

## When Tintos Break Ice: Elite Interviews in Colombia

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Can creativity and rationality coexist in formal social science research?

One of the pitfalls of overly rationalizing the research process has been that it somewhat strangles originality. Science is, as Richard Feynman observed, imagination in a straitjacket. Even Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba—in their seminal contribution *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994)—implicitly acknowledged that formal research methods cannot provide substantive answers to what count as interesting research questions. They concur with Karl Popper that discovery contains an irrational element (1994, 14). “Eureka” is difficult to formalize, but some methods and techniques of social scientific research sometimes provide unintentional moments of serendipity. My doctoral research in Colombia showed that intensive elite interviews fall into that category of methods that deepen the research agenda. Even in the process of conducting the research itself, results in interviews alter the topics of questions or add new ones.

I went to Bogotá to conduct interviews with magistrates and clerks to the Constitutional Court, as well as with academics and *congresistas* involved in constitutional reform campaigns on presidential term limits. The Constitutional Court decided the question of reform differently in 2010 from 2005, with the Court siding against the president more recently. In the course of those interviews, I discovered political processes that were neither on my own agenda nor in the extant literature on judicial independence and legal politics in Colombia. Over cups of *tinto*, Colombia’s dark coffee, it was the interviewees themselves that pointed me in unexpected directions. They shed light on relationships that involved the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of governments. In addition, they raised

serious questions about internal competition within the branches of government. It turns out that *tintos* are great icebreakers.

It is crucial that interview subjects be given sufficient space to freely answer and discuss topics. This brings us back to King, Keohane, and Verba. In their only footnote devoted to such social science research practices (112n), they raise a number of validity issues, but only on the side do they note that “asking about motivations is often a productive means of generating hypotheses” (1994, 112). Particularly for small-N or case studies, explicit questions of motivation turn out to be very productive. They not only suggest new meta-hypotheses but provide nuances in arguments that are naturally complex due to the detailed narration and analysis of a given case.

It is somewhat perplexing that methodological imperatives would make elite interviews the bad apple of social science research. After a methods seminar I took at the University of British Columbia that introduced the sophisticated terms and practices of the state of the art of research methodology, a colleague of mine wondered, maybe naively, if you want to find out why and how people acted the way they did, why don’t you simply go and ask them? King, Keohane, and Verba cautioned against this practice, arguing that we should not let the subjects of our study do the work of inferring causal processes for us. Rather, answers are observable implications, which juxtapose motivations “antithetically to facts, indicating a bias in favor of behavior” (Rathbun 2008, 692). Answers that detail motivations might not be equal to facts, but they certainly can contain elements of causal relations, resulting in a more complex structure than this bifurcation between fact and

motivation as observable implication suggests.

Of course, King, Keohane, and Verba are right to warn against simply believing answers given in interviews—not least by politicians, whose job description entails hiding actual intentions behind a smokescreen of rhetorical devices. As is well documented, Colombia is no exception. On the contrary, given the relations between organized crime and formal politics, such tendencies are more pronounced. Nevertheless, we should not entirely disregard the connections drawn by interviewees. The aforementioned relations within each branch of government speak to the internal dimension of the rule of law. Clashes over jurisdiction within the branches affected the coordination and external relations between the branches of government. My interviewees made allusions to those relations and thereby placed a whole new range of actors on my map, namely the other high courts in Colombia. Evidently, such claims must be tested or, more formally, triangulated. Nevertheless, claims, even causal ones, built the substance of the research project. It certainly did not mean that I let interviewees do the work of drawing causal inferences for me, but their answers did affect the scope of my research.

Even the claim that subjects in interviews are almost inevitably not telling the truth does not necessarily hold for social science researchers. Politicians as well as magistrates were very willing to provide detailed analyses of their actions and the processes around them—even painting their institutions in an unfavorable light. *Congresistas*, for example, unequivocally noted that Congress was very corrupted (never themselves, though). In addition, when interviewing legislators in Colombia who were on the side of the referendum for

another presidential term, I expected that some would attack the Court for meddling in political affairs. The fact that no one did speaks volumes, even if those sentiments were not entirely sincere and interviewees did in fact shelter such antagonistic sentiments toward the constitutional tribunal. The mere fact that interviewees in a protected environment would not confront the Court and question its authority speaks to the respect it holds in Colombia, regardless of whether the responses were 100 percent truthful.

Magistrates and their clerks were also very willing to extensively discuss questions and issues such as judicial independence and political pressure in deliberative processes. Some interviews that I scheduled for 45 minutes to an hour ended up lasting several hours because, as one interviewee suggested, “the country had suffered tremendously,” and they figured that social science research, in the long run, could help assuage the anguish Colombia has witnessed over the decades. In short, I can confirm that interviewees feel less threatened by scientists than by journalists. Possibly there was an advantage that I was doing the research as an outsider under the auspices of the University of British Columbia, but my connection to the local university, Universidad de los Andes, was similarly valuable.

Probably the most difficult task for researchers is to bridge the gap of being outsiders while at the same time embedding themselves intimately in the sociopolitical context. This poses challenges for fully understanding what interview subjects or just random people are actually getting at. For example, a taxi driver in Bogotá explained the significance of the late Hugo Chávez in the following words: “In Venezuela there is change without deaths, while here in Colombia there is no change



The Judicial Palace, Bogotá, November 2012. Photograph by Jan Boesten.

with many deaths.” As outsiders, we might be quickly led to think that this is hardly a substantive analysis of the real situation, since already at that time Colombia’s neighbor was leading the world in numbers of violent deaths. The driver was no naive fan of Chávez, either. He made allusions to high inflation and crime rates. This statement was simply not that much about Venezuela as it was a commentary on the state of affairs in Colombia. Chávez and his followers had put fundamental transformations on the agenda and in fact followed through with action so that opposition candidate Henrique Capriles, too, had to promise to uphold Chávez’s most important achievements (whether the results were positive is another story). This is almost entirely lacking in Colombia’s political class, where the story goes more along the lines of “changing everything so nothing changes.” After President Uribe initiated a program of demobilization of paramilitaries, now sometimes the very same people are killing activists under the name of so-called criminal bands. Various judicial reforms have intended to make the justice system more effective and efficient, yet impunity remains high. In addition, *congresistas* repeatedly tried to use judicial

reforms to get something for themselves—usually in the form of protection against criminal prosecution. In short, there is an evident inconsistency between what is said and what is being done in politics in Colombia, and the frustration was speaking through the somewhat naive admiration for Chávez’s revolution. This can only be understood, however, if the insider’s and outsider’s perspective are somehow appreciated.

Fieldwork in Colombia can be a tedious task, and King, Keohane, and Verba correctly advise their readers to be as precise and concise as possible in preparing for qualitative research projects. Above all, researchers can save themselves a tremendous amount of time. After I arrived in Bogotá and surveyed the literature on legal politics, my most satisfying sigh of relief was, “I won’t need that.” What doctors are to Cuba, lawyers are to Colombia: a source of human capital with profound know-how. One interviewee said: “Colombia es lleno de abogados” (Colombia is full of lawyers). Those lawyers and experts in constitutional law have written a *mélange* of analyses, and without properly preparing the

## ON THE PROFESSION

## Compelled to Err: Fieldwork as Iterative Experiential Learning

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research question, one runs the danger of simply translating their work without much additional academic benefit (and wasting a whole lot of time while doing it). When it comes to some of the techniques of conducting research, we have to read between the lines of *Designing Social Inquiry* to fully grasp the potential of some of the practices that its authors might not have fully appreciated. The literature on methodology has grown since King, Keohane, and Verba's volume, and researchers have rediscovered the advantages of small-N and case studies (Brady and Collier 2002). An appreciation of intensive elite interviews and an understanding of their importance are among methodological rediscoveries (Rathbun 2008). I found interviews to be particularly helpful in an environment such as Colombia, where politics do not necessarily adhere to formal norms.

### References

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During my initial trip to the Chapare region of Bolivia in December 2012—the first time I truly felt “in the field,” in the sense that I was on my own, without immediate recourse to institutional support of any kind—I spent about a week doing introductory interviews with local community leaders and other initial contacts. While there I spent a day exploring a couple of the main towns along the primary highway of the region. During my afternoon stop in Shinahota, I wandered along the streets of its market, the largest in the area. It was such a novel experience, like but unlike the markets of La Paz and Cochabamba I had come to know, that I succumbed to the temptation to take a few pictures of the scene without first seeking permission from those in it, something I had previously resolved never to do in the field. I snapped what I thought were a couple of discreet and anonymous street vignettes. I was not focusing on anyone in particular, just taking in the scene.

I walked onward to the main square, and passed back through the market on the way to the town's transportation stand perhaps half an hour later. I had stopped on a corner to send a quick text message, and when I looked up, I realized with a start that a dozen Shinahotans were approaching me purposefully on all sides, effectively hemming me in. In the six months I spent in Bolivia, it was the only time I felt completely vulnerable, where I had no clear sense of what was transpiring, what would happen next, and how I would handle it.

The questions were quick and to the point. What was I doing in Shinahota? Why was I taking pictures? Who was I working for? Not knowing what would be considered wrong or right answers, I stuck with the truth: I was a student from Canada, visiting

the town for a day. I was in Bolivia to study . . . actually, it didn't matter what I was hoping to study. The moment I opened my mouth, it had become abundantly clear I was not Bolivian, and my interlocutors relaxed and began to disperse. Within seconds the circle surrounding me had bled away back into the busy streets. The woman who had asked the questions stayed long enough to explain that they were worried I was sent by the state tax collection agency to document who used which stalls. Then, just like that, I was alone again.

The photographs were a silly error in judgement, yet in hindsight the ensuing encounter, brief as it was, proved highly illuminating to my understanding of politics and society in the region, pushing me toward an important part of the answer to my own research puzzle. I felt the moment carried meaning as soon as it happened, but it took some time to realize how it had rendered vividly themes I had previously read and heard about elsewhere. It brought out the Chapare's tightly woven social fabric; the limited extent to which the state had penetrated the region, and rural Bolivia more generally, even to this day, with society often pushing back against those efforts;<sup>1</sup> the degree to which communities regulated themselves; and their capacity to mobilize quickly and effectively in response to perceived threats (García Linera, Chávez León, and Costas Monje 2004, 393–394). These topics all now feature prominently in my emerging dissertation, which focuses on the sources, mechanisms, and limits of social conflict in the region between state and society during the government's eradication campaigns under Ley 1008. Though I had read about those topics prior to my arrival in the Chapare and had heard more about them during my initial interviews, until that moment they had simply been selected