

Animated intersectionality: Deepening perspectives on elite research

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Abstract

Scholars emphasise the importance of taking positionality seriously when researching people with high socio-economic status, yet relatively few studies fully recognise the intersecting identities of both researchers and these ‘elites’. In this paper, we introduce the term ‘animated intersectionality’, which allows us to recognise the significance of identities and structural inequalities, while acknowledging individual agency and the diversity among people who share similar structural positions. This paper draws from our experience as a diverse research team exploring off-grid infrastructure transitions among elites in South Africa. We emphasise that while team members secured interviews through persistence, this work takes a toll on researchers. Expanding Sennett and Cobb’s concept of ‘hidden injury’, we explore the psychological and emotional costs of working in a hostile environment. Animated intersectionality offers a nuanced approach to understanding power, preserving the importance of identities

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and structural inequalities. It provides a framework to examine how power dynamics unfold in personal, contextual ways, especially in interactions between researchers and elites.

Keywords

animated intersectionality, elite research, South Africa, inequality, power, infrastructure transitions, hidden injuries

Introduction

From 2021, our team of researchers examined how South African ‘elites’¹ (discussed in detail later in the paper) have found alternative ways to self-provide energy and water. Our team consisted of experienced academics, post-doctoral research fellows (postdocs), and PhD and master’s students. The team also had a very particular racial and gendered profile, with the senior researchers being white, middle-class and women or non-binary, while the other members of the team were largely men and women of colour, some foreign and most coming from less well-resourced backgrounds. Through team meetings, writing workshops, conference attendances and formal and informal discussions, it became clear that, unsurprisingly, our experiences of interviewing and engaging with our interlocutors were vastly different, even within the same interviews. Although the senior team members proactively supported colleagues to anticipate and overcome potential difficulties in researching elites, these differentiated experiences nonetheless had a profound influence on our research process and findings. Although all team members occupy a position within the academic elite, the intersection of this status with other forms of privilege and disadvantage shaped each researcher’s experience in distinct ways. Despite a rich literature on the complexities of conducting research with the high-status ‘other’, the current sets of conceptualisations inadequately explain or engage with the complexity and messiness of our research team’s experiences. Thus, we wanted to understand how our different intersectional identities shaped, influenced and mediated our experiences. What did our positionality mean when ‘studying up’ (Nader, 1972)?

Unintentionally, we had constructed a functional, social experiment by which to take positionality seriously and explore how intersecting identities grounded in structural inequalities – such as race, gender and class – fundamentally shape the dynamics between elites and those who research them. Our paper argues that an intersectional approach is needed to fully understand issues of access and engagement within interviews, and the broader ethical questions that elite research raises. We propose the term ‘animated intersectionality’ to capture how intersecting identities are embedded, resisted and (re)negotiated within the research process and everyday experiences of conducting research.

The term ‘animated intersectionality’ helps us to highlight the importance of people’s individual biographies, beliefs and behaviours. As discussed later, animated intersectionality provides a way of engaging with the complexity, indeterminacy and blurriness that

occurs between structure and agency. Our insights come from our own experiences of studying elite individuals and their actions. Using these experiences, this paper interrogates the methodological complexities of studying elite groups whose actions exacerbate inequality, while recognising that researchers themselves occupy uneven positions of privilege and marginalisation. Through the lens of ‘animated intersectionality’, we explore how these intersecting identities are activated in everyday interactions and how they fundamentally shape research processes. Drawing on interviews with members of the project team, we (as the authorship team) demonstrate that intersecting forms of power are never absent nor irrelevant. Nonetheless, when considering people’s intersecting identities, we must also pay careful attention to people’s agency within the research process and the factors that shape the exercise of this agency. This is not a simple story of agency overcoming injustice: we also explore the limits of agency and the toll that it takes on those who face intersecting forms of structural oppression. Expanding Sennett and Cobb’s (1972) term ‘hidden injury’, we discuss the psychological and emotional costs of occupying a hostile environment (Emejulu and Sobande, 2019).

This paper first explores scholarship on elite research and the recent push for more reflexive approaches. It then outlines recent debates and developments on intersectionality, and introduces our contribution, which we term ‘animated intersectionality’. We choose this term to ensure that personal agency does not overshadow intersectional power or suggest it is ever absent. Instead, we argue for an intersectional analysis that explicitly acknowledges the importance of heterogeneity in shared structural positions. Following this contribution’s theoretical foundation, we introduce our research on South African elites, from which we draw our insights. Using qualitative data from interviews with our project team, we highlight the utility of ‘animated intersectionality’ in understanding elite research.

While our article focuses on elite research, the power dynamics that we describe are not limited to elite interviews (Empson, 2017; Glas, 2021) and it is not only in elite research that researchers may be on the losing end of power imbalances (Oakley, 1981). Therefore, the insights we share have a broader application to understanding a diversity of research processes.

Defining the ‘elite’

Although the study of ‘elites’ and debates around their definition stretch back many decades (Mills, 1956), methodological scholarship on the researching of elites increased in the 1990s (e.g. Fritz et al., 1994; Hertz and Imber, 1995; Ostrander, 1993). As disciplines such as human geography, anthropology and criminology started to ‘study up’ (Nader, 1972), the interest in methodological reflections on elite research grew (Smith, 2006).

A key question in this academic literature is how ‘elite’ is defined. In most cases, people are referred to as ‘elites’ because they have attained some form of status or power relative to others (Glas, 2021). Writing on elites in the field of politics, Richards (1996: 199) defines them as ‘a group of individuals who hold, or have held, a privileged position in society’. For others, the definition of elites is more specific. John Scott (2008: 22), for example, argues that elites are not just privileged people. Instead, the term ‘elite’ should

be reserved for those who ‘hold or exercise domination ... within a particular area of social life’. In practice, these forms of domination can be difficult to identify (Vlavonou, 2023), particularly when people are driven by a mixture of modesty, denial and discomfort to obfuscate the power and privilege they hold (Ruan, 2022).

Our project, which focused on energy and water practices, adopted a definition of ‘the elite’ that aligns with William Harvey’s (2011: 433) notion of those who ‘hold important social networks, social capital and strategic positions within social structures because they are better able to exert influence’. This definition has the advantage of encompassing Mason-Bish’s (2018) argument that being in an elite position may be due to a person’s ability to ‘straddle’ multiple realms or contexts simultaneously (i.e. social, economic, religious, political, community, etc.) in any number of configurations. We use the shorthand of ‘elites’ throughout this article to refer to people in this multi-faceted position.

Researching the ‘elite’

Much of the methodological literature on elite research has focused on the difficulties of accessing those in power and the power asymmetries that shape the research process. Access remains a dominant theme, with scholars repeatedly emphasising the inherent challenges involved (Richards, 1996: 200). Given that non-response is presented as a norm in several accounts of elite interviewing (Huggins, 2014: 7), Huggins (2014: 3) argues that ‘no matter how methodologically suitable elite interviewing is for a particular study, its success still depends on the researcher’s ability to effectively undertake them’. Scholars like Empson (2018: 60) report spending multiple years cultivating relationships with key contacts in order to secure access. Therefore, accounts of elite interviewing are filled with directives that researchers should avoid any feelings of ‘worthlessness’ that may accompany serial rejections (Empson, 2017: 61) and deal with the frustrations of frequent cancellations (Huggins, 2014: 9).

Reflecting on this literature, Smith (2006) calls for caution, and by drawing on post-structural theories of power, argues that power is far more fluid than these accounts of elite research would suggest. ‘Modalities of power’, she argues, ‘can be negotiated and are neither constant nor inscribed’ (Smith, 2006: 645). To illustrate her point, she turns to the work of Philippe Bourgois (1995) on marginalised Puerto Rican communities in America and Yvette Taylor’s (2004) research on working-class lesbians in the United Kingdom. Both scholars struggled to gain trust and access to the communities they wanted to study. This, for Smith (2006), demonstrates that power is a flexible, context-specific phenomenon, highlighting the limits of a structural analysis.

However, by making equivalence between the issues of access with elite and marginalised communities, Smith (2006) elides the very different reasons why access is denied, which leads us back to the issue of structural power. We cannot make sense of the barriers that Philippe Bourgois or Yvette Taylor faced without reckoning with the forms of daily oppression that minoritised communities face. Their position is very different from that of privileged elites who are uncomfortable with the idea that they may be rendered vulnerable by research. By virtue of their position in society, minoritised groups are persistently in a position of potential vulnerability, notwithstanding their agency, resourcefulness and

other forms of power. Trust is hard-earned in these contexts, even when researchers (like Taylor, 2004) share elements of a community's lived and living experience. Where this is not the case – and researchers embody intersecting forms of privilege as well as the power of the academy – negotiating access can be even more challenging. If our own understanding of power does not enable us to recognise this, it falls short of the precision and insight needed to be useful. If we flatten our analysis of power in this way, we are also unable to speak about those elites who are themselves from minoritised groups and who may face a complex mixture of different vulnerabilities in the research process.

Smith's (2006) work is an important call to think carefully and reflexively about the power that elites hold. We agree with her argument that an elite person's status may not easily translate into the research context: elites may, for example, feel 'exposed or vulnerable' in an interview setting (Smith, 2006: 646). We build on this scholarship, arguing that binaries between 'outsider' and 'insider' or 'powerful' and 'powerless' often fail to capture the complex dynamics that shape interviews with elites (Ntienjom Mbohhou and Tomkinson, 2022; Vlavourou, 2023).

Other work on elites and researchers has taken a different approach to Smith (2006), and has sought to name the structural forms of power that undergird elites with greater precision. This broader scholarship emphasises that 'the elite' is not a homogenous group and important differences exist between (and within) elites in different sectors (Glas, 2021; Li, 2022). Take, for example, someone who occupies an important political post while also being a member of a minoritised community (or communities). This paper also builds on their recognition that scholars should acknowledge the interplay between power, influence, marginalisation and discrimination that works on both the research participants and researchers in complex ways (Ntienjom Mbohhou and Tomkinson, 2022).

Elite researchers

The same is true for researchers of the elite, whose power is also shaped by the structural position they occupy. Research on elites has frequently engaged with the work of earlier feminist researchers, who have engaged in questions of power within research settings (Oakley, 1981; Pacholok, 2012). More recently, however, methodological studies on elite research have gone further in discussing identity and power. Work on low-to-middle-income countries, for example, demonstrates that whiteness and institutional location can play an important role in securing access. Nick Clare (2017) explores this phenomenon in the context of Argentina. Clare (2017) had initially wanted to do 'militant research' with and for social movements in the country. However, these movements were suspicious of the stream of relatively privileged researchers coming to their door. In light of this, Clare (2017) re-oriented his work towards elites. As a white researcher from a European university, Clare found that he was welcomed by a set of political elites. He was even actively approached by a 'national government representative... to organise an interview for/with their boss' (Clare, 2017: 380). Western universities – particularly elite universities like the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge – can prove especially powerful in gaining access (Empson, 2017: 61 and 64). This is not to argue that whiteness or institutional location

consistently enables access (see e.g. Glas, 2021: 439), but rather that these factors are important to acknowledge.

Vlavonou (2023) further argues that race and racism continue to shape research access in post-colonial Africa. Vlavonou (2023) speaks about the challenges of researching elites in the Central African Republic as a young, male, Beninese PhD student based at a Canadian university. Black elites in the Central African Republic, he reported, were dismissive of his attempts to interview them but granted access to white, post-graduate students. As an African, he argues, he felt trapped within ‘norms around seniority and hierarchy establish expectations for young people’ by elites who ‘work to exclude young people from social and political spheres’ (Vlavonou, 2023: 2 and 10). Meanwhile, as a foreign researcher, he lacked the personal and professional contacts that socio-spatial proximity offered to other researchers (Li et al., 2019).²

Conversely, writing on ‘developing countries’ Yonatan Morse (2019: 281) argues that ‘with some preparation and tenacity young researchers can approach elite respondents much more directly than in other settings’. He advocates for what he terms ‘patient insistence’ in the pursuit of interviews (Morse, 2019: 287). Waiting is a common aspect of many research settings, particularly in elite spaces where various power dynamics unfold between researchers, respondents and the research environment. In these contexts, researchers may view the process of waiting as potentially ‘productive’, allowing for reflection and deeper engagement with the research setting. The idea that confidence and assertiveness can impress elites is not new (Ostrander, 1993), but persistence is sometimes no match for power dynamics. The same actions that could be read as ‘patient persistence’ by researchers who leverage structural power might be construed by elites as impertinence or harassment. Vlavonou (2023), for example, recalls being loudly berated by elites when he persisted in trying to gain access.

This scholarship highlights the need to maintain a focus on structural power and its effects on access and interaction. Combining this perspective with an intersectional approach allows for an even deeper analysis. In the following section, we explore Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) approach to intersectionality and its relevance for research settings. At the same time, we also draw on Smith (2006) to emphasise that structural analyses cannot account for all the personal ways that people navigate and exercise power. To capture this indeterminacy, we introduce the notion of ‘animated intersectionality’.

Animated intersectionality

Crenshaw (1991) coined the term ‘intersectionality’ to capture how identities, rooted in structural inequalities, come together in a person’s life. Her focus was on the intersection between race and gender, which was systematically ignored by legal provisions intended to tackle discrimination. Crenshaw argues that identities are co-constitutive: they are neither forged nor experienced separately. In this sense, Crenshaw was developing earlier notions of inequality, moving away from the idea of ‘triple oppression’ where singular axes of inequality multiplied, while consciously building on the earlier work of Black feminists and groups like the Combahee River Collective who had been theorising

how inequalities coalesce or ‘curdle’³ in people’s lives (Collins, 2020; Lugones, 1994: 459; Potter, 2015; Weldon, 2008).

As intersectionality has gained popularity, it has ‘travelled’ across the globe and beyond the academy (Davis and Lutz, 2023). Sirma Bilge (2020: 2299) warns of the dangers of paying ‘lip service’ or reifying the roots of intersectionality while de-centring the struggles of Black women in practice. She argues it has become ‘an empty shell onto which they can project their own concerns and desires’ (2020: 2301). Intersectionality is particularly at risk of this because of the ‘fungibility’ of ‘female Blackness’ which has meant that Black women in the academy have been commodified and turned into objects, texts, or pathways for the use of others while their scholarship is unmoored from rich academic lineage to become a ‘an anybody-can-play pick-up game performed on a wide-open, untrammelled field’ (duCille in Bilge, 2020: 2307).

Given that intersectionality is a ‘Black feminist intellectual production’ (Bilge, 2020: 2309), Bilge is particularly critical of its reconfiguration to a generic ‘gender+’ framework that sidelines the centrality of race (Bilge, 2013, 2020). This tendency is most evident in the work of European feminists who engage with intersectionality while denying the centrality of race within its framework (Lewis, 2013). However, Bilge does not argue that intersectionality must be used only by, or exclusively focus on, Black women (Bilge, 2020: 2321). This aligns with the view that intersectionality is ‘more of a nodal point than a closed system’ (Cho et al., 2013: 787) and is not meant to be a ‘full-fledged grand theory or a standardised methodology’ (Cho et al., 2013: 789). The movement of intersectionality across disciplines, fields and topics is not necessarily illegitimate, though such translation can ‘sometimes contribute to the very erasures to which intersectionality draws attention’ (Cho et al., 2013: 793).

Intersectionality can thus be seen as an ‘analytic disposition’ (Cho et al., 2013: 795). It is an approach that allows us to explore the coming together of multiple, identities in the lives of individuals and communities, grounded in structural inequalities. When we use the term ‘identities’ in the remainder of this paper, it is with an awareness of the structural context in which they operate. In so doing, we acknowledge that there is no internal limit on the identities that may be of relevance in a particular case, but the use of intersectionality as a concept is always anchored in the experiences, mobilisations and theorisation of Black women.

Intersectionality provides an invaluable entry point for identifying and exploring how identities come together in people’s lives. The notion of the crossroads, which Crenshaw (1991) developed, is a powerful metaphor for thinking through the intersections of power and their consequences. Yet, when we apply intersectionality to life, there are three key factors that we need to keep in mind. The first is that the meaning of identities is not homogenous or static. While structures such as race have a global presence and force, they are embedded in historically and socially contingent ways. Thus, Wright (2016) could argue that Stuart Hall (e.g. 1994) fell short of creating theoretical insights into Blackness that could encompass experiences of African Blackness. This mattered not only for theorising across the continent but also for diasporic movements and mobilisations through which the meanings of Blackness travelled globally. Approaches to

intersectionality need to pay attention to the different meanings that structural forces have accrued in particular contexts, and how these forms of difference impact people's lives.

The second factor argues that identities do not simply determine a person's life in any arithmetic fashion. The effects of structural conditions are negotiated at both the individual and collective levels. This interplay between structure and agency has long occupied sociological theorists (Giddens, 1984). Accounts of intersectionality need to acknowledge this interplay (Collins and Bilge, 2020). This is a difficult line to hold, and scholars must be careful that they do not fall into the trap of either suggesting that structural factors have a pre-determined certainty or a totally malleable presence.

Finally, as sociological theories of 'the everyday' remind us (Highmore, 2002, 2010), there is a messiness to these negotiations (Cooper-Knock, 2018). What we see playing out on the ground pulls on different forms of power, which are operating across a variety of spaces and scales. In other words, agency is as unpredictable as it is ever-present. The means by which negotiations over power occur and the effect of these negotiations must be empirically proven rather than analytically assumed.

How then do we capture the messiness of everyday life, the interplay of structure and agency and the variation within the structures that shape our world? As an authorship team, we attempt this through the notion of animated intersectionality. We have chosen the term 'animated' because it captures how structures (in all their complexity) are set in motion. It enables us to introduce a level of indeterminacy without losing sight of the thudding reality of structural injustice and oppression. It also does not make any *a priori* judgements about (a) who initiates things, (b) what individuals, spaces or scales will be most important in this process or (c) the positionality of researchers and the epistemological position that they inhabit. The term allows us to examine the moments in which different people move into a diversity of spaces and activate a set of events, relationships and interactions. How and what team members needed to do was based on both their identities and on their own specific biographies and forms of agency.

Researching elites in South Africa

Between 2021 and 2023, our research team worked together on a project called 'Off-grid Cities: Elite Infrastructure Secession and Social Justice'. The project's aim was to understand how private investments in water and energy infrastructure affect social justice in South Africa. The project is situated within a context where colonialism and apartheid legacies remain entrenched, and despite constitutional rights to water and electricity, 18% of South Africans remain without adequate state-supplied water and 6% do not have access to electricity (Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), 2023). Many who do have access to the grid struggle to afford water and electricity beyond the state-subsidised free basic allowance (Chance, 2018). Although in early post-apartheid South Africa, state-supplied water and electricity were affordable and reliable for the country's economic elite, by the start of our project this had shifted dramatically. Inadequate electricity supply, water shortages and failing infrastructure had led to both 'load-shedding' – scheduled electricity 'black-outs' across the country – and 'water-shedding' – the rationing of water supplies (Middelmann, 2023a, 2023b; Murahwa, 2024a, 2024b).

In response to infrastructure failures, households and businesses have found alternatives to the grid to meet their needs. Our team explored elite strategies for dealing with electricity and water shortages and interruptions in Cape Town and Johannesburg, and particularly the adoption of solar panels and boreholes. We aimed to understand the elite's decision-making processes and the degree to which their decisions helped or hindered a socially just transition towards environmental sustainability. As mentioned, we followed Harvey's (2011) definition of elite, and focused on resource-rich individuals who could afford investments in alternative infrastructures. In a highly unequal country, these elites hold a disproportionate share of economic and political power. Given South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, many of these elites are white and occupy spaces still heavily shaped by whiteness. Much of the scholarship on urban South Africa has focused on marginalised residents. Our focus on urban elites answers calls to examine their worlds to better understand how urban inequalities are (re)produced (Hay and Muller, 2012: 85; Nyamnjoh, 2012; Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, 2007: 5–6; Simone, 2009: 279). Despite the disproportionate impact elites have on urban resource consumption and climate change (Dodman, 2009; Leonard, 2018), scholarship on urban South Africa currently lacks a robust understanding of elite's everyday relationships with urban infrastructure. Our research contributes to addressing this gap.

Our project team consisted of 11 scholars, including political scientists, geographers, planners, urbanists, sociologists, anthropologists and interdisciplinary academics with a range of fieldwork experience. Two master's students, one PhD and three postdocs undertook research throughout the project, supported by the core team of more experienced researchers who also conducted fieldwork. Team members had different intersecting identities around race, nationality, sexuality, gender, class and language. Our project adopted a transdisciplinary approach, combining quantitative survey methods, geographical information systems (GIS), document analysis and interviewing, with innovative participant observation, ethnography, shadowing and photography.

Methods

We adopted a collaborative approach to researching and writing this paper. All members of the research team in the '*Off-grid Cities*' project were invited to join this paper's authorship team. Six team members elected to do so, this sub-group led the research process for this article, including data collection, analysis and writing. The authorship team included three white, middle-class senior researchers (two South African women and one UK non-binary person) and one Black South African woman researcher. It also included two male postdocs: one white, middle-class South African and one Black Zimbabwean, raised in a low-income settlement. Each member of the authorship team wrote a question that we posed to the full team. The set of questions included:

1. What was the feeling of being in these elite spaces?
2. What challenge(s) did you confront in the fieldwork?
3. What has motivated you to study this topic?
4. What lesson have you learned from the research process/project?

5. How did your own positionalities and those that you are researching conform to expectations/not?
6. Did you confront any ethical considerations/conundrums?

Team members were not required to answer every question and were also invited to add additional questions. The whole project team was invited to respond to each question in 200–300 words (though some team members chose shorter or longer responses), by voice note, or through an informal interview with one of the authorship team. In total, nine team members responded to these questions, and no one proposed additional questions. The authorship team received seven written responses, one voice note (subsequently transcribed) and one requesting an interview, which was conducted and subsequently transcribed by a senior researcher of the authorship team.

The authorship team considered these inputs, drew out common themes and explored various theories to help understand our team's experiences of researching elites. The writing process was deliberately collaborative, with regular online meetings to discuss the structure and content of the paper. A shared online document was used to write the paper, with two senior members contributing to the writing towards initial framings, and all authors had equal opportunity to write and comment on the paper, iteratively reshaping the theoretical framing and building the empirical core.

This paper's focus was not always comfortable as we dealt directly with power imbalances and inequalities, including structural, institutional and interpersonal dynamics both within and beyond the project team. Just as power dynamics are inescapable in the research process, they were also inescapable in the process of paper writing. Although these complexities and how they were managed fall outside of the scope of this paper, they reflect challenges such as balancing the potential dominance of senior researchers in writing processes (ka Canham and Musila, 2024) and creating space for early career researchers to take ownership of the writing process. We have sought to recognise and mitigate these inequalities structurally embedded within academia (Mauthner and Bell, 2007), ensuring that the paper was co-produced and that each author could contribute their perspectives and have their voice heard.

Animated intersectionality and elite research

This paper explores how intersecting forms of privilege and oppression fundamentally shaped our research process, focusing on research access and acts (interviews and participant observation). In doing so, we also consider the experiences of conducting research in elite communities – strategies of resistance, subversion and perseverance that researchers used to overcome these challenges, and how researchers who shared similarly intersecting identities differed in their opinions and approaches. We highlight the toll that elite research can take on researchers, and how the concept 'animated intersectionality' can be productive for nuancing differential experiences of negotiating power and identities in elite research.

Research access

Our research required team members to contact and access elites, except for one team member – a specialist in GIS – who conducted desk-top research. Despite the literature emphasising difficulties in accessing the elite, our team's experiences suggest that elites are not universally inaccessible. We consider the interplay between researching as elites contrasted against research with elites. For example, Fiona, one of the project leads is a white, middle-class woman living in Cape Town. She resides in a higher-income neighbourhood and given that her family has invested in alternative infrastructures, she is part of the group that our research sampled. Fiona explains:

To be honest I was very comfortable here [conducting interviews]. I am of and from these spaces. I have both solar and a borehole and thus speaking to others about these [infrastructures] (especially those who had them) was not difficult ... Many respondents I spoke to looked like me too! Literally 30–50 year old white women.

Her ease of recruiting participants placed Fiona in an ethical dilemma: how much should she rely on personal networks, and what risks might this pose in terms of unintended pressure or a biased sample? These dilemmas arose precisely from her closeness to, rather than separation from, the elite residents we aimed to interview. Initially, she deliberately avoided using her networks, but 'When [one student] struggled to find respondents, I did give [them] some contacts and posted in neighborhood groups', despite her initial hesitation.

Fiona clearly held the status of an 'insider' within this research. This is not just due to her living within one of the neighbourhoods that we were studying. Her insider status was forged at the intersection of race and class, cemented through social ties she had built while living in the area. This contrasted with Brian, a Black Zimbabwean postdoc who spent 6 months living in an elite gated community in Johannesburg while conducting ethnographic research and interviews. Brian 'grew up in a community of low economic standing' and was able to live in this elite community due to funding from our research grant. Entering the gated community, it was immediately apparent that living in a community was not the same as fitting into it:

From the first day I moved there, I suspected that I would struggle to align my ghettoed habitus with this new suburban or elite habitus. From the way individuals dressed elegantly in designer clothes (even when they were not attending any occasion), to the lavish lifestyle they showed off at the pool and the local bar/restaurant where they purchased expensive drinks and food, I felt that it was going to be very hard for me to connect with this community. I had feelings of being in place, but out. I felt like a fish out of water.

Brian recounts that 'In a desperate attempt to try and "fit in", I found myself spending unnecessarily at the restaurant and bar to get at least a "false sense of belonging". Without noticing, I was slowly becoming one of them'.⁴ Resources enabled him to perform a belonging he did not feel in this space. To some degree, this performance was

successful. 'Many assumed that I was one of them', Brian reflected, 'considering that I was staying in one of the apartments, alone'. Yet, as Lawler (1999: 17) found in her study of women's class mobility in Britain, such performances are demanding and complex: 'Sedimentations of an earlier habitus remain to disrupt and fragment a later one'. Brian's fear that he would not be able to transform his habitus was confirmed in the course of his stay: 'Despite trying to live and speak like an elite as I attempted to "fit" in, I was always betrayed by language'. He reflected, 'I struggled to speak the language of the elites, and like an elite'. Brian's experiences advances earlier observations and discussions about social mobility, which tend to conclude that when habitus encounters an unfamiliar field, or what can be referred to as 'habitus dislocation', individuals tend to experience 'hidden injuries', feelings of insecurities and senses of difference and displacement (Baxter and Britton, 2001; Sennett and Cobb, 1972; Stahl and Nguyen, 2025).

As Grenfell (2010) argues, language is at the core of meaning-making. Speaking the language of elites extends beyond conversations, encompassing broader aspects such as lifestyle, fashion and taste. Those conducting research on elites must often adjust what they wear, the lexicons they use and how they occupy spaces (Lyons and Chipperfield, 2000: 11). These performances are frequently scrutinised closely by those they are researching. Empson (2017: 62), for example, speaks of the 'sneering' response she received from a barrister when referring to 'customers' rather than 'clients' for his 'company' as opposed to his 'firm'. For Brian, living within an elite neighbourhood, however, this performance was particularly exhausting. This resonates with literature on the social practice of masking one's identity and mimicking others in an attempt to fit in. Not only is this an exhausting process, but it also results in people feeling disconnected from themselves (Miller et al., 2021). Living within an elite neighbourhood did not, on its own, render Brian an 'insider'. Nonetheless, he felt 'morally and professionally compelled' to continue. After all, he concluded, 'if it was not me, then who was going to understand this complex group of people?'.

If Brian's experience could be classified as one of 'tenuous inclusion' within an elite space, Tahr's, a PhD researcher, initial experiences of elite spaces prior to the project were characterised by exclusion. Tahr previously worked as an informal trader at one of the business sites that he ended up researching for his PhD, selling cell phone accessories in the parking lot. Informal entrepreneurs in South Africa are often targeted by the police and formal businesses in their vicinity (Legodi and Kanjere, 2015). Tahr was no exception. The business centre's manager, whom he needed to interview, had personally chased him from the parking lot in the past. Tahr's official documentation and status as an established researcher did not surmount the identities he held and the personal history he had forged. He recalled:

It was quite challenging when you meet other people who give you a lot of difficulties ... People ... would not even reply to your emails. Then when you give them a phone call ... they'll pick up the phone, you explain yourself to them, and they just reply to you with one sentence: "Can you please send an email?" And then [I said], "I have been sending an email, ma'am, I've been sending emails to reach you and I had no reply, that is why I had to call". Then you get that reply like,

“Please just send an email now, I will check it”. And then you still go and send the email and there’s still no reply.

Tahr grew increasingly frustrated, as did the rest of the team. When prejudice is not openly articulated, it is impossible to definitively prove. This is often what makes it as infuriating as it is insidious (Ahmed, 2021). We knew from Tahr’s reflections and our experience, however, that his experiences were due to structural injustice, including xenophobia against Black Africans from outside South Africa and the persecution of informal traders. In similar situations, white, middle-class team members had approached businesses for interviews and, even when met with hesitation, never faced the dismissiveness Tahr encountered. Strategies that benefited more privileged researchers proved ineffective for him. Privilege may not always open doors, but it leaves many of them unlocked.

Instead, Tahr had to rely on leverage and persistence. Fiona provided leverage by calling the centre’s business manager. One phone call from a white, middle-class professor opened the doors necessary for Tahr to secure an interview. The other interviews relied on a direct approach from Tahr:

When phone calls are not producing any good results, just pay a physical visit to the office ... the person will be like, “Okay, can you send emails?” Then you tell him, “No, I’ve sent a couple of them. I’ve made phone calls. If you can just tell me ... when you are free and then I can come back, I don’t mind. Or you have an option for an online interview” ... it works. It really helped to facilitate the issue of accessibility.”

This advice drew on the knowledge and experience of senior team members, who knew that elites are often less likely to be rude in public, seeking to maintain the appearance of being accepting and non-racist. Furthermore, politeness and protocol can be the civil facade through which prejudice operates. In his study of minoritised young people in France, Claske Dijkema (2019: 252) argues that ‘everyday occupations’ of privileged and exclusionary spaces are a means of asserting belonging and humanity (see also Chance, 2018). In this context, Tahr used his physical presence in elite offices as an assertion of his legitimacy as a researcher and his humanity as an individual. His presence called the bluff of the ‘polite’ rebuffs he had received. Tahr ensured all potential participants knew they could refuse, but he sought a definitive answer to end the repeated deferrals and referrals.

This process and his persistence came at a cost for Tahr. That cost was often exacted not by the elites themselves, but by secretaries and security guards who were their literal gatekeepers. Such gatekeepers are seldom given their deserved space in methodological texts on elite research. Often, these individuals occupied social positions much closer to Tahr’s than the managers he was trying to access. Through their acts of refusal, these members of staff were not just barring Tahr’s access to management, they were also asserting themselves to be different from – and superior to – him. ‘There were people that made me really feel like I did not belong in this space’, Tahr recalls, ‘... and

sometimes you feel broken at the end of the day'. In this context, securing an interview could be deeply affirming:

You feel that negative energy. Sometimes you feel disrespected, right from the security. And you'll know exactly why you are being disrespected: because you could not speak his language from the beginning. So he picked up that you are not one of them. And then there was that negative treatment, and so on ... and you finally get through, and maybe the security officer sees you coming back with his boss ... after maybe talking to his boss. And his boss is walking you out and having a good conversation with you. You know, it makes you feel kind of fulfilled, like okay, I achieved what I wanted from this place ... The receptionist or the security had worked on you at the beginning. The fact that you achieved your goal at the end. It's quite important and quite good for you.

The examples above show animated intersectionality at work. We draw two key conclusions from this discussion. First, intersecting identities played a critical role in determining access to elite interviews. Power may be fluid (Smith, 2006), but it is also sticky, and in this context it sticks readily to the intersection of ethnicity, race and class. Nonetheless, the personal and collective ways that this power topography was navigated also shaped the research process. This highlights the importance of looking at how intersectionality is 'animated': what is set in motion and what is acted out in these spaces. Recognising the importance of animated intersectionality allows us to challenge some of the narratives on elite research methods. In her work on elite interviewing, Empson (2018) argues that elites often refuse interviews because they do not see them as an attractive prospect. Interviews often offer no clear benefit to the elites in question and yet they bring the risk of material and reputational damage (Empson, 2018: 62). While this may factor into a potential participant's thinking, it elides the fact that when elites are deciding whether they want to take part in research, they are not just making judgements about the interview: they are also making judgements about the interviewer and the ways by which the interviewer accesses these spaces. Researchers are also negotiating their identity, deciding what to reveal, and weighing the costs and benefits of participating versus not participating. Those judgements are shaped by the interviewer's identities and beliefs.

Second, these findings push us to rethink the notion of 'studying up' and 'studying down' in research. Several scholars question the degree to which these terms are useful descriptors for research, arguing that the words 'up' and 'down' suggest that power is static when, in reality, it is fluid (Pacholok, 2012; Smith, 2006). Our critique takes a different approach. We are concerned that 'studying up' and 'studying down' do *too little* to position the researcher within a topography of power. Both terms assume that researchers occupy a middle ground in this topography, with elites 'above' them and marginalised groups 'below' them. In our research team, this was certainly not the case, as some were part of the elite that we were studying, while others were constantly reminded that they were not. By using the terms 'studying up' and 'studying down', we risk normalising the idea that academics occupy a shared position of power. This is not only analytically problematic. It also risks reinforcing damaging assumptions about who 'belongs' in academic spaces by assuming, for example, that those who study minoritised

and marginalised spaces would be ‘studying down’. This, in turn, shapes the scholarship produced. How many methods textbooks, for instance, suggest strategies as universally effective for approaching participants, ignoring how researchers’ identities affect their success? These assumptions also locate identity as static rather than relative and contingent on circumstance. How a researcher is seen is highly dependent on both who is doing the seeing and in what context. Recognising the importance of animated intersectionality can help us to correct those assumptions. Having explored the impact of ‘animated intersectionality’ on research access, we now turn to exploring how this concept can aid an analysis of the interview itself.

Connection within research spaces

Ntienjom Mbohhou and Tomkinson (2022: 8) argue that it is by reflecting on ‘moments of discomfort’ that analysts can gain important insights into how power operates (see also Smith, 2006: 643). Within our research project, there were interesting moments of comfort and discomfort. Although the power dynamics at play are not necessarily visible or fully knowable (Smith, 2006: 647), they provide important insights into animated intersectionality. We explore the notion of discomfort, while maintaining its analytical distinction from forms of harm that create ‘hidden injuries’.

For Christina and Fiona, both white South African women from middle-class backgrounds, occupying elite spaces was a largely comfortable process. While Christina did not live in an elite estate, where some of our research was conducted, she occasionally socialised in such spaces. Moreover, as a white, middle-class South African, she would be read by others as someone who ‘belonged’ (Cooper-Knock, 2016). As she reflected, ‘although I had a slight feeling that I wasn’t directly an insider, I felt a confidence that I had a right to be in these spaces’. Temba, a white South African man, was also familiar with these spaces, which resembled those he had grown up in and where some of his family lived. He, too, could move largely unquestioned in these spaces due to a privilege that occupied the intersection of gender, race and class. However, occupying privileged interview spaces can be uncomfortable for other reasons, including – for some of the more privileged members of the team – facing our complicity in the inequities that this project interrogated. As a project team, we are all concerned with social justice. In a country like South Africa, where injustice and inequality are heavily spatialised, being within elite spaces is always a disquieting reminder of the country’s inequalities. As Temba explains:

I feared being in spaces that were too white, as spaces in South Africa without diversity feel problematic, uncomfortable, and often unaware of critical realities around them. Despite growing up in a white family, I was raised in a relatively diverse community that held anti-racism as a core value.

Temba felt uncomfortably reminded of the country’s inequalities, and his own complicities reproducing these inequalities. These feelings were shared by other members of the research team. While the extract above focuses on race, this discomfort was often provoked by concerns that lay at the intersection of race and class.⁵

Within an interview, being white and middle-class could also create the assumption of intimacy and similarity in ways that also provoke discomfort. Nick Clare (2017: 380) refers to this as an ‘unintended rapport’. Charlotte, a white woman from the United Kingdom, reflected upon such connections. Unlike Fiona, Charlotte does not have experience of living in the neighbourhoods we were studying. However, as she is a white person who ‘feels comfortable’ in middle-class spaces, some of the elite white residents that she spoke to assumed that she shared their experiences and beliefs. ‘As a white British woman’, she reflected, ‘I found that white South Africans would assume a shared identity with me that I did not always reciprocate’.

These assumed forms of intimacy and disclosure can create their own ethical dilemmas. During interviews, Charlotte chose not to actively challenge views with which she disagreed. This is not, however, always an easy line to hold. In our project, we did not cover particularly sensitive topics, but many elite interviews do cover thornier terrain (Neal and McLaughlin, 2009). Assumed intimacy, as Clare (2017: 380) highlights, can lead to ‘extremely unguarded responses’. At what point should an interviewer correct the assumptions that their interviewee is making of shared beliefs and experiences (Clare, 2017: 381)? Malan (Malan, 1990) confronted this question when he worked as a journalist interviewing apartheid-era police officials. He found comfort in the Afrikaans formulation ‘ja-nee’ (yes-no). He felt that this filler was non-committal enough to encourage conversation without misleading the person with whom he was in conversation. Ultimately, however, this is a difficult line to walk. In their previous research on policing in elite spaces, SJ had faced this dilemma. Elites had shared illegal actions and prejudiced opinions with them that they had not directly challenged in an interview setting:

I took care to make sure that my body language and responses did not affirm what they said. In some cases, I presented my own opinions in the formulation “how would you respond to someone who thought ...” It was a deeply uncomfortable process. In the end, when I was writing up my work, I felt as if I also had to keep my own voice out of the writing. Having not voiced my opinions directly in the interview, I did not feel as if I could ethically introduce them in my writing, where my interviewees had no opportunity to reply. Sometimes, this meant that I was not as direct as I wanted to be in denouncing the injustices I had witnessed. I just had to share these injustices on the page, in the words of the interviewees, and in the context of broader theoretical discussions, hoping that the reader could do the rest.

Thus far, we have discussed contexts in which belonging was felt and assumed. In Tahr’s case, the situation was different. When he had secured interviews, he was invited into elite spaces with a level of opulence with which he was completely unfamiliar. These were places, for Tahr, that ‘you never dreamt that you would be ... someday ... [the] kind of offices that you may see in Nigerian movies ... in our academic space, you hardly see such spaces or such offices’. It was not just that these elite spaces were new; it was also that life within them was shaped by unfamiliar rituals and protocols.

I also remember when I got into [the manager's] office to interview him and we had to do the interview while taking coffee, you see the different types of protocols. You get into someone's office, you have to wait by the secretary's office for a couple of minutes before he calls you in. Then later on, he asks for coffee ... you move to a different section in the office, and then conduct the interview while having coffee.

These rituals of middle-class business create a form of dance that moves people through the offices and hallways of an institution. Each stage of that dance holds its own possibilities and expectations. An interviewer who starts asking questions too early – before the coffee has been served and pleasantries exchanged – clearly does not understand the social niceties and will be marked as someone who does not belong. Tahr had to learn these steps as he went, which he did with great success. Others in the team, who were more familiar with such spaces, found that they moved more instinctively through the motions. This was a dance that they had danced before.

When Tahr had an interview with the centre's manager, it was a pleasant, successful experience, but it was one that was shaped by his personal history with the manager and the space itself. As he recalls:

[the business manager] introduce[d] me to all members of his staff, reminding me of the years that he was chasing me out of Viking business park when I was walking on the street. It was just so amazing. I could see tears in my eyes as he was narrating my story to the rest of his staff team. Really, it was quite a great experience for me to meet people like that.

In this exchange, the demarcations of difference that had previously fuelled the refusals of secretaries, security guards and managers did not disappear. Rather, they were reformulated into the narrative of a success story. Tahr was deemed to be exceptional in two senses: his academic successes and status were deemed to be impressive. At the same time, his status as a success story meant that people could affirm Tahr as an individual without necessarily challenging the broader prejudices that they held.

The experiences narrated above demonstrate the importance of 'animated intersectionality' in the research process, in particular the shifting and fluid nature of identity and power. These examples show both how different researchers sharing similar intersectional identities have vastly different experiences in similar spaces, demonstrating both the individual and agentic nature of research interactions and the importance of context. It also highlights how differently people are treated when their identities are seen to shift and the context changes (e.g. Tahr's experiences as an informal trader vs. an esteemed researcher).

Conclusion

In this article, we have contributed to the methodological literature on elite research, by engaging with the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). While elite research has long recognised that elites are not homogenous, far fewer studies explicitly acknowledge the importance of the intersecting identities held by researchers *and* elites.

Intersectionality, we argue, is an invaluable means of capturing the way that identities come together in people's lives and shape the research process. Post-structuralist accounts of power (Smith, 2006), which emphasise the fluidity of power in research, risk eliding the critical role that these identities continue to play. Our concept of 'animated intersectionality' enables us to take intersecting identities seriously, while explicitly acknowledging the importance of exploring the deeply personal and contextual ways that power dynamics play out in everyday life between specific groups and individuals. In doing so, it builds on efforts in the broader literature on intersectionality, which tackle the interplay of structure and agency (Collins and Bilge, 2020).

Our empirical analysis illustrates the utility of 'animated intersectionality' by exploring the experiences of our diverse team. Access to elites and research interactions with them cannot be understood without considering the intersecting identities that each holds. When elites decide whether to participate in an interview, they are not only judging the research but also the researcher – alongside their own identities and how they wish to be perceived. This, in turn, pushes us to rethink the whole idea of 'studying up' and 'studying down' which problematically assumes that all researchers occupy some fictional middle ground in the topography of power. Each of our project team members has different positionalities. That these positions are not fixed, that their effects may be inconsistent and that they may be embraced, resisted, or subverted at different moments in the research process does not erase their importance. Power plays a crucial role in determining access to elites and in shaping research interactions. Similarly, the negotiability of power in certain contexts should not allow us to overlook the visible and 'hidden injuries' carried by those who face discrimination and exclusion. The concept of 'animated intersectionality' enables us to explore the power dynamics of the research process with the nuance that they deserve.

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Ethical approval and informed consent statements

The Off-grid Cities project obtained ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), protocol number: H21/11/10.

Author contributions

All authors were involved in the study conception and design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results and draft manuscript preparation, and all authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Notes

1. In this paper, we use the term 'elites' to refer to individuals who are able to exert influence through their multi-faceted positions of privilege, derived from their financial resources, economic advantage and the advantages they enable (Harvey, 2011).
2. It is important to note that, if they have sufficient resources, foreign researchers can employ researchers in the area of their study, leveraging the networks that they have developed. In other words, economic resources can help to compensate for a lack of local networks (Marchais et al., 2020).
3. The notion of 'curdling' was coined by Lugones (1994). She was reflecting how her identity functioned as an emulsion, such a mayonnaise (Lugones, 1994). As she explained, even if mayonnaise curdles, its ingredients never fully separate. Emulsions vary only in their 'levels of coalescence' (Lugones, 1994: 459).
4. Elite interviewing is often described as a performance. Several scholars have written about how they present themselves – in terms of aesthetics and affect – to ease their entry into different elite worlds. This applies to other research contexts as well but the challenges of doing so in the context of elite research are specific, and analysts often fail to give sufficient attention to the material costs of performance in elite spaces. As Huggins (2014: 8) argues, elite interviews need to be in locations that are considered convenient and comfortable. In such cases, researchers may face the prospect of having to dress and consume beyond their means in order to secure access. Research grants that are interested in facilitating elite research need to take this into account.
5. While we use the term 'middle class' in this article, it is also important to note that this term is expansive in a deeply unequal country, like South Africa. The relative income and wealth of team members who would classify themselves as 'middle class' vary greatly.

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