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Cross-National Interviewing at International Conferences: How to Make the Most of a Unique Research Opportunity[1]

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International conferences can be highly efficient venues for collecting cross-national data. Such conferences offer the opportunity to meet and interview government officials and other elites from numerous countries worldwide, all at a single location and within a few days. The article encourages IR scholars to take advantage of this underutilized opportunity and provides advice for doing so.

Keywords: methodology, elite interviewing

Much contemporary research in international relations (IR) examines the processes by which internationally coordinated policies are established and implemented. Whether the goal is to set human rights standards, fight crime, curb arms proliferation, liberalize trade, or fund development projects, the making of international policies involves a large number of actors of various nationalities. Many of these actors are representatives of states, be they politicians, bureaucrats, or members of any government agency. Yet increasingly, the establishment and implementation of international policies may involve additional participants that are not government-affiliated: civil society actors, such as advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and professional associations, as well as private-sector firms and industries. International bureaucracies also play a major role in this process (Abbott and Snidal 2010). As IR scholars, our task is to identify and explain the preferences, views, motivations, and intentions of these actors. We seek to understand the considerations that brought the actors to take a certain course of action or to avoid doing so, the constraints under which they operate, and their perceptions of the interests and behavior of other actors. A host of sources may assist us in accomplishing this task: from public statements to internal government documents to media reports to records of negotiations and meetings. Another important source involves a direct interaction between the researcher and the actor in the form of an interview.

Yet employing the interview method in the context of international policy-making processes raises a fundamental challenge. To fully understand the dynamics and outcomes of these processes, we may wish to gain access to actors from the many countries involved. It is certainly possible to visit and conduct interviews in a handful of countries; but how can we interview actors from 20, 50,

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or 100 different countries? Traveling to that many destinations would likely be prohibitively expensive and time-consuming. Indeed, technology can mitigate the problem of distance through cheap and easily available alternatives to the in-person interaction. Today, interviews can be conducted not only by phone, but through various online tools, such as email, Skype, or chat (James and Busher 2009; Deakin and Wakefield 2013). Yet online interviews are less-than-satisfying substitutes, as they raise a variety of problems, including the loss of contextual information (such as nonverbal cues or the interviewee's social environment); difficulty in establishing rapport with the interviewee from afar, thus limiting the accuracy and depth of the information provided; and ethical concerns (for example, risk to the interviewee if their responses are recorded in an email and then forwarded or if the Internet connection is not secure). For these reasons, political scientists continue to prefer and rely on in-person interactions (Mosley 2013a:7–8). They turn to the online mode as a second-best choice or as a supplement that allows interaction with the interviewee prior to the face-to-face encounter or following it. The question thus remains: how can we enjoy the benefits of a direct, in-person exchange when the research population is cross-nationally dispersed? Is it possible to interact with and pose questions to individuals from a multitude of countries, while avoiding the drawbacks of online interviewing?

International conferences offer IR researchers a unique opportunity for face-to-face interviews with a large, cross-national group of actors who are involved in the political process under study. An international conference brings together many of the relevant stakeholders, be they government officials, industry representatives, or NGOs. Each arriving from their home country, the participants gather at a single site for several days or weeks. *Their* goal is to exchange views, deliberate, negotiate, and perhaps reach agreement on certain rules or policies. We, as scholars, can use the international conference as a venue for meeting and interviewing actors from a large number of countries within a very short time. Indeed, international conferences offer highly cost-efficient opportunities for collecting cross-national data. Whether the goal is to conduct in-depth interviews or perhaps administer a survey, the conference gives the researcher a platform for interacting with and obtaining information from actors of numerous nationalities, all gathered at a single location at the same time. Furthermore, this may be a particularly opportune time for obtaining information from these actors. In anticipation of the conference, they have likely given careful thought to their views, goals, and constraints with respect to the relevant political process.

Indeed, like any research method, conference interviewing has its limitations and potential pitfalls, as I discuss below. Yet even with these, international conferences offer valuable and unique opportunities for cross-national research. To date, however, these opportunities have been underutilized. Few political scientists have used international conferences as vehicles for large-scale cross-national data collection. I have done so twice. The first occasion was the United Nations (UN) Review Conference on Small Arms, held in New York in the summer of 2006.[2] This 2-week conference brought together government officials from the majority of the member states of the UN. The delegates came from ministries of foreign affairs, defense, justice, and interior as well as from police and military forces. This conference gave me the opportunity to hold a survey by interviewing officials from 118 countries. The survey yielded unique data on these countries' preferences concerning the international regulation of the small-arms trade and the prevention of the illicit trade (Efrat 2010). The second international gathering was not a diplomatic conference, but a professional one: the 24th International Congress of the Transplantation Society—an association

[2]UN Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the Program of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, June 26–July 7, 2006.

of health-care professionals in the field of transplantation. Senior physicians from various countries worldwide attended this 5-day event in Berlin in July 2012. Some of these physicians had been involved in an international campaign against organ trafficking—a campaign led by the Transplantation Society and the World Health Organization that was the subject of my research. The meeting in Berlin allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews with 20 of the physicians, who came from the United States, Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The interviews resulted in a large amount of information, from multiple national perspectives, on the efforts to eliminate the organ trade.

The goal of this article is twofold. First, I seek to bring attention to the promising research opportunities that international conferences offer and to encourage IR scholars to take advantage of them. Second, I draw on my experience to impart advice for making the most use of these opportunities. The suggestions here aim to help researchers exploit the international-conference setting for the purpose of meeting many of the actors relevant to their research and gathering data. I begin, however, by situating the conference-interviewing technique within the broader methodology of elite interviews.

International Conferences as Special Sites for Elite Interviewing

The individuals that attend international conferences are typically members of political, economic, social, or professional elites. Interviews at international conferences are thus a special case of elite interviewing. As a data-collection technique, elite interviewing may serve a variety of purposes, from theory building to hypothesis testing. Through interviews, researchers can obtain rich, detailed information about the respondents' preferences, attitudes, and beliefs and may use that information to make inferences about the preferences, attitudes, and beliefs of a larger population. Interviews can provide data on the decisions and actions behind certain events and processes; they may also be used to corroborate information gained from other sources (Tansey 2007; Mosley 2013a). Similarly, conference interviews may have different uses, such as providing information on governments' views and preferences with respect to a specific international agreement, opening a window into governments' general thinking about or approach to an international issue, and offering accounts of debates, deliberations, and decision making at the national or international levels. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that conference interviewing offers great breadth over depth. By interviewing one or two officials from each of dozens of countries, the researcher may gain valuable information on each country's approach to the international process under study. Such information, however, will not allow a full understanding of the competing positions of different government agencies and societal actors in each country.

In recent years, a small but growing literature on elite interviews has provided advice on the entire interviewing process, from interviewee selection through the formulation of questions to ethical concerns (Richards 1996; Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Goldstein 2002; Leech 2002; Lilleker 2003; Burnham, Gilland, Grant, and Layton-Henry 2004: chapter 9; Morris 2009; Harvey 2010, 2011; Goldman and Swayze 2012; Mosley 2013b). Alongside the benefits of elite interviewing, the literature has identified the potential weaknesses and pitfalls of this technique and has offered some remedies. Of greatest concern is perhaps the (in)ability or (un)willingness of respondents to accurately state their views and motivations. A strategy of triangulation, that is, cross-checking with multiple other sources, can increase the researcher's confidence in the accuracy and credibility of the interview data, and so can careful wording of questions and proper follow-up questions (Davies 2001; Berry 2002; Johnston 2008:42–3).

Interviewing at international conferences raises many of the challenges and dilemmas that are typical of elite interviews in other settings. Thus, much of the advice offered by the elite-interview literature applies to conference interviews as well and will not be reiterated here. The technique of conference interviewing, however, also involves some unique considerations and challenges. For example, the researcher has to be careful to distinguish between actors' true preferences and their negotiating positions, which take the preferences of other actors into account. At the UN small-arms conference, I asked African officials whether they would support the establishment of an international prohibition on arms provision to unauthorized nonstate actors. Based on prior knowledge, I expected to hear an enthusiastic "yes" and was surprised when they responded with a "no." It took several additional questions to reveal that the negative answer reflected the respondents' realization that, given the American opposition, such a prohibition was not politically achievable. They did believe, however, that it was highly desirable and essential for preventing rebels from obtaining arms.

Another concern is sampling and potential biases. For example, some small countries may not be attending the conference for various reasons, such as a limited interest in the subject matter of the event or limited resources that do not allow them to send representatives. By contrast, large countries are more likely to attend, as they will typically have a stake at the conference as well as funding for a delegation. This means that small countries, especially poor ones, might be underrepresented in your sample. Furthermore, as I discuss below, some may decline the interview request, potentially introducing a nonresponse bias. Even when a country accepts your invitation, you may not be able to freely determine who the specific interviewee will be. Often you will be told that "X is our delegate, and they will give you the interview." In such case, it might be difficult to tell whether and to what extent one can generalize from the interviewee's answers. All this may or may not be consequential, depending on the goals of the research and the kind of data that you are seeking (see Tansey 2007; Lynch 2013). In any case, these concerns should and can be properly addressed and mitigated. For example, if public statements of the government are found to be consistent with the interviewee's responses, this will increase our confidence that these responses indeed represent the government's view.

The following pages offer some guidance and advice on conference interviewing. I assume here that the respondents are government officials from different countries, but my suggestions are applicable to non-governmental respondents as well. The suggestions primarily aim to help researchers schedule and carry out as many useful meetings as possible while on site. Indeed, getting access to the respondent and arranging the meeting is a crucial part in any interview: no interviewing skill is important "if the meeting never takes place" (Goldstein 2002:669). For conference interviewing, making appointments—and ensuring they are kept—poses a particular challenge, but one that researchers can successfully meet with adequate preparation and planning.

Pre-Conference Preparation

The first step in the process is to identify a conference relevant to your research, one whose participants you would like to meet and interview. This could be a conference held by the UN or one of its bodies or agencies, a conference sponsored by another international organization (IO), or any other international meeting that brings together many of the actors pertinent to your study. You may find out about the conference from various sources, such as newspapers and relevant Web sites. Of particular use are IO Web sites, such as those of the UN and the European Union, that list future conferences.[3] Another potential

[3]UN conferences, meetings, and events can be found at http://www.un.org/en/events; the European Union's event calendar is at http://europa.eu/newsroom/calendar/.

source is individuals that you might meet in the course of your research. Indeed, it was a physician I interviewed on organ trafficking who informed me about the upcoming medical conference in Berlin. Note that some authors recommend that elite interviews be conducted in the latter stages of the research, once the researcher has acquired a solid knowledge of the subject matter (Harvey 2010:202; Richards 1996:201). The date of an international conference, however, is not yours to choose. If you have identified a relevant conference, consider taking advantage of this opportunity even if the timing is not optimal in terms of your research progress.

The next step is to inquire with the organizers whether the conference is open to outside observers and, if so, to ensure your on-site attendance. Indeed, it is possible, in principle, to interview conference participants off-site—say, at a nearby café. However, this would inconvenience the interviewees and thus lower the number of meetings you'll be able to schedule. By contrast, on-site attendance will allow you to make more appointments and increase the chances that scheduled appointments are indeed kept. Even if the arranging of attendance requires some paperwork or paying a fee, this would be worthwhile, as it will greatly facilitate your efforts. UN conferences, for example, may allow accredited NGOs to attend the event and observe some of the sessions. To obtain accreditation, the NGO has to submit an application that includes information about the organization and confirms its interest in the goals of the conference (UN n.d.). In such case, your NGO is the academic department or research center with which you are affiliated; the chair or director will file a request on your behalf, stating the academic interest in the conference. While it may be possible to attend the conference in another capacity—for example, as a member of a non-academic NGO or even as part of your country's official delegation—this would be less desirable. Wearing the hat of an impartial academic researcher—rather than being identified with any state or nonstate actor—will better serve the goal of holding productive interviews. In terms of the time frame, it is best to ensure your attendance as soon as possible, at least 2 months prior to the conference. This is certainly the case if you'll be seeking an NGO accreditation, which entails a bureaucratic process. Even if signing up for the conference requires no more than a simple online registration, it is best to do that well ahead of time. Keep in mind that preparing for the conference involves additional steps—booking a flight, arranging accommodation, and, of course, contacting potential interviewees—all of which require that you will have secured your attendance at the conference.

Contacting conference participants in order to request and, hopefully, schedule an interview is the most important part of your preparations. Indeed, it is possible, potentially, to skip this laborious stage altogether and simply approach would-be respondents on the spot during the conference, without prior contact. However, making appointments in advance would greatly improve your data-collection efforts. First and foremost, in-advance scheduling will allow you to interview more people than would be possible otherwise. International conferences are hectic, and many of the participants, if approached on site, might be unable to add another meeting to their already busy schedule; it is better to have that meeting penciled into their schedule before the conference begins. In-advance scheduling will also probably result in longer meetings, as the interviewees have blocked out time for you. Finally, making appointments in advance may allow the interviewees to think ahead of time about the issues you would like to discuss and perhaps even gather relevant information and documents. This may be important, as the conference's time constraints and changing schedule could ultimately cut the interview short and as the interviewees might not have access to relevant documents while at the conference, outside their office.

When should you start contacting conference participants? This depends on the number of meetings you have in mind. Obviously, scheduling 50 appointments would be more time-consuming than setting up 10. Yet as a rule of thumb, it is a good idea to begin the process 2–3 months ahead of the conference. This will allow enough time for gathering the list of participants, locating their contact information, requesting an interview, and doing the necessary scheduling and coordination prior to the conference. In fact, it may be a good idea to have two rounds of contact with the prospective respondents. The initial contact will aim at obtaining their consent for an interview; the second round—a week or two prior to the conference, when the respondents already have a sense of the expected schedule—will set the exact time and location of the meetings.

Key to this preparation stage is the list of conference participants and their contact information. In most cases, the list will not be publicly available in advance, and you cannot count on the conference organizer—for example, the UN Secretariat—to provide you with the list or to facilitate your efforts in any way. This, however, is not an insurmountable obstacle. Keep in mind that at this point your goal is not necessarily to identify the individual participants, but the bodies, organizations, or institutions from which they will come. For that, several pathways are available. Some multilateral processes designate national points-of-contact: ministries or other government bodies in each country that act as communication channels and go-to addresses in all matters related to the process. If such points-of-contact have been designated, you may be able to find their list, which would constitute an excellent starting point. Another option is to simply contact the ministry or government body in each country that seems relevant to the subject matter of the conference. Some of the delegates to an arms-control conference, for example, will likely come from arms-control departments in ministries of foreign affairs or defense; for a trade-related conference, it would typically be the ministry of trade or finance that is involved. You might also want to look at reports that states may have submitted as a part of the international process, as well as any other related document, including the list of attendees in past conferences. All these will provide hints that may facilitate the identification of the relevant government entity in each country.

If the conference is sponsored by an international organization, further assistance may come from countries' permanent delegations to the IO (for example, the permanent missions to the UN in New York and Geneva). The permanent delegations will likely know the identity of the delegate(s) scheduled to arrive from the capital for the conference and may even help you to arrange a meeting with them. Furthermore, members of the permanent delegations may themselves be representing their countries at the conference and are therefore potential interviewees. Throughout this process of identifying the conference participants, do not hesitate to use the phone. A quick call to a relevant ministry or a permanent delegation to an IO may save you much time and allow you to precisely identify the department or individual that is involved with the conference.

Armed with a list of likely participants, be they government authorities, NGOs or others, your next goal is to establish contact and request an interview. The cheapest and most convenient method to do that—especially when the number of recipients is large—is by email, but this is not necessarily the way that will produce maximum results. An email may be an effective means of communication with some recipients, such as NGOs or actors in the private sector. For contacting government authorities, a fax may be preferable, as it is more formal and "legitimate" than an email and less easily dismissed. Sending a faxed letter on a university letterhead will further enhance the credibility of your request. Faxing, however, has its costs. It is more expensive and time-consuming than emailing, especially if some of the recipients are in developing countries. The poor quality of telephone lines in many of these countries might mean multiple failed attempts to send a fax before it goes through.

Whether you contact the potential respondents by fax or email, there are several things to keep in mind about the content of the request. Most important, avoid sending a generic, identically worded message to all the recipients. It is better to "personalize" the request by indicating that you are very interested in Country X's views and that the upcoming conference would be an excellent opportunity to learn about the role that Country X plays in the international process of which the conference is a part. In addition, highlight the fact that you are an *academic* researcher conducting an important study and that the requested interview—held for purely academic purposes—will significantly contribute to your study. For Ph.D. students, a letter of introduction from the advisor can confirm such statements. You should also indicate how the information provided in the interview will be used and published; for example, will any views be attributed to the specific respondent, to the government ministry to which they belong, or to their country? Another point to emphasize is that the interview will be short—asking for a 30-minute meeting is reasonable—and will involve minimal inconvenience, as it will be conducted on-site at a time that fits the interviewee's schedule.

Once the requests are out, the waiting begins. Hopefully, some potential interviewees will respond by accepting your invitation; others, however, might remain silent. In the latter case, you can follow up on the written request with a phone call to make sure that your request was indeed received and to further indicate your interest in holding an interview at the conference. Be prepared with a 30-second description of who you are and what your research is about (Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Harvey 2010:198). When talking to an official from Country X, you may even point out that a number of countries have already confirmed their participation in your study, and therefore, it is important that Country X be included in the study as well. At this stage, persistence and self-confidence are crucial. Time and again, you might hear that the persons you are trying to reach are away from their desk or are otherwise unavailable. Do not give up and keep trying! It is a good idea to remember, at this point and during the conference itself, that these individuals are very busy. They may be willing to participate in an academic study, but this is certainly not the most important thing on their mind.

Obviously, even with the best efforts, you are unlikely to achieve a perfect response rate. In fact, responses to your interview requests may vary in somewhat predictable ways. One is geographic: in my experience, East Asian officials have been less enthusiastic about expressing their views publicly, whereas European and Latin American officials have been more forthcoming. Unsurprisingly, open, democratic governments are more inclined to speak to an academic researcher than closed authoritarian regimes. This, however, by no means implies that East Asian or authoritarian governments would refuse to take a part in your study; it does mean that convincing them to participate might take longer and require a greater effort. Another possible influence is countries' substantive views on the subject matter of the conference. For example, we might expect that countries unsupportive of international action on human rights or climate change would be reluctant to openly express their opposition in an academic study. This, however, is not always the case. In fact, countries resisting international action might feel that they are misunderstood, even vilified, and that their legitimate concerns are unacknowledged. They could seize the interview as an opportunity to clarify and justify their position. At the UN small-arms conference, the Iranian and Pakistani interviewees thanked me for allowing them to explain their governments' opposition to the international regulation of small arms—opposition that, in their view, had brought them unwarranted criticism from other countries and the NGO community.[4]

[4]Similarly, William Reno (2013:170) notes that rebels may be "keen to talk to journalists and academics to convey the righteousness of their grievances and goals."

As the Conference Nears

The conference is now approaching. A week or two before the event is the moment to contact all those who have agreed to be interviewed in order to schedule the place and time of the meetings. As for the place, it is best to meet at a spot that is central, yet not too crowded: a crowded spot might make it difficult for you to recognize your interviewees within the sea of people. In the likely case that you are unfamiliar with the conference venue, you may ask the interviewees to suggest a suitable place to meet—some of them may be familiar with the site. Regarding the time, it is best to fill the early time slots in your schedule first and to keep some of the later slots open. Inevitably, not all the appointments you make will be kept: the person may not be able to leave the conference room at the scheduled time, may fail to find you, or might simply forget about the interview. Therefore, it is important to maintain flexibility and leave some free slots to allow for rescheduling of missed interviews. Unoccupied time slots will also allow you to take a break from interviewing and attend some of the conference sessions open to observers. Flexibility is also crucial in case you schedule some back-to-back meetings. Many of the meetings will begin at least a few minutes late; some may last longer than expected. Allow yourself some extra time in between meetings, so that you don't have to rush and arrive breathless to your next appointment.

At the time of scheduling, it is also a good idea to provide the interviewees with your cell phone number and, if you feel comfortable, to ask politely for theirs. Cell phones will significantly facilitate the coordination and communication between yourself and the interviewee, for example, if either of you are running late or in case of trouble finding each other. One additional point to keep in mind is language. As you will be meeting people of many nationalities, some of them might not be entirely fluent in English (or any other language that you speak). In such case, you may suggest that the interviewee bring to the meeting a third person to serve as an interpreter (see Fujii 2013). Alternatively, you could give that interviewee an advance indication of the issues to be covered in the interview. This will allow them to prepare for discussing these issues in English and will raise the likelihood of a productive meeting. In fact, if the conference and the interviews will be addressing topics that might be seen as sensitive—such as security policy—it may be advisable to give *all* interviewees a general idea of the expected content of the interview ahead of time. This will put them at ease and make them more comfortable about meeting you at the conference and providing information.

Holding Interviews During and Following the Conference

The big day has come. As you arrive at the conference site, identify two or three locations that are suitable for holding the interviews, such as a lounge, a cafeteria, or a seating area within the site. Ideally, these locations should be relatively close to the scheduled meeting spot, but also isolated enough to allow for a quiet and undistracted conversation. Remember that international conferences are large events with hundreds or even thousands of participants, and it is better to hold the interviews with as little background noise as possible.

Approximately 24 hours ahead of the meeting would be a good time to send the interviewee an email with a reminder of the scheduled location and time. Hopefully, all interviewees will show up as planned. Yet, as indicated above, this is unlikely to be the case, and some appointments will be missed. As with the pre-conference preparation stage, the key here is self-confidence and persistence: remind the person that they have agreed to meet with you and politely ask to reschedule. The same attitude should apply to new potential interviewees that you come across at the conference. While on site, you may identify individuals that you did not or could not contact in advance, but would still like to interview. Approach them and ask to meet during the conference; if that is not possible, you may suggest a telephone interview following the conference.

Indeed, while your main goal is to conduct on-site interviews during the conference, some of the interviews will have to be conducted prior to or after the event, and this may even hold certain advantages. At the preparation stage, as you contact potential interviewees to request a meeting at the conference, some may indicate that they will not be attending or will be too busy to meet with you on site. In such case, suggest a telephone interview before the conference or following it. Holding a few telephone interviews prior to the conference will have the added advantage of allowing you to test and improve your questions before posing them to the interviewees at the conference. *Post-conference* interviews may be particularly appropriate if the event is IO-sponsored, and some of the delegates are countries' permanent representatives to the IO. Rather than interview those delegates during the conference, you may choose to interview them in the days immediately following it at their permanent-delegation office, which is likely close to the conference site. Doing so has the advantage of freeing up time during the conference for meeting with the delegates arriving from the capitals—delegates who will be heading back home when the conference ends. Furthermore, interviews at the permanent delegations will be held at a quieter, more relaxed environment than those conducted against the noisy background and busy schedule of the conference.

Conclusion

As a data-collection method, international-conference interviewing offers the advantages typical of elite interviews. It allows the researcher to directly interact with the actors involved in the events and processes under study and to frame these interactions in accordance with the needs and priorities of the research. It enables the researcher to ask theoretically driven, specific questions and thus obtain valuable data and insights that other sources may not provide (Tansey 2007). To these benefits, the international-conference setting adds the advantages of efficiency and access. By holding a large number of interviews during the few days of an international conference, the researcher can complete an amount of work that might take months under normal circumstances. Most important, the conference allows the researcher to meet face-to-face with government officials and other elites from numerous countries worldwide—an otherwise impossible task.

International relations scholars would be well advised to take advantage of international conferences as platforms for collecting cross-national data. Through careful preparation as well as a confident and persistent mindset, conference interviewing can generate a very large amount of useful information. Apart from the direct benefits to one's research, engaging with many people from different countries—all involved in the political process of interest—is a truly exciting and rewarding experience that offers a front-seat view of how international politics is made.

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