Methodological challenges in interviewing classic professionals within a declining socio-economic environment

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ABSTRACT

The article draws upon the experiences obtained by the researcher with regards to the interviews conducted with chartered accountants, engineers and legal practitioners as professionals in Zimbabwe. Three arguments inform this article. Engaging professionals as research participants has its methodological challenges, professionals in an unstable socio-economic environment attach less value to research, especially when the research interferes with time for clients and lastly, power dynamics are tilted in favour of the participants. Previous studies have focused on corporate elites, political and intellectual elites in stable socio-economic environments, and less if any have focused on elite classic professionals in a socially and economically unstable environment. In addition to findings of previous studies, it has been established that professionals in a declining socio-economic environment prioritise clients who are scarce to come by and attach less value to research. This led to the abortion of many appointments. Some sessions were cancelled or shortened as participants received communications of availability of some scarce products such as bread, cash or fuel. Participants could not allocate time solely for an interview session as they continued engaging with their work, at times even hurrying the researcher through to accommodate work related assignments. Social capital and referrals can be used to address the challenges associated with classic professionals as participants.

Key phrases

Elite participants; in-depth interviews; key informants; methodological challenges; classic professionals and socio-economic environment

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1.   INTRODUCTION

This article is a methodological review of two separate studies conducted in 2015 and 2018 but also the involvement of 58 participants interviewed by the author comprising of lawyers, engineers and chartered accountants in Zimbabwe. Of these, four were key informants drawn from professional bodies representing each of these professions and academic institutions mandated to groom these professionals. The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Institute of Engineers and the Law Society of Zimbabwe are the professional bodies representing chartered accountants, engineers and lawyers in Zimbabwe respectively. As already mentioned, key informants were also drawn from academic institutions and these were purposively sampled from the universities' respective faculties. In academic institutions, the researcher aimed at the Deans of Faculties of Schools while at professional bodies, the focus was on the President, Chief Executive Officer or the Secretary depending on which term is used to depict the individual at the helm of the organisation. The assumption was that these top personnel both at academic institutions and professional bodies were strategically positioned to know and deliberate issues in their professions.

The first study looked at how professions and professional work have been changing in Zimbabwe, with a focus on legal practitioners, engineers and chartered accountants while the second focused on female legal practitioners' experiences as they practice law. Qualitative methodology was employed in these studies and semi-structured interviews were used as data collecting instruments. This article draws on the authors' personal experiences as data was collected for these studies involving professionals. Methodological challenges were faced both prior and during the interview sessions. The overall objective of this article is to signal the need for a reflexive approach to fieldwork which considers methodological challenges on researches involving classic professionals particularly, from a Zimbabwean perspective and from a declining economy in general. Specifically, the study sought to provide insights into the particularities of interviewing professionals in similar socio-economic settings for those new to researching this group of participants.

While the methods used to investigate elites are of relevancy in policy research, as much empirical research on policy making is based on interviews with participants regarded as powerful or expert including politicians and policy makers (Lancaster 2017:94), to date, there has been little examination, if any, of the particular challenges associated with interviewing the elite in the form of classic professionals in a declining socio-economic environment such

as Zimbabwe. It is the author's submission that such an environment has an impact on the research process involving the elite.

The main argument of this article stems from the realisation that engaging classic professionals as research participants has its own related challenges which have not been adequately addressed by previous researchers on methodological challenges in empirical research from a Zimbabwean perspective. In addition, the article also argues that classic professionals, particularly those whose work entails charging clients hourly or daily rates do not prioritise research work, especially in an unstable socio-economic environment where the number of clients is dwindling, and competition is rife. Motivation to take part in research is compromised. Finally, the article is premised on the argument that in a research involving classic professionals in Zimbabwe, power dynamics are heavily tilted in favour of the participants, leaving the researcher with less power on how, when and for how long the interview process should unfold.

The article begins by giving a brief overview of interviews in qualitative methodologies. It proceeds to focus on the meaning of elites and related concepts. It was assumed that classic professionals, to a greater extent represent the elites as is explained in subsequent sections. The importance of a research setting is also investigated before turning attention to specific methodological issues and challenges associated with interviewing the elites in the form of classic professionals. Conclusion and recommendations will mark the end of this article.

2.   THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1   Qualitative research interviews

The studies under review adopted semi-structured interviews and used interview guides. These instruments are mainly applied in social sciences to solicit information from participants. Social scientists attempts to comprehend the world from participants' point of view (Anyan 2013:1, Kvale 2006:480, Silverman 2017:146, Maramwidze-Merrison 2016). Qualitative research interviews encompass gathering facts and information (King, Horrocks & Brooks; Targum 2011:483), eliciting stories, (Birch & Miller 2000:192) as well as learning about emotions, meanings, experiences and relationships (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick 2008:293; Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley & Mckenna 2017:693; Tracy & Robles 2010:179; Voldnes, Grønhaug & Sogn-Grundvåg 2014:142) that cannot easily be observed (Baxter & Babbie 2003:57). During an interview, interviewers engage in active supporting

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listening that encompasses paraphrasing and probing to develop rapport at the same time, encouraging an in-depth discussion (Baxter & Babbie 2003:101; Tracy & Robles 2010:180).

2.2   Researching the elite

Researching classic professionals is to a greater extent similar to researching elites. Classic professions such as law, medicine and engineering are characterised by exclusionary closure (Saks 2012:6), immune from (perceived) outside interference (Noordegraaf, Muzio & Kirkpatrick 2011:470), possession of a body of abstract knowledge upon which the occupation bases its claims for the exclusive right to control specified work activities (Abbott, 1988:8) and an establishment of a strong assocaition set to monitor professionalism and standards of its members (Pilbeam & Corbridge 2006). Mikecz (2012:482) notes that the viability of researching elites is premised on the willingness of participants to talk and to open-up. According to Voldnes *et al.* (2014:145), an elite is a group in society which is considered to be superior due to its power, talent, privileges among other factors, of its members.

Considering the nature of the participants of the studies under review Lancaster (2017:93) provides a more interesting description of elites by highlighting that the term generally relates to individuals or groups who apparently have closer proximity to power or particular professional expertise. Of interest in this description is the involvement of classic professionals, in this case, chartered accountants, legal professionals and engineers. Harvey (2011:432) further clarifies on the subject by suggesting that there is a hierarchy of status within elite groups. If this suggestion is to be taken, one would then argue that elites can be categorised or can be on a continuum. In the research under study, classic professionals are considered an elite group by virtue of their academic achievements, power and social influence. On the continuum, key informants such as CEOs and presidents from professional bodies are on a higher level of the elite continuum, although they are also considered classic professionals in general terms.

In the case, just like classic professionals, interviewing elites represents unique methodological challenges compared with non-elite interviews (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:137; Mikecz 2012:482). Whilst locating elites might seem relatively easy due to their high visibility, approaching them and obtaining their personal account of events can be very challenging (Cladie 1999:56; Laurila 1997:409; Ostrande 1995:134; Thuesen 2011:614). Mikecz (2012:482) and Alvesalo-Kuusi and Whyte (2018:138) argue that gaining access to members of the elite is hard enough; gaining their trust and building a rapport with them is even more difficult. Although the characteristics of an elite community as argued by Voldnes

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et al. (2014:145) relates quite well with the characteristics of classic professionals as in power, high academic achievements and social status, the key informants resonates more with this characterisation as these are both classic professionals as well as heads of institutions or sections. Targeted key informants from the professional bodies were Chief Executive Officers and presidents who were at the helm of the professional bodies of professions under considerations.

Elites are relatively unstudied owing to their power and ability to protect themselves from intrusion and criticism (Maramwidze-Merrison 2016:160). Studies using elites such as business, political and social figures are rare as most research in social sciences involves ordinary individuals, leading to an irregularity in the distribution of knowledge where information is provided about the majority of people to the elites (Aguiar & Schneider 2016:71).

Studies with the elite, classic professionals in this case, aim to address the irregularity of information flow which has characterised many researches in the social sciences by providing a flow of knowledge the other way. While in non-elite studies the researchers assume the position of 'expert', in elite studies the ones being studied are in the know how (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:139; Mikecz 2012:483). Due to the social status of elite research participants, elite studies are also known as studying up researches (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:139; Hunter 1993:38,). Cormode and Hughes (1999:299) and Alvesalo-Kuusi and Whyte (2018:137) have it that studying elites has its own unique methodological and ethical challenges.

For any qualitative researcher, one of the most pressing research aspects lies in gaining access. The researcher's success in this regard will significantly affect the nature and quality of the data collected and ultimately, the trustworthiness of the findings. In the studies under review, it was important to carefully negotiate accessing elites particularly CEOs and presidents of the professional bodies. This process can take longer and higher costs than non-elite studies (Aguiar & Schneider 2016:71; Nir 2018:77; Shenton & Hayter 2004:224). Elites can manipulate information and deny access to it. It is also argued that this category of participants commands significant resources and exert influence over others Mikecz (2012). As such, they are hard to access and are surrounded by numerous gatekeepers. Although elites are visible, they are not necessarily accessible (Maramwidze-Merrison 2016:159; Marland & Esselment 2018:2; Mikecz, 2012:482; Nir 2018:78). After gaining access, the next issue of concern would be the research setting, which is the focus of the next section.

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2.3   Research setting

Across the social sciences, there is a recognition that a place that an interviewee associates or once associated with is becoming increasingly important in any research encounter in as far as recalling is concerned (Carpiano 2009:263; Ecker 2017:3; Till, Kaufman & Woodward). Place-based interviews allow researchers to get into the gaps of participants' experiences and understand how their dynamic relationships with place shape their conceptions and narrations (Holton & Riley 2014:59). Evans and Jones (2011:849) interrogated the relationship between what people say and where they say it, they found out that the two have a positive relationship, thus emphasising the importance of the environment in shaping an interview discussion. Qualitative researchers have frequently hinted at the spatial contexts of the researcher encounter, usually when they allude to the fact that they are going out into the field to research into the groups under study. Particular spatial contexts may be important in giving access to some of the transcendent and reflexive aspects of livid experiences (Chouinard & Milley 2016:3; Dwyer & Davies 2010:92; Lynch & Mannion 2016:331; Porter, Hampshire, Abane, Munthali, Robson, Mashiri & Maponya 2010:91). In the studies under review, interviews were conducted in the participants' offices as this was regarded as their familiar place in as far as their work is concerned. In addition, the participants chose their offices ahead of any other possible venue.

Classic professionals, just like other elite participants, are less willing to travel to the interview and not likely to adapt to the researchers' schedule, the researcher must be prepared to be flexible, an aspect which costs time and money (Conti & O'Neil 2007:70, Stephens 2007:206). However, McNamara (2009:2) suggests that researchers must choose a setting with little distraction. In the studies under review, the researcher could not choose the setting as the participants preferred their offices. The location of the interview can have significant influence on the interview process. The setting of the front stage such as the persons' office and the availability of gatekeepers reflects the bureaucratic position and the power of elites (Mikecz 2012:482). In the studies under consideration, executive assistants and personal assistants that act as gatekeepers needed to be carefully negotiated with to have access to the key informants, particularly, the CEOs and presidents of the professional bodies as well as other participants who held some senior positions within their organisations.

Ostrander (1995:133) suggests that interviews with elites or professionals take place at public places. The argument is that meeting at neutral locations minimises distraction and interruptions, at the same time, enabling the researcher to claim some control over the

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setting. However, Thomas (1993:80) challenges this notion by arguing that meeting elites outside their offices can be problematic due to various reasons such as compromised personal security. In both studies under review, it is the submission of the author that all the participants were not exposed to any form of personal security threats and a neutral venue would have sufficed had the researcher been given an option. The next sections' thrust is on specific challenges encountered by the researcher in different phases of the data collection efforts involving classic professionals, including key informants.

3. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM INTERVIEWING ELITE PROFESSIONALS

3.1 Accessing heads of professional bodies and dean of schools

In the studies that resulted in this article, key informants were drawn from academic institutions as well as from professional bodies. These key informants were considered strategically positioned to know how and why these professions have been changing over time. As noted by Schubert (2013:144), there is a need to develop strong relationships between researchers and informants before interviews are conducted. This is meant to put informants at ease as well as fostering a relationship of trust as some questions could be sensitive. In most cases, a relationship of trust is cultivated through repeated visits to an area, particularly over a long period of time (Schubert 2013:145). It is however critical to mention that the research by Schubert (2013:144) focused on peace and conflict resolution, an area full of sensitive personal information which may require a high level of trust for one to divulge information. The sensitive nature of such issues is different from the information one would expect in interviewing classic professionals for information pertaining to their respective professions which is in most cases general and may not require a high level of rapport building.

Although the researcher wanted to build a good rapport with the officials who were heading these bodies and Schools/Faculties, the nature of their jobs as well as gatekeepers prevented the researcher from frequently visiting them. Chief executive officers, presidents and deans of Schools/Faculties naturally operate under a very busy schedule and may not find it easy to accommodate researchers. In addition, these top organisational personnel may avail their juniors to participate in interviews on their behalf. This automatically posed a challenge for a researcher who wanted to build rapport with an informant before they embark on an interview for they did not know who exactly was to be assigned, if any was to be assigned.

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Ideally, the researcher had planned to interview all the three heads of the professional bodies, that is, the CEO or the president. This however did not materialise, the study only saw two CEOs being interviewed while the remaining head of a professional body assigned a subordinate to be interviewed. Although the subordinate was drawn from the personnel of the professional body, the researcher had limited control over how the subordinate was chosen. The researcher then had to deal with situations where the subordinate had inadequate knowledge in certain areas.

The researcher also contacted the deans of the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Engineering as well as the head of the academic side of an audit firm which engages in the training of Chartered Accountants. They opted to assign other people such as deputy deans or other senior lecturers to be interviewed. In the study, all three who were targeted could not avail themselves for interviews, despite continuous efforts by the researcher to engage them. The researcher had no control over who was assigned, and this could have compromised the quality of information received from the key informants. This reflects the power imbalance (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:140; Lancaster 2017:97; Mikecz 2012:482) characterising elite research where researchers do not have much power to influence the research process. This is contrary to ordinary research participants as noted by Råheim, Magnussen, Sekse, Lunde, Jacobsen & Blystad (2016:2) where power is tilted in favour of the researchers. On a similar note, Haynes (2006:7) argues that in "researching down'', power is evenly distributed between the researched and the researcher.

Although interviews with senior personnel of professional bodies and academic institutions were conducted, the time allocated was far below the desired and previously agreed on. The researcher had to screen the questions and focus on the questions perceived to have been more important. The researcher further established that dealing with participants presiding over important institutions and departments operating in a declining socio-economic environment is not an easy task. Any activity that does not help them address the immediate challenges within the faculty, organisation or profession could be facing is given peripheral attention both in terms of quantity of time and quality of responses. However, receiving a nod from classic professionals to conduct an interview with them has been proved not to be all that was expected. The researcher would face another hurdle in scheduling the exact time an interview would be conducted, hence the essence of the next session.

3.2 Scheduling interview sessions with participants

The process of scheduling interview sessions with classic professionals to participate in the studies under review was also characterised with challenges, chief among them, getting

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them to sit down for an interview. As part of the initially agreed methodology in the 2015 study, the researcher had planned to conduct a series of focus group discussions with each category of classic professionals, but it proved futile to get them to be together at the same time at the same venue due to differences in their schedules, free time as well as different work stations. In addition, participants were more comfortable being interviewed in their respective offices, an aspect which is in line with the arguments by Conti and O'Neil (2007:70) and Stephens (2007:206) who note that elite participants are less prepared to travel for an interview. Dempsey, Dowling, Larkin & Murphy (2016:484) note that when dealing with special categories of participants, interviews should be conducted at a time and place of their choice. The researcher was prepared to take advantage of the suggestion by McNamara (2009:2) and Dempsey *et al.* (2016:484) of choosing a setting with minimum distraction, the conditions by the participants made it impossible, considering the power imbalance between the researcher and the elites (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:140; Lancaster 2017:97; Mikecz 2012:482). This forced the researcher to settle for one on one interview sessions with these participants in their offices. Interviews at the participants' setting however are beneficial as the environment is capable of stimulating some thoughts and participants are in a position to relive some experiences as they narrate the issue under study (Dempsey *et al.* 2016:484; Dwyer & Davies 2010:92; Porter *et al.* 2010:91).

For a single appointment to eventually materialise, a potential participant had to be (re)scheduled at least 5 times. Some appointments were cancelled about 30 minutes before the scheduled time after the researcher called to confirm the interview. Cases where the potential participant would call to cancel an interview were very rare, in most cases, the cancellation would only be revealed when the researcher called. In some other rare cases, the researcher would arrive at the venue only to realise the potential participant was unavailable and their phone would not be answered or be off. The researcher had to wait or slip a note under the door and would call later for another appointment. In other cases, the researcher had to completely cancel out some potential participants due to unending reschedules. This challenge confirms the issue of an imbalanced power dynamics between researchers and elite participants (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:140; Lancaster 2017:97; Mikecz 2012:482). Further, lack of communication from the participants on changes can be interpreted as lack of commitment to the research process. To this effect, Conti and O'Neil (2007:70) and Stephens (2007:206) note that when dealing with the elite, the researcher must be prepared to be flexible and this usually costs time and money.

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Shortages of goods and services have been a common characteristic of Zimbabwe's' declining economy and classic professionals are not spared from this challenge. Given any free moment, these professionals, just like any other person in the country, would prefer to join fuel queues, queues to get cash from the banks or something related instead of being loyal to the agreed time for an interview.

The above clearly indicates that in most cases, classic professionals, particularly in Zimbabwe do not prioritise research or alternatively, are too busy with work schedules and personal issues to seriously allocate time for research. Another possible explanation would be some level of pride, considering their professions as the elite professions. The latter argument brings to the forefront the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched with the latter assuming a superior role in the relationship (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:140; Lancaster 2017:97; Mikecz 2012:482). Although Haynes (2006:7) notes that in qualitative research, interviewers are more equal partners in an inter-subjective story telling experience, researches involving elite professionals in Zimbabwe could see interviewers assuming a less prominent role, particularly on issues to do with where the interview is done as well as the timeframe. This is particularly true when the researcher is coming from an outside occupation, perceived to be inferior to that of the participants. This is in line with the argument by Sixsmith, Boneham & Goldring (2003:578) who note that gaining access as an outsider has its own challenges.

In the studies under consideration, participants were purposively sampled. With purposive sampling the researcher needs to use his/her judgement to select cases that will best enable him/her to answer his/her research questions and to meet the research objectives. For this reason, purposive sampling is sometimes called judgemental sampling (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2015:301). As conditions to be selected to take part in the studies, participants had to be registered with their respective professional bodies and should have been with their respective profession for a minimum of two years. The first condition was meant to avoid interviewing charlatans while the second one was based on the assumption that they had gathered adequate knowledge and experience to respond to the interview questions. To accomplish this, the researcher used registers from the professional bodies.

Although the sampling was easy, getting hold of these professionals was a mammoth task as others were reported to have left the country, as a result of economic-decline led migration (Chinembiri 2016), others had changed their phone numbers and others had changed their workstations making it difficult for them to be located. To address this challenge, the researcher resorted to social capital and used unofficial links to access some

of the professionals. In addition, the researcher also adopted the snowballing technique with a channel or link being abandoned after every second or third participant. Both studies under review have also revealed that when dealing with classic professionals as participants in a declining socio-economic environment where attention is given to other seemingly more pressing issues and less on research, referrals are easier to deal with as they have an obligation to please and respect their colleagues or fellow professionals who would have referred the researcher. In some cases, a potential participant would also have been told about the research and would be waiting for the researcher. This strategy concurs with the argument by Nir (2018:80) who emphasises the beneficial effects of using personal contacts to access elite participants. After eventually getting them seated in their respective offices, the exact interview sessions were also plagued with some challenges and this is the essence of the following section.

3.3 The interview process

The interview process had its own challenges. Chief among them, participants in most cases failed to allocate a specific time solely for the interview. Most of the interviews were marred with work related disturbances such as calls, subordinates who would come with papers to be signed among others. This brings into perspective the suggestion that to avoid distractions; the interviews with elites must take place at neutral venues (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:140; Lancaster 2017:97; Mikecz 2012:482). Such venues also allow the researcher some control over the setting as well as the interview proceedings. As noted earlier on, participants were more comfortable being interviewed in their offices. These disturbances had some profound effects on the flowing nature of the interviews since they were frequently interrupted. The researcher had to stop the recorder every time there was a knock, a phone call or a side talk.

Some interview sessions were also affected by workplace related meetings. Interviews were scheduled to last for an hour or more and that was indicated on the consent forms, however on some occasions, the researcher was forced to cut on the allocated time due to an 'unforeseeable' meeting on the part of the participant. The participant would openly indicate that he or she is allocating the researcher a specific amount of time because he or she has a meeting to attend which s/he had not known of before. The unequal power dynamics reflect the limited power of researchers dealing with elite participants (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018:140; Lancaster 2017:97; Mikecz 2012:482). In a related argument, Sixsmith *et al.* (2003:578) note that when a researcher is not part of the research population (outsider), they are bound to face challenges gaining acceptance into communities or populations they want

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to investigate (insiders), automatically, there are unequal power dynamics. A similar argument is presented by Voldnes *et al.* (2014:145) when they highlight challenges associated with business related inter-cultural research.

Some, specifically legal practitioners who participated in the studies under scrutiny were affected by the ever-changing time of court appearances. Legal practitioners whose court time changed also had to reschedule their interview times. In worst circumstances, the rescheduling of court appearances would affect an interview just about to start or already underway, thereby in most cases, making it shorter and less detailed than expected.

On several occasions, the researcher had to abandon interviews which were already in progress after the participants would have received a communication of a possible fuel delivery at a nearby fuel station, availability of cash at a particular branch, or delivery of some basic commodities at a certain supermarket and was supposed to quickly go and join the queue. The economic meltdown obtaining in Zimbabwe has negatively affected the social standing of classic professionals who have been relegated to a lower social class, where they fight for basic survival. The distortion of the expected social status quo as a result of the declining economy could have left them frustrated and less prepared to entertain researchers leading to at best, a reduced time frame for the interview or at worst, the cancellation of an interview session. The former meant the researcher had to use discretion on which questions were more important and focused on those ones at the expense of other questions. However, by virtue of all the questions having been included in the interview guide, it meant they were important and leaving out some meant a serious compromise on the findings. Alternatively, the researcher had to limit some probing questions so that more questions could be addressed within a shorter period of time. This also potentially compromised the findings.

Some participants, particularly legal practitioners and audit-chartered accountants openly told the researcher that they work for money and they charge hourly rates in most cases. This mentality could have consciously or unconsciously influenced the priority given to the research by the participants, especially when the researcher is seen to be competing with time meant for clients. Whenever a client came or called during an interview, the legal practitioner would try openly or clandestinely to quicken the interview process, so they attend to clients who give them money, which is considered more important, especially in an unstable economic environment. The same applied to chartered accountants, particularly those in audit firms where they bill their clients on an hourly or daily rate.

This approach by practitioners on the aspect of time could have emanated from an over supplied side of classic professionals exacerbated by a declining economy. In 2014, unemployment rate according to Rusvingo (2015:1) stood at 85% while capacity utilisation was at 39.6%. Demand for services has been on a decrease and classic professionals would literally scramble for the remaining few clients and they are less prepared to lose business by giving a researcher priority over clients. Clients can easily move to the next professional if the first one approached seems busy. Over the years, these professionals have seriously learned to put a monetary value on time. Table 1 below summarises the challenges and implications of interviewing classic professionals in a declining socio-economic environment as derived from the studies under review.

Table 1:   Challenges and Implications of the interview process

Research stage	Nature of participants	Challenge	Effects on the research process	Addressing the challenge
Pre-interview period	Key informants	Access	- Compromised rapport building - Allocating a subordinate on their behalf - Researcher could not control who was chosen to represent the key informant	- Efforts were made to build rapport on the interview date - No action - No action
	Key informants and professionals	Inadequate time allocation	- The interview process was made short, depending with the time allocated	- Some questions were not even asked although they were on the interview guide and deemed important. - Probing was minimised to accommodate more questions
	Key informants and professionals	Peripheral attention	- Overt lack of focus and interest on the interview process	- Probing for elaborations - Making them decide the best time and place for the interview, with the assumption that the time and place they chose was best for them and they were comfortable and ready to hold a conversation
The interview process	Key informants and professionals	Failure to allocate time specifically for the interview	- Disturbances on the flowing nature of the interviews due to calls, papers from subordinates for signing,	- Pose the recorder every time there was a disturbance. - At tines the participant

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Research stage	Nature of participants	Challenge	Effects on the research process	Addressing the challenge
			among other administrative duties	would make an effort to switch out all disturbances by locking their doors, turning off their phones among others
				- At times the participant would suggest that the interview be conducted in a private office or room within their premises.

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Research stage	Nature of participants	Challenge	Effects on the research process	Addressing the challenge
	Legal practitioners	Changes in court time appearance	- Interview appointments were cancelled - Interview sessions were shortened	- Interviews were rescheduled. - Some questions were not even asked although they were on the interview guide and deemed important. - Probing was minimised to accommodate more questions
	Key informants and professionals	Sudden availability of products in short supply such as fuel	- Interview appointments were cancelled - Interview sessions were shortened	- Interviews were rescheduled. - Some questions were not even asked although they were on the interview guide and deemed important. - Probing was minimised to accommodate more questions
	Legal practitioners and chartered accountants in auditing	Sudden availability of a client	- Interview appointments were cancelled - Interview sessions were shortened	- Interviews were rescheduled. - Some questions were not even asked although they were on the interview guide and deemed important. - Probing was minimised to accommodate more questions

Source: Author's own compilation

This section focused on the challenges which were faced by the researcher in the studies under consideration. Conclusion and recommendations constitute the next section and marks the end of this article.

4.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the experiences of interviewing chartered accountants, engineers and legal practitioners in Zimbabwe, in this article, the author has tried to offer a critical analysis of challenges in interviewing classic professionals. Gaining access and establishing rapport are instrumental in researches involving professionals. Conducting interviews with classic professionals' poses specific challenges, primarily due to the barriers surrounding them, perceived status imbalance between researcher and the participants as well as the demand

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for their time. These challenges have been exacerbated by the negative socio-economic development obtaining in Zimbabwe.

This article has contributed to the body of knowledge by exploring the challenges faced by researchers in dealing with classic professionals as participants in Zimbabwe, particularly within the context of an unstable socio-economic environment. The reflections presented here have shown that classic professionals as participants in a declining economy like that obtaining in Zimbabwe pose unique challenges which must be handled uniquely by a researcher.

The article has revealed that classic professionals, especially those whose work entails charging clients on an hourly or daily rate are usually reluctant to accommodate researchers. This is particularly true in a country where economic activities are declining, such as Zimbabwe, and professionals are keen to maximise on the few remaining opportunities than entertaining researchers. The supply of professionals has been increasing whilst the demand for their services has been on a decline thereby, increasing competition for clients, at the same time, weakening their social status. To these types of participants, time is usually calculated in the form of money. On interview appointments, time schedules are always changing as potential participants keep on focusing more on their work and personal lives, hence, usually failing to prioritise researchers.

Classic professionals, the article has established, are more comfortable being interviewed in their offices. Although literature (Evans & Jones 2011:849; Holton & Riley 2014:59) has it that, a familiar setting is instrumental in bringing back memories relevant to the research and positively contributes to the outcome of the study, the professionals' setting usually interferes with the flowing nature of an interview. In as much as conducting interviews with participants in their familiar environments or settings is viewed positively, a trade off should also be made on the possible impact of distractions.

During interviews, professionals may also engage in some form of multi-tasking whereby they are both attending to the interview and at the same time, attending to some of their routine work such as signing off documents and entertaining calls. In almost all the instances, interviews suffered as the professionals tend to attend more to their work than the interview process. In addition, the flowing nature of the interview is significantly compromised in some cases.

In extreme cases, the interview sessions can be cut short because of some unforeseeable events on the part of the professional. These could be in the form of meetings, change of

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court times in the case of legal practitioners or need for urgent attention to clients in the form of legal practitioners as well as chartered accountants in auditing. Sessions may also be cut short or postponed as participants focus on acquiring products in short supply such as cash, fuel, basic commodities such as bread among others. Such a scenario has a negative bearing on the interview outcome as some questions on the instrument are left out and probing is minimised.

Generally, the article has contributed to the understanding of imbalanced power relations between the researcher and the participants where the latter has much influence on almost the entire interview process. The unequal power dynamics determines where, and for how long the interview should take place. This strip the researcher of their power to determine the course of the interview and a lot of compromises are made, at times at the expense of the outcome of the study. This is particularly true in occasions where the researcher is coming from a different profession, usually perceived inferior by classic professionals.

The methodological challenges that the researcher faced in the study largely emanated from lack of commitment to the research by the participants and the imbalanced power relations between the researcher and the researched. Researchers engaging classic professionals as participants must rely mostly on their social capital and referrals. These two are likely to force potential participants to respect researchers at the same time giving the researcher some form of power to direct the course of the interview. The third force (after the researcher and the participant) either through social capital or referral is usually adequate to restore the power balance which according to the authors' experience, is in most cases tilted against the researcher. Acquiring participants through social capital and referrals is instrumental in mitigating the methodological challenges associated with interviewing classic professionals in an unstable socio-economic environment.

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