating further questions.

Document Analysis

After completing a literature review, I began to collect documents and data sets related to the TSI. These included the following:

- National labor market data sets and European labor market data sets (e.g., labor force surveys);
- Business reports, business association reports, trade union reports, government reports, and consultations;
- Newspaper and magazine articles (in English, German, and Czech).

These documents helped develop a picture of the characteristics of the TSI in each country (and across Europe) and helped confirm the suitability of cases chosen based on the size and characteristics of the industry. Preliminary analysis allowed the identification of relevant actors for the TSI in each country, contributing the initial formation of an "institutional map" which would then act as a guide for interview selection. As research progressed and interviews were conducted, further documents were collected, and their findings were integrated into the research. The type of data collected in this method was largely a collection of corporate and institutional documents and national data sets. Throughout the research process, a range of other secondary data documents were acquired which were collected at meetings, corporate seminars, and via the media. These documents provided supplementary evidence to the initial data analysis and the data gathered through the interviews as an important part forming the comprehensive case studies.

Remember that data of this type require careful examination, not only for its content but also for any underlying motive or bias. Corporate documents have a tendency to display positive

aspects of an industry, while institutional documents may have an underlying political agenda. It is important to check that when viewing graphs that the data presented isn't skewed by creative use of axis or omission of anomalies that wouldn't fit the ideal trend. Critically examining any data collected is a key process in any piece of research.

Institutional Mapping

The institutional mapping stage I mentioned previously is a method rarely explicitly used in the social sciences, but widely used in policymaking. It was critical in my research to provide insights into institutional and governance structures for national TSIs (see Aligica, 2006). Essentially, it is way to visualize the important actors for your research topic, highlighting relationships; this provided insights into the relations between key stakeholders including those formally and informally involved in the TSI.

Key Principles

According to Paul Aligica (2006), there are several key principles to institutional mapping:

- First, information gathered can be drawn from existing studies and official documents and other secondary sources;
- Second, mapping consists of a time and labor-intensive exercise, requiring an awareness of differences in socioeconomic political systems;
- Third, an awareness of history is vital; prevailing concerns and issues from the past can be reflected in definitions or terms in regulations and in the actions of institutions.

Creating an Institutional Map

Analysis of secondary data contributed to an understanding of the different institutions involved in each of the chosen TSIs, and began to identify ways in which they are connected, and highlighted relevant institutions in each national market. This process allowed the institutional arrangement to be "mapped" for each different country. An example of an institutional map for Germany is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The German temporary staffing industry.
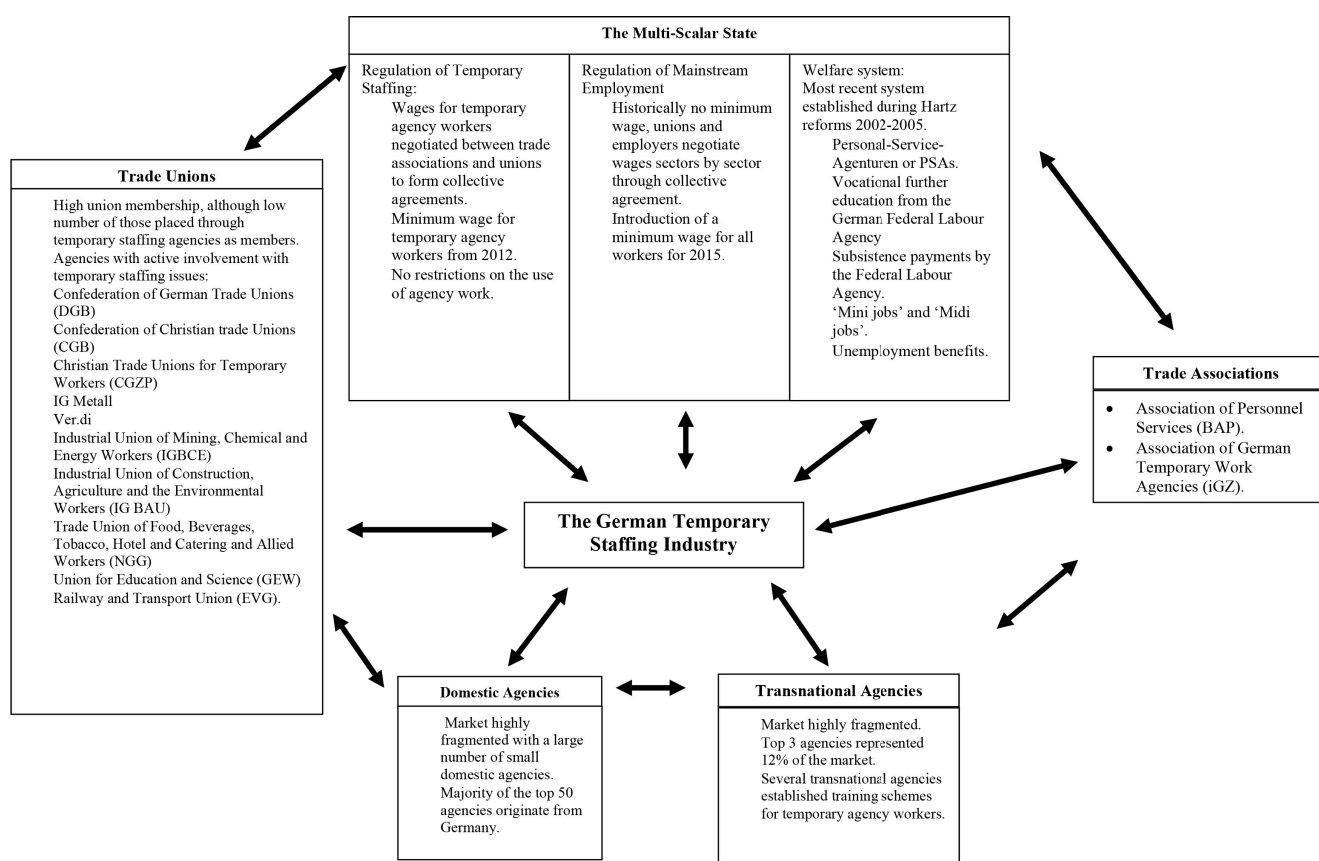
Description: This diagram shows the institutional map for the TSI in Germany showing the different actors involved, some of their features, and the links between them.
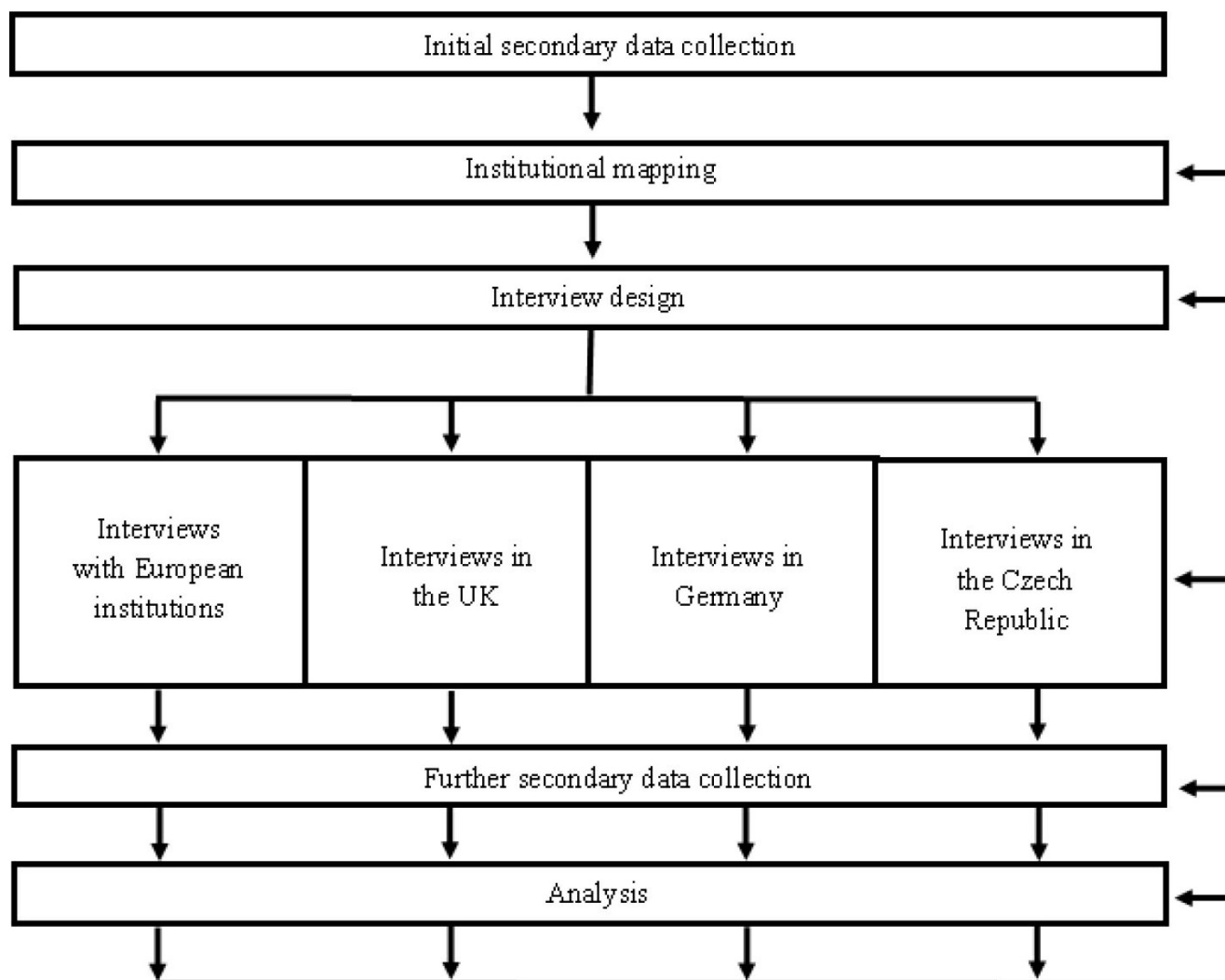
Source: Author.

Institutions and Change

Institutions are shaped by their historical, geographical, and political contexts, and therefore the institutions involved in the TSI and the relationships between them were different. "Mapping" represents a metaphor for the exercise of exploring the institutional arrangements in each national system, and there are a number of parallels with geographical mapping: important actors are identified, relationships between actors are explored, and geographical or functional boundaries are highlighted.

Policy and practice exist in a constant state of flux, so an awareness of what changes being contemplated is important. An institutional map will only ever display a snapshot of institutional arrangements at a particular time; the development of institutional maps is an iterative process, which continues throughout the interview and analysis research stages (see Figure 2 later in this methods case). Initial stages of institutional mapping focused around identification of

groups of actors in each market. The institutional maps identified which institutions were key to particular national TSIs, informing choices around those to contact for initial interviews.

Figure 2. Processes of data collection and analysis.

Description: A diagram to show the cyclical nature of the research process from designing methodology to analysis.

Source: Author.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In order to gain a deeper understanding of key relationships between these actors, I needed to conduct a series of qualitative interviews. According to Andrea Fontana and James Frey (1994), there are three different forms of interviews, depending on their level of structure: unstructured, semi-structured, and structured. The choice would affect not only the form of data collected but also the kind of knowledge generated. Semi-structured interviews, in particular, allowed me to

explore different lines of inquiry as issues arose in each interview: semi-structured interviews elicited in-depth responses, which included nuances and contradictions, while also providing an interpretive perspective of the participant.

This research was designed to uncover distinct national institutional arrangements, and while secondary data analysis and initial institutional mapping provided a good base for beginning comparison of the three cases, a much greater level of detail was needed in order to understand more fully the key actors and their relationships in each TSI. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore each case in more detail and provided the data to expand the institutional map and begin to understand the relationships between actors. An interview schedule was created for each of the categories identified in the institutional mapping stage, allowing for a comparison between institutions across countries. While key questions were included in each schedule, more specific questions were included which related to the actors' institutional place.

Responses would usually generate further questions, and as further issues arose, the schedule could be modified for future interviews. This research was not trying to identify the same features in each case study, it was trying to identify the complex interactions in each national system, and therefore comparisons could be drawn from any features identified from these interviews. As is typical in semi-structured interviews, some questions were either included or omitted depending on the context of each participant, highlighting the benefit of this method which allows for a reflexive approach to the generation of questions for a range of research participants.

Finding Research Participants

So how do you find people to interview? Identifying participants for semi-structured interviews constituted a key part of ensuring the development of this research. While much of the literature on qualitative interviews as a research technique focuses on the interview itself, little guidance is provided concerning accessing research participants (see for example Flowerdew & Martin, 2005). It is vital in case study research to access appropriate participants whose institutional identity is relevant to the line of enquiry. Selection of interviewees for this research was largely informed by the institutional mapping stage of the research. While every effort was made to ensure similar numbers of interviewees were drawn from institutions across countries, the existence of different institutions in some cases meant that this was not always uniform.

Sampling and Introductions

Developing a rigid sampling frame for interviews, particularly in the political and economic

realms would have been extremely restrictive for this research. This study necessitated that the sample population should have knowledge and experience of the subject matter. How many interviews you conduct will very much vary between studies. I started with a target figure of around 15 interviews per case in my initial research strategy. Rather than the number of interviews, it was important to address all the categories identified, and have as many institutions as possible, in order to present a representative analysis of the national system.

Interviewees were contacted via email with a short summary of the research and a request to be interviewed at a time and location at their convenience. It is important to keep this email clear and concise, but also make a compelling case that would encourage your respondent to reply, that is, explain a little about why you would like to talk to that person in particular rather than "I am doing a study in 'X' and I would like to talk to you."

Snowballing

The identification of further participants was an iterative process. Where possible further contacts were identified by those who were interviewed, a technique called snowballing was often used as a method for gathering data from a small sample population (see Sarantakos, 2005). This technique ensured that actors, which may not have been equally represented in the document analysis/institutional mapping phase, were included in data collection. A potential problem with this strategy is that the selection may have become biased based on the networks of participants I accessed. In order to try and reduce these potential biases, snowballing was used alongside identification of potential participants from secondary literature and contacts gained through attendance at relevant industry and business seminars.

To aid purposes of comparison, efforts were made to try and access similar participants across the case studies. For example, a trade association representative in the United Kingdom provided contacts for their equivalent position in trade associations in Germany and the Czech Republic. In addition, a number of contextual interviews with European institutions were conducted which were useful for identifying further participants in each country from similar kinds of institutions. For example, an interview with a professional from a European recruitment trade body aided the identification of a suitable representative from national trade associations in each country, acting as gatekeeper to further participants.

Recording Data

In total, 82 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Where possible, and with participants' consent, interviews were recorded. Recording the interviews had a number of advantages:

- Even if participants spoke rapidly, recorded interviews allowed freedom for the researcher to

take notes;

- Transcription could take place after the interview, and so aspects of the interview which may have been missed during the interview would still be included in the analysis;
- The interview could be captured totally, apart from the body language which could be noted down during the interview.

Interviews took place at the participant's place of work, to ensure complete convenience for the participant, but also at suitable surroundings such as a quiet office or meeting room. In all cases, interviews were transcribed immediately after they took place, along with detailed notes about the interview. This allowed for progression during the fieldwork stage, and the addition of further ideas that arose in interviews as different perspectives/details/concepts came to light, and questions could be amended as necessary.

Elite Interviews

The business-led nature of the research meant that many participants involved in interviews could be considered "elites." The term "elite" generally defines people in society who command a superior level of power or privilege compared to other members of society, for example, those in powerful managerial positions or roles with a high level of responsibility such as CEOs or government ministers. Researching these elites presents different methodological and ethical challenges, particularly in terms of access and the importance of the researcher's positionality.

Methodological Challenges

Interviews can host a variety of different power relations dependent on the position of the researcher and the interviewee. Conducting interviews in the territory of the elite meant that the power balance of the interview is skewed toward the participant, highlighting the importance of the skills required to conduct elite interviews in order to manipulate the "gap" between elites and the researcher (see Moss, 1995). Elites tend to be "accustomed to being in control and exerting authority over others," and as such the corporate interviews can potentially be used as a site for them to follow their points of interest. The corporate interview therefore can be a site of continued "negotiation or struggle about power and control in every interview" (Schoenberger, 1992, p. 217).

Researcher Strategies

There are a series of strategies you can employ to try and ensure that you as the researcher retain as much control as possible (and this applies to non-elite interviews too):

- Have good knowledge of the points of discussion in the interview to show that you

understand the intricacies of their industry;

- Be familiar with the relevant terminology—acronyms. There are often a large number of acronyms for various organizations or sectors;

- Consider how you are dressed. Dressing in formal business attire will create a better impression than if you turn up in jeans. Appearance and first impressions are important.

Researcher Positionality

These all contribute to developing a professional, knowledgeable, and trustworthy researcher who they can talk honestly to. It is important to recognize your positionality (your position in relation to the research participants) and any potential underlying power relations between the researcher and participants embedded in the interview process (see Schoenberger, 1992; Smith, 2006). Characteristics including race, class, gender, age, appearance, and in the case of this research, understanding of language, all represent important features which can influence this positionality. As a young female researcher interviewing elites, I was aware that this could have had an impact on the information the respondents released, particularly as gender is thought to be an important factor in elite interviewing (see McDowell, 1997, 1998). It is crucial to consider your positionality and be aware that this may shift as the research progresses and moves between different research environments.

It is your job as a researcher to build trust with the participant, so you get behind the information that you can probably already get in company brochures or reports. The strategies I mentioned previously to create a good impression are a good way to start. It is important to ensure that the agenda of the interview did not skew to areas the interviewees were to talk about or are particularly interested in. This was a particular issue for interviews conducted in the United Kingdom, as at the time of fieldwork, the Agency Workers Directive and its potential impacts were still being hotly debated between actors in the TSI. While the importance of regulation on the national system was a feature of this research, at times it required a series of questions or comments which would steer the conversation away from just regulation and into other aspects of the TSI.

International Interviews

Interviews for this research were carried out across Europe, and therefore it is necessary to consider issues regarding "foreign" and "local/domestic" elites. Andrew Herod (1999) highlights that even the most basic issues can become complicated, as "in practice simply arranging an interview can itself be an extremely challenging ordeal" (p. 315). Fortunately, in dealing with elites, some of the issues regarding foreign interviewees including unfamiliarity with cultural and organizational structures were generally not experienced. In all but two cases, interview

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participants had a good knowledge of English; consequently, interviews were conducted in English. In the two cases where an interpreter was needed (one Czech trade union and one Czech domestic agency), an individual was suggested from within the same organization so they would have had a similar level of knowledge and understanding as the interview participant.

"Messy" Research

I was told at the beginning of my PhD that research is not an easy, smooth, and linear process, but is in fact very messy. As time progressed, I understood what the lecturer meant. Research does not always go to plan, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes unexpected events can lead to new ideas, contacts or sources of data. For example, because I had to delay a couple of interviews due to being stranded in the United States by a volcanic ash cloud, I obtained two interviews from people who were potentially more useful because my original interview date had been before they were due to attend an industry conference. I had not known this at the time. But speaking to them after the conference meant they had a lot more information to discuss. The key message here is that it is important to be flexible at all times and be open to new ideas, new lines of inquiry, and the inclusion of things you did not expect as your project progresses; after all, research is all about finding out new things.

The Iterative Research Process

A key point I have tried to embed in this methods case is that the processes of research are iterative and in some ways cyclical. Research design, methods of data collection, and data analysis are not mutually exclusive; the processes overlap. Attempts to analyze data occurred simultaneously with the data collection stage. The process of this iterative methodological framework is displayed in Figure 2. A key feature of case study research is the question and answer cycles which are modified on the basis of subsequent findings.

Conclusion

Through the combination of secondary data collection, institutional mapping, and semi-structured interviews, it was possible to explore in-detail the roles of different actors in the TSI in the three countries, uncovering their defining features and providing evidence for the concept of a national TSI. Ultimately, the strength of the methodological process in this case was based in the triangulation of data from document analysis and semi-structured interviews forming an institutional map of each system and developing an understanding of the key actors and relationships. The methodological strategy for this research was designed in order to focus on gaining intensive detail and a deeper understanding of each national TSI.

Through comparison of the three chosen cases, it was possible to develop a comprehensive data corpus with critical understanding of the complex situations found in each national system. This methods case has highlighted that for some research projects, one research method is not enough, and that through an iterative cycle of research design and data collection, a methodological strategy can be created that allows for effective comparative study of phenomena across national borders.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Identify some forms of secondary data (qualitative or quantitative) and consider the potential ways these data might be inaccurate, biased, or unrepresentative, and what impact this might have on your research.
2. For your research project, think about how your positionality may be affecting your data collection particularly in an interview situation.
3. Imagine you need to interview a CEO of a company or a government minister. Practice writing a letter of introduction to invite them to be interviewed as part of your research. Try to do this in fewer than 200 words.
4. Can you make an institutional map for your research project? Try to identify key actors and the links between them.

Further Reading

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Web Resources

The British Library Business and IP Centre: http://www.bl.uk/bipc/

UK Data Service—Interviews: http://ukdataservice.ac.uk/teaching-resources/interview.aspx

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