Chapter 4

Studying elites in an egalitarian society

There are a lot of things that make strange noises in the social scientific night. That's why methodological communities exist – so you won't have to deal with those things on a regular basis if you don't want to.

(Abbott, 2004, p. 112)

The successful production of sociological truth requires the adept mobilization of theory

(Reed, 2011, p. 36)

This chapter will provide the reader with information about the research process: how it was planned, how it unfolded, which adjustments were needed, what ethical considerations were central, and how the collected data were gathered and analysed. The separation of research processes into different phases, such as planning, collecting and synthesising, runs the risk of giving an impression of a neat and chronologically linear process. In reality, this project unfolded in a much more entangled and overlapping way, with constant re-articulations of key research questions, for instance. However, for the sake of readability, it is presented here in a chronological fashion. The overarching theme of the thesis is consecration and the role of historical elite institutions in creating cultural hierarchies. This chapter will describe the overall research process, where for instance more information was collected than was used in the analysis. In some way one could say that the choice of what material to focus on is also the result of an analysis, for instance when the question of

masculinity construction at one of the schools appeared for us as particularly interesting, as a sociological puzzle, we "zoomed in" on this topic, and consequently did not focus on the interviews from the other school. Of course, this was a methodological choice since we could have done a comparative study between the two schools with a research question like: how do they construct masculinity at elite schools? Or why are masculinity constructions at two seemingly similar elite schools so different? However, the sample of these two schools would provide the answer, since it is exactly because these schools are typical examples of "economic" and "cultural capital" that they are different. For us, however, the interesting question as cultural sociologists was how the meaning-making happened on a local level, and therefore we were particularly focused on an interwoven in-group of teenagers at one of the schools. This chapter will therefore describe both the research process chronologically up until the point where the data were gathered, and then in a distilling manner that starts with the entire overarching material, show how and why some elements were given particular analysis. Before the narrative begins, I will give a brief presentation of the data in general.

4.1   Data

The data that form the basis for the analyses in this study are 88 individual interviews, 4 focus group interviews, and 30 hours of participant observation. The individual interviews were of 73 high school students and 15 literary critics, in some extent reflecting the size of their population. The interviews lasted between 90 and 180 minutes, which provided a total of around 11,880 minutes of interview material. Ordinary size for a sample in qualitative projects is 15 interviews +/– 10 according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 113), and the methods literature describes the experiencing of a saturation point when the researcher understands that further interviewing is unnecessary. These were audio recorded, transcribed and coded, using HyperTRANSCRIBE and HyperRESEARCH. The interviews were coded with two distinct codebooks, consisting of 12 and 36 code groups respectively, and 64 and 50 codes in total. More details on coding follow later in this chapter. In total this provided around 2,640 pages of transcribed interviews. All the interviewees from the schools have been given fictitious names in order to secure their anonymity,

while the critics are referred to by the newspaper they wrote for at the time of the interviews. All participants gave us their informed consent, also to be referred to as they are here, and the data collections were approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service. The data collection was undertaken in a two-fold manner, where the study of literary critics was done solely by me, and the study of elite schools were undertaken as part of a larger research group on a project called "Adolescent Elites". This project mainly took place at the University of Oslo, with Professor Willy Pedersen as project leader. Both projects were rather explorative and had a broad approach, with few predefined themes apart from the selection of interviewees. In the following I will describe the research process from beginning to end.

4.2   Planning and sampling

The main research question in this study first and foremost designates a social environment for further analysis, namely historical elite institutions, and even further it asks for negotiations. This indicated a qualitative research design. First, a couple of historical elite institutions were selected: upper secondary education and literary criticism and approached through three organisations: two public schools and the Critics' Association. I do not claim that these organisations constitute actual elites, but that they represent institutions that are symbolically understood as elite. A similar example may be operas, which are historical elite institutions, but not necessarily consisting of actual elites (Benzecry, 2011; Larsen, 2019). The emergence of a research question is often hard to explain in detail, but it is related to other studies. Research questions are often posed in relation to each other, either to problematise earlier research or to "spot gaps" between earlier research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). So is the case here, where the selection of the schools and the critics was done based on gaps that were spotted in the research. Sociological research on literary critics in Norway is completely new ground, to which this study hopefully is the first small contribution. The sample can be said to fill a gap because it is related to sociological studies of taste and culture that leaves the question of the activity of professional quality assessment unanswered. Sociological studies of upper secondary education in Scandinavia exist *en masse*, and studies of elite schools also exist, but until now the study of elite schools in

Scandinavia have been very sparse (Törnqvist, 2019), and in Norway non-existent. The ambition was therefore to study hitherto unstudied groups in themselves, and not as prisms to understand something more general, or reflections of something specific. The project is to a large degree inspired by Daloz' (2010) pluralistic and comparative approach, where fixed conceptions deriving from theoretical standpoints are kept to a minimum. As he writes (2013, p. 15), his method consists of the following:

> (a) appealing to the authority of conventional models of interpretation only at the condition that they make sense in a particular context without giving a priori explanatory precedence to any of them; (b) being sufficiently open-minded to recognise those cases for which new theorising, or at least a revision of existing theories, is required; (c) taking a cautious stance toward concepts with a universalistic ring and toward grand theories that rely on them while encouraging studies that are attentive to local perceptions.

Hence, this approach does not lead to the discovery of covering laws or anything like it, but rather anomalies, or "problematic settings in which excessively general propositions no longer work" (2013, p. 16). Daloz advocated for inductive analysis and the search for understanding local cultures first, before theorising. I am sympathetic to the latter but share the criticism of Tavory and Timmermans (2014) of grounded theory and related methods called "inductive". This project aims at doing an abductive analysis with a constant consideration of theory and empirical material in light of each other. The abductive is characterised as different from inductive approaches, because of knowledge from different theories before the data collection, and throughout the research process, instead of picking it up at the end. Norman Blaikie (1993, pp. 176–177) defines abduction as:

> [T]he process used to produce social scientific accounts of social life by drawing on the concepts and meanings used by social actors … Once these descriptions are produced, the Interpretivist may then wish to understand them in terms of some existing social theory or perspective.

In this study this entails that the interviewees talk about their historical elite institutions, and questions concerning culture, taste, and inequality are put

under scrutiny first, and then afterwards "measured up against" the theoretical concepts of Bourdieu, Alexander, Boltanski, and Thévenot, or Lamont, for instance. Abduction has been described as the research logic to "measure" the fruitfulness of concepts in empirical research (Hagen & Gudmundsen, 2011), and thus fits this project. It is seen as an addition or a replacement to inductive methods. This line of research has often identified existing theories' problems with explaining phenomena, either through problems with concepts or simply limits to theory. This is what Vassenden (2018) called "productive anomalies", because these examples can be used to generate new concepts or reformulate them in a better way. It is considered a logic to generate new knowledge, and highlights creativity and imagination as central to analysing. The ambition of this study is to provide a deep understanding of specific relationships, and not to provide a representative overview of general patterns or mechanisms. The first step in an abductive analysis is description. It will also be considered whether or not these two institutions could fit within existing theoretical frameworks or not. However, the choice of two institutions shows a curiosity for the possibility of "theoretical stretching" of pre-existing concepts, and new theorising beyond the particular. In other words, the research design is constructed with a particular sensibility to being as open as possible to many potential findings.

This research project has also been inspired by Andrew Abbott's (2004, p. 15) point about methods being like any other social phenomena: a living, social thing, possible to categorise in a variety of ways. He shows how methods can be categorised according to (1) what type of data that one gathers, (2) how one analyses data, or (3) how one poses a question. The latter often dictates the data size one aims at, and gives three sub-categories: (1) case-study analysis, (2) Small-N analysis, and (3) Large-N analysis. According to this categorisation, this project could be called a Small-N analysis, in that it has a small number of cases and is interested in differences and similarities between them. He further pointed out that these methods are explanatory programs, and that they entail different concepts of explanation. I will elaborate on this later in the chapter. Based on a wide range of examples from social scientific literature, Abbott identifies different types of *heuristics*, i.e. ways of using gambits of imagination to "open up new topics, to find new things" (2004, p. 191). Central heuristics in this project have been to "problematize the obvious" (2004, p. 122), in the sense that it problematises the notion that

cultural tastes work as signs of distinction and expression of social distance that have been "obvious" to academics, and to "lump together" (2004, p. 245), by taking two seemingly different samples and treating them as instances of a single phenomenon, in this case historical elite institutions. These heuristics have guided the project since the beginning.

The interviews with the literary critics were done in 2013 and 2018. They were done through the Critics Association in Norway, and the U.S. Qualitative interviews were chosen to understand their negotiations of the historical elite institution of criticism, as well as their description of their work on a more daily basis. There was also a choice to give them the possibility to express themselves, beyond the restrictions of newspaper columns and newsworthiness. The interviews were semi-structured, with the same set of questions, but appearing in a different manner in most of the interviews.

The planning and sampling of the material connected to the school project was done as a part of a research group during the winter and spring of 2016. The project was called "adolescent elites", and elite schools in Oslo were explicitly sampled. There was no ambition of mapping the amount or reach of elite schools, but rather to gain access to some of them and do a closer study on what goes on inside them. The schools that were selected both have long traditions and prestigious alumni. The schools specialise in different subjects, the Oslo Commerce School is famous for its business and economy orientation, whereas *Schola Osloensis* is famous for its academic and cultural orientation. Part of the research group was inspired by Bourdieusian research and they had developed The Oslo Register Data Class scheme to conceptualise class differentiation, and distribution of cultural and economic capital in Norway. All indicators pointed to Oslo Commerce School as a school where the students come from economic upper-class families, and *Schola Osloensis* as a school where the students come from cultural upper-class families. For this study, the concepts of capital as a sampling guidance were of lesser importance, given that I was interested in these schools in their own right as elite institutions, not as examples of something other than themselves. When I was invited on this project, and partook in forming it, my experience from interviewing literary critics was central, and the questions that we posed and the themes we were preoccupied with as a group resonated with those I had worked with earlier. These themes were questions about taste, status, culture, self-conceptions, elites,

(perceptions of) social distance, Norwegian culture, egalitarianism, snobbishness, distinction, literature, money, prizes, and hierarchies.

4.3   Data collection

The interviews with critics were undertaken at the place they preferred: the home of the interviewee (3), their offices (2), public cafés (7), and by telephone (3). They were all conducted by the author, with a similar style and same interview guide. As other elite researchers (Ljunggren, 2016; Mikecz, 2012) have noted, offices are not the best location for interviewing, as these provide a formal setting, but I considered it as a potentially fruitful negotiation to let them choose themselves, and given that only two interviewees wanted this, I took the risk. My experience, however, was similar, it provided a much more difficult setting for the interviews. The difference in time was dealt with by re-reading the first interviews before undertaking the last ones. The latest ones were in my second language, English, which proved to be a bit challenging, but nonetheless provided good data, and interviews that in hindsight were strikingly similar to the ones conducted in Norwegian. Since these interviewees can be said to have a "voice of their own" and be publicly known, I made sure to gather information from the interviewees beforehand, such as reading their last reviews, checking out their Twitter account and some of the public discussions in which they had engaged. After this, I "customised" some of the questions in the interview guides to make them aware that I was prepared and to give them easier examples upon which to build. I got the impression that if we had a common example, it was easier for the interviewee to share perspectives and opinions. For the American sample the (at the time) recently published books *My struggle* by the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård became a good example. I also used more general examples, such as discussing whether young critics tend to be more critical than older critics, and if so why. The interviews with the school students were all conducted at the schools, 40 of them by the author and the rest by a professor and two research assistants. These interviews were all conducted in empty classrooms at the schools, which I found to be a good framework for the interviews. The topics we touched upon included parental education and employment, grandparents' education and employment, family wealth, area

of upbringing in Oslo, networks of peers, early school experiences, networks at OCS and OS, perceived social hierarchies at the school, the importance of homework and studying, as well as plans for the future. However, other topics – such as sports, partying, use of alcohol and drugs, party buses known in Norwegian as *russebuss*, the importance of fashion and clothes, holidays, and the use of social media – were also broached. The interviewees were recruited through a focus group made up of four students, who each gave us ten interviewees to contact through their phone numbers.

4.3.1   Participant observation

I undertook the participant observation in the spring of 2016, mostly by spending time at the "open" areas of the schools, such as the schoolyard and the libraries. Having interviewed many students, I became a person that some people at the school recognised, but the schools were also accustomed to different "non-students" walking around the schools, attending meetings or doing presentations, so my presence was not particularly conspicuous. It went by more or less unnoticed, except for friendly greetings. Also, my focus was not to snoop around and gather information by staring at people, but more to hang around and get a sense of the everyday atmosphere at the schools. This resulted in small field notes with descriptions of what I saw and impressions I got. Altogether this became around 30 notes that I have used as background information in the writing of the analysis.

4.3.2   Quantitative data

Before the selection of samples, quantitative overviews of the populations were consulted. For the critics this is mostly from Andreassen (2006) and Wright Lund (2005). For the upper secondary education in Oslo the "Young in Oslo" study (N 24 000) (Andersen & Bakken, 2016) provided detailed information on the different schools and made the selection easier. Andersen and Bakken, who are responsible for the "Young in Oslo" study, were also connected to the "Adolescent Elites" project. We were given the surveys that they had used and gave our interviewees the same. All interviewees filled out this short survey, and thus enabled us to locate our sample within a broader population. The combination of survey and interview data enabled us to establish a rather

precise ORDC classification (Hansen, Flemmen, & Andersen, 2009, see Fig. 1) of the participants. The classification was done on the basis of their parents' profession, and the main classification we do in the analysis is between the OCS, whose parents are from predominantly economic upper middle or upper class, such as economist, physician or lawyer, and SO, whose parents are from predominantly the upper middle or upper class, with a skew towards cultural professions such as architects, directors, and professors. These quantitative measures are not used in specific analysis other than to provide an overview of an example of what the sample selection is.

4.3.3   Interviews

The part on elite schooling draws on 73 individual interviews, lasting approximately two hours each, undertaken at the two elite high schools in inner city Oslo, with adolescents aged 17 or 18. We also conducted four focus group interviews with current and previous students at the two schools. The first two focus group interviews were conducted to establish a good interview guide based on what the interviewees gave us information about, and to give us a rough impression of what to expect at the different schools, as well as to recruit further interviewees. The two focus groups with previous students were done after the individual interviews and provided a sort of validation. First, we asked them the same kind of questions about their time at the school and their choice of school, and then we presented them with some of the answers we had gotten from the current students. To be able to work as an actual validation, we would have had to do this with more rigour, but their answers, which expressed resonance, nonetheless gave us an indication that we were onto a sound description of the schools and the school cultures.

The sample of critics consists of individual interviews with 15 book reviewers from Norway and the U.S. All interviews were conducted by the author, in the language of the interviewee. The selection was done through the National Book Critics Circle associations in the respective countries, where one person was contacted strategically and the rest through "snowball sampling". All the interviews touched on questions about nationality of criticism or literature, but mostly they focused on the different conceptions of the "profession". The reviewers that are interviewed all write regularly for the most important newspapers and news media in the two countries, that is *New*

York Times, *Washington Post*, *LA Times*, *NPR*, *NRK*, *Morgenbladet*, *Dagbladet*, *Klassekampen*, *Dag og tid*, and more.

4.4   Analysing interview data

According to Kvale (1996, p. 103), the analysis part of research projects goes all the way from when the interviewee had given answers, until the researcher has written out the research in the form of a book, an article, or a report. Being aware of this, we wrote reflection notes after every single interview in "Adolescent Elites", with short summaries of the impressions we got, and what we thought might be key insights. We also had conversations with the other interviewers, to get an impression of what kind of information surfaced in the other interviews. After they were collected, I transcribed the interviews using HYPERtranscribe for the interviews with the critics and trained a group of master students to transcribe the interviews using the same program for the interviews with the students. The transcriptions were not closely written with details on utterances, but every word was noted, in the line of Tavory and Timmermanns' (2014, p. 134) recommendations:

> [D]etailed transcription of interviews is important. If we do not produce close transcriptions, we will either change accounts retroactively or simply forget some snippets of conversation that could have proved crucial for our argument. Even if it is impossible to provide a full transcription that captures every utterance, movement, environmental stimulus, and biological parameter, this does not negate the aim of a comprehensive record. To appropriate Clifford Geertz's medical metaphor, the fact that we cannot perfectly disinfect our scalpels does not mean we should conduct surgery in the sewer.

I have aimed at making the analysis as pluralistic as possible, maintaining several theoretical inspirations. After the transcription of the interviews, I initially coded them with pen and paper, underlining passages I found interesting and writing analytic notes on the side. After that I coded the interviews in the program HYPERresearch. Again, the sample of critics were coded only by me, while the same project team coded the interviews with the students (I also did some of these myself).

Coding often gives the impression of a rigorous way of leading to an answer that inevitably lies within the data but given the many ways data can fit different models and stories, another approach, more in line with humanist studies, to coding was done here. As Biernacki (2012, p. 11) pointed out, coding runs the risk of becoming a ritual practice, "regenerating meanings into an isolated token, a datum label". Humanist approaches provide us with the "gift of an acute trial, the insurance of shared documentation, and the transformative power of anomalies" (Biernacki, 2012, p. 3), and can be considered both more rigorous and open to the reader. Tavory and Timmermanns (2014, p. 138) warned about the perils of coding while at the same time highlighting the helpful sides.

> Taking field notes, transcribing interviews, and performing coding are important ways to guard against biased memories and the imposition of preconceived ideas on observations – in other words, to increase the resistance of the objects we encounter. And where field notes and transcriptions function as mnemonic devices, coding leads to greater familiarization with the researcher's observations. These procedures thus operate as methods of justification, helping the researcher to ensure that the path to the completed argument is not mired in incompetent memory and other cognitive biases. These practical processes do more than that, however. If we remain on the level of mnemonics, we divorce the research process from the active generation of theoretical insights and re-create the boundary between moments of discovery and moments of justification. A key point of a pragmatist position is that this neat division is untenable, that discovery and justification are analytically and practically intertwined.

In the coding of the transcribed interviews, as pointed out in Halvorsen & Ljunggren (2020), we utilised both a thematic approach – using for instance "Oslo", "parents", "friends" and "school work" – but also a more open form of descriptive coding, where the initial codes were expanded by sub-codes of "speech acts" (cf. Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), that covered for instance "what is a man", "who are "the boys", and "gendered expectations". A similar approach was taken in the critics interviews. In the analyses, both forms of codes proved helpful in scrutinising the topics under question. Theoretical coding was not done, but instead passages and interpretations were analysed up against theories afterwards.

4.5   Strengths and limitations to interviews

The answers and thoughts of the interviewees on, and descriptions of, elite activities could surely be dismissed as examples of respondents giving the "correct" answer – in line with hermeneutics of suspicion. This is a common critique of interview studies in general (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014a, b), but it misses the strengths of interviews and the active parts of speech (Cerulo, 2014; Pugh, 2013). In my study, the choice of words by the interviewees show that they are well-immersed in what can be called a discourse of egalitarianism, and it is an untangling of these local understandings and enactments that we have put under scrutiny. However, ethnographic fieldwork to uncover several aspects of this is encouraged for further research. As a researcher I had no interest in promoting or criticising elites. On the basis of this I take their answers and reflections on the questions as legitimate and valid/honourable illustrations. In other words, interviews were chosen in order to elicit how they wanted to present themselves, that is what Pugh (2013, p. 50) calls the *honourable* information that interviews provide. This means that interviewees are actively conducting "a form of display work", which is interesting in itself, and does not necessarily provide insights into what they *actually* mean or feel. The interviews then provide information on beliefs, thoughts, reasonings, and meanings of elites. However, it is important to point out that there are many questions regarding elites that this empirical material does not address.

The interviews with the critics proved to be a good arena for the interviewees to express which values they were preoccupied with in their professional activity. The interviews were not situations where they had to legitimise their activity, but they talked about those kinds of situations. The number of situations where legitimation became necessary was uneven, most of them were nonetheless preoccupied with the central question of the need for criticism. This might be because they were prepared in case they needed to mobilise arguments in favour of criticism, or because many of them have a humanist educational background, and the so-called crisis of humanities is a related discourse. The reasons why we as a society need humanistic studies are in many cases the same for why we need criticism. Several of those interviewed, as well as many critics in general, have written books on this topic (the need for criticism, and to acknowledge the point that for some it seems like a pointless

and unnecessary activity). In the interviews several of the interviewees referred to their own books or texts on the matter. These texts were also consulted, but not included, in the empirical material that is analysed.

The interviews with the students covered many aspects of their high school life, but mostly aspects connected to their school. The students also partake in other areas in society, which the interviews to a lesser extent provided information on, although some information was given about family and upbringing. A lot of research on elite education has focused more on areas such as upbringing, eating, attire, and sport and other recreational activities than done here. This is partially a result of the studies being undertaken in Anglo-American contexts, where such activities are more strongly connected to school than in Norway, but it is also a question of method. More comprehensive participatory observation might have brought more detailed information into these aspects. However, the interviews provided rich information on how the students understand themselves and their school, which are of greatest importance here.

4.6   Interpretivism: what is it that's going on here?

Earlier in this chapter I noted that this research could be considered an example of "small-N analysis", according to Abbott's categorisation. The other methods he categorised are ethnography, historical narrative, and survey research. He argued that they differ in both questions posed, data gathered, and in view of what an explanation is. In other words, they rely on theoretical perspectives as well. He distinguished between three views on what constitutes an explanation: (1) the pragmatic view, where an explanation is an account that allows intervention, (2) the syntactic view, where an explanation is an account that allows us to make a beautiful and compelling argument, and (3) the semantic view, where "an explanation is an account that suffices" (2004, p. 9). The small-N analysis is a method that in practice borrows from many different methodological traditions but is mostly associated with the semantic program and close to ethnography. The semantic programme "explains the world of social particulars by assimilating it to more and more general *patterns*" (2012, p. 28), according to Abbott, and this fits this research project as well. First, I describe the institutions I look at, then I look for similarities

and differences, and how that enables me to discuss the role of elites, in this case students at elite schools, and critics and their self-perception.

This research can be considered interpretivist, and this makes questions of interpretation, description, and explanation important. Interpretivism is a "theory of method", and thus a set of thoughts on how the gathering of data influences what one can say about the questions asked. The view of descriptions applied in this project is that they always entail an interpretation, and that a neutral description is impossible. Describing something is to put it into words, giving it a form it did not have before. It can be seen as an answer to Erving Goffman's (1986) classic question: "What is it that's going on here?" In that way, a good description is, from my perspective, also an explanation, and a good example might be a finding (Jøker, 2017). By an explanation I mean that it brings us to an understanding that we did not have prior to reading the analysis, that we are able to understand what the project aims at explaining. We can look at the well-known example of Bourdieu's use of distinction as a concept: Sociologists have been preoccupied with the notion of signifying distance and symbolic aspects of power for decades, as Jean-Pascal Daloz (2010, 2013) has pointed out. It could be read descriptively as an act of showing difference, or in some way communicating differences in taste, but in a Bourdieusian setting we associate the concept with an explanation: it is given an explanatory status. Does this use of distinction provide a causal or a functionalist explanation? Does the logic of distinction point to some explanatory causes between taste and class, or are they correlations that fit with the theoretical model of a class society? As Weber wrote: "[A] description is…indispensable in order to clearly understand the object of the investigation…The final and definitive concept in contrast cannot stand at the beginning of the investigation, but must come at the end" (Weber, 1930, p. 47). However, with an abductive approach the theoretical concepts are also a part of the project in the beginning, but then in combination with an openness for restrictions in how central it becomes or how encompassing it can be applied. Distinction might therefore be a descriptive concept in the beginning, since it frames certain topics one is interested in, and then through analysis its meaning becomes a specific one, and thus becomes explanatory. A result of *Distinction* as a study, is that the concept has become heavily theory-laden and filled with presuppositions. It has been criticised several times for becoming immune to empirical material, since the conclusion already lies within the definition of the concept(s) (Biernacki, 2012,

for instance). In this project it has been important to "offload" the concept of distinction, in order to be open to interpret the specificities that occur in the empirical material.

In this attempt of a sociology of constructions of eliteness and hierarchies, positioned in a post-positivist theoretical landscape, the notion of re-reading is central. The methodological point behind this is that the facts do not speak for themselves and are not enough. The facts have to be interpreted and regarded in relation to something else than themselves. In order to do so one has to read the interviews or the empirical material over and over again to ensure openness to the layers of meaning that can be found. Not that cultural sociology is an archaeological exercise to dig down to the inner, deeper (more real) meaning of speech, but it needs to deal with the plurality in order to give a cultural explanation. Building on minimal interpretations of single interviews and circumstances, one ends up with a maximal interpretation (Reed, 2011, p. 31). As Tavory (2020, p. 10) wrote about inferring from interviews: "by eliciting representations and narratives, researchers can identify structural aspects of interviewees' landscapes of meaning".

4.7   Ethics

Ethics is often dealt with as it is here, as a short text within a longer one, that sort of works like ticking of a box. Have you remembered to conduct the research according to the guidelines? The "ethics sections" often try to convince or just state that the answer is yes, after the specific guidelines are named. Guidelines like these are often imposed on the research from a national ethics board, an institutional one, or informally through the research community. The data collection is approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data service. The ethical part of the research consists of anonymising the interviewees and getting informed consent (which I have gotten and done), but it also penetrates all the other aspects of the research. This short text under the sub-title ethics is thus written performatively, to remind the reader of keeping questions about the ethical aspects in mind during the entire reading of the book.

An example that can help explain the ethical aspects of this study, is the aforementioned point by Biernacki about coding. His point is that coding runs

the risk of effacing the boundary between reporting and creating facts, and that humanistic interpretation lies at the centre without being shown. In my mind this becomes an ethical question. The coding in this project is therefore not done in order to make the project "appear scientific", and thus to make findings anyone would have arrived at following the same procedures. The coding is merely done to organise the material, and orient me as a researcher. It does not at any stage exclude the reading and rereading of the entire material. The project is explicitly an interpretive undertaking, where the reader is invited to follow every step of the process. This makes the project more or less transparent. In turn, transparency is a way of ensuring validity, and one might claim, as Biernacki, that this is the best way of ensuring validity.

Ethics is then not a constraining framework, as it might be understood by researchers conducting fieldwork in sensitive areas such as hospitals, but rather a commitment the researcher has. An example that might highlight ethical dilemmas in this research might be the descriptions or classifications of individuals. Norwegian research has found that people do not want to be described as "privileged elites" (Skarpenes, 2007; Jarness, 2013; Krogstad, 2019). This became a topic during the interviews when I explicitly questioned them about their own and their surroundings' elite status. The classification as "elite" was often resisted, as one also finds people do with other classifications. For instance, Skeggs (1997) found that individuals "dis-identify" with class categorisations because they are connected to negative characteristics. It then becomes a difficult task for the researcher to balance the interviewees personal descriptions and more general social descriptions. Rather than categorising the interviewees into a category they themselves do not approve, this project aims at opening up how they deal with these issues and treating that as a source for information about society. The important part of the study is not to identify who constitutes the elite, but rather how people in places associated with elite status relate to it.

4.8   Concluding reflections

In order to investigate these historical elite institutions and their meaning, it has been fruitful to approach them without predefined variables, but to openly to understand them in themselves. This open approach to studying elites is

advocated by several sociologists (Larsen, 2018, 2019; Daloz, 2010, 2013, for instance). In this chapter, I have described how the research process unfolded from beginning to end, and also covered the amount of material gathered. This hopefully gives the reader the necessary information to evaluate the soundness of the interpretations and findings summarised in the next chapter.