An elite perspective on interviewing entrepreneurs – methodological considerations for the entrepreneurship field

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Abstract

Purpose – Elite interviewing is a well-established area of interview research methods. Nevertheless, the actual casting of an "elite" has been generally conducted in a prima facie or broad manner. A consideration of entrepreneurs and owner-managers as "elites" has been less profiled and received less attention, therefore the paper views the entrepreneurs and owner-managers as constituting a form of "local elite" within given and varying sectorial, regional and community boundaries. The authors argue that a consideration of entrepreneurs as "local elites" and transferring knowledge from an elite interviewing perspective may strongly support scholarly research in the entrepreneurship field.

Design/methodology/approach – The study conducts a comprehensive narrative literature review of elite interviewing literature and transfers key methodological insights to the entrepreneurship field. The methodological contribution based on literature is complemented by experiences and observations from an extensive inductive interview study with over 30 entrepreneurs of German manufacturing Small and Medium-sized Entities (SMEs) and are used to reflect on, and refine, interview research approaches with entrepreneurs.

Findings – The reflections and discussions in this paper provide valuable insights for other researchers conducting research in entrepreneurship domains regarding the power dynamics of negotiating access, procedural issues of interviews and thereby enhancing the quality of data.

Originality/value – The contribution to knowledge is mainly of a methodological nature. While the paper takes a novel act of recasting elite interviewing in the SME and entrepreneurship context, the paper methodologically contributes to the entrepreneurship and elite interview literature thereby facilitating higher quality interviews.

Keywords Elites, Entrepreneurs, Owner-managers, SMEs, Interviews, Qualitative research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper applies a novel view on entrepreneurs and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) owner-managers and argues that there is fresh and original scope, in certain contexts, to view this group through the lens of a local organisational and societal elite (Hertz and Imber, 1995; Kincaid and Bright, 1957; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). Conventionally, senior corporate figures (in contrast to SME) have been more readily cast as elites in academic literature and wider media. Moreover, Harvey (2021) argued that interviewing in elite contexts has generally been thinly addressed by business and management scholars: "as academic scholars we need greater guidance, training and reflection on the practices of interviewing elites". The present paper addresses this call and considers that an elite context, especially in relation to issues of data collection, differs significantly to non-elite settings (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Ma *et al.*, 2020). In addition, our observations lead to the conviction that viewing entrepreneurs and SME owner-managers through an elite perspective also contributes to understanding the overall SME and entrepreneurship research field and therefore represents an important and timely contribution. The incorporation of the elite perspective in SME and entrepreneurial literature supports the need to explore SME owners and entrepreneurs within their social structures. Indeed, the adoption of the elite perspective re-enforces the notion that SME ownership and entrepreneurship are socially constructed activities that are highly dependent upon the context in which they are situated. By taking into account the elite status and "positionality" of SME owners and entrepreneurs, researchers have an opportunity to develop new and novel insights into entrepreneurial characteristics, traits and behaviors (Burt, 1992; Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Harvey, 2010; Welch *et al.*, 2002). In addition, the framing of SME owners and entrepreneurs as elites has the potential to develop a richer and more granular perspective. In particular, viewing research participants through the "elite" lens enables researchers to explore more fully SME owner and entrepreneurial roles in terms of their transiency, instability and fragility (Harvey, 2010; Aberbach and Rockman, 2002).

There exists extensive literature on elites in social sciences research which focusses upon aspects such as their social background, careers etc (Hoffmann-Lange, 1987, 2007; Cousin *et al.*, 2018; DiCaprio, 2012). However, particularly in a European context, issues such as, "eliteness" tend to be viewed with scepticism and seen as detached from large parts of society (De Bruycker, 2017; Hartmann, 2010). Indeed, it can be argued that elites play an increasingly dominant role in today's business world (Aguinis and Molina-Azorín, 2015; Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Harvey, 2021; Kincaid and Bright, 1957; Van Audenhove and Donders, 2019) and thus can provide valuable information and insights into companies and organisations (Ma *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, it is essential for scholars engaged in business management and organisational research to develop better understandings of elite phenomena and the role and impact of elites in areas such as organisational life, the role of organisations in society and organisations behaviour. Given the significance of the SME sector for most of the economies worldwide, connecting an elite with the entrepreneurship perspective importantly supports scholars in their research endeavours within the entrepreneurship field and similar contexts.

Hence, the overall aims of this paper are to revisit and develop an elite perspective on interviewing in SMEs and to show that elites may be identified in hitherto under-commented domains. The argument provides scholars with broader practical advice for undertaking field studies with elite entrepreneurship and SME owner-manager participants. The focus of this paper lies on methodological and procedural considerations, which may impact on the quality of socially constructed data by means of elite interviews. It must be noted that the present paper is rooted in a social constructionist methodological tradition (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998).The underlying research question addressed in this paper is:

(1) How does the elite distinctiveness of SME owner-managers manifest and how does this affect the process of conducting interviews with them?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows, the next section, provides a concise literature review framing the elite context of entrepreneurs and SME owner-managers. We then move on to discuss the research approach applied in this research. Subsequently, we discuss the key findings of the elite literature and complementarily reflect on the experience of conducting interviews in (SME owner manager) elite contexts. By doing so, negotiating access to elites, procedural issues of interviewing elites and ensuring quality will be elaborated. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main findings and methodological recommendations, contributions, implications, and limitations of this research.

An elite perspective as conceptual background of this research

Key elements of an elite perspective in management and organisational research

It is important to develop a general broad understanding of what is understood by "elites". The discussions of Harvey (2011) and Liu (2018) reveal that there is no universally accepted definition of the term "elite". There is indeed confusion in the literature about what constitutes a member of an elite class (Dexter, 2006; Woods, 1998). During the latter part of the twentieth century, Hoffmann-Lange (1987) commented that: "most definitions of elites are rather imprecise and give only little guidance as to the adequate sampling method to apply." A useful overview of existing definitions of elite informants is provided by Solarino and Aguinis (2021) referring to *impact on others*, *high hierarchical positions*, *privileged positions*, *authority* and so forth. In a similar vein, Harvey (2011) refers to aspects such as *professionalism*, *competence*, *power*, and a *context relation* of the elite status as well as that it might be that the elite status of a person is rarely unconditional and decontextual. Power can be understood as a set of relations between individuals (Perera, 2021). Usefully, Aguinis and Solarino (2019) describe elites as: "key decision makers who have extensive and exclusive information and the ability to influence important firm outcomes, either alone or jointly with others (e.g. on a board of directors)." Odendahl and Shaw (2002) also highlight the ambiguity of the term "elite". According to them there are different categories such as, for example, business elites, political elites, and community elites. Echoing Solarino and Aguinis (2021), Delaney (2007) speaks of a *kind* of organisational elite, and this implies that elite status is related to one's position within an organisational hierarchy. Harvey (2011) develops this notion and refers to an elite understanding, which includes senior management and board level positions within organisation as these imply a significant decision-making influence.

In a business context, elite status is often associated with professionalism and expert knowledge. In this vein, Gläser and Laudel (2010) draw a line between "experts" and "elites", as experts frequently can be considered as an elite of specific areas or respective functions. However, they also note that there may be many "experts", who are not necessarily related to any elite positions. Zuckerman (1972) and Stephens (2007) go further to distinguish between *elites* and *ultra-elites*. According to Zuckerman (1972), who investigated Nobel Laureate recipients, members of the ultra-elite are extremely influential, occupy prestigious positions and have hierarchical authority and power that are readily identifiable. Moreover, while social standings, family backgrounds, professional positions and so forth are also typically related to elite phenomena, for instance Wedel (2017) refers to more contemporary elite understandings, including the elites *modus operandi* rather than treating elites as a fixed and stable group. In summary, discussions on elites encompass a potential range of positional, situational, perspectical, and contextual factors. We can conceptualise the core characteristics of an elite perspective as follows in Figure 1.

Given elite characteristics, it is reasonable to assume that interviewing elites may differ from interviewing "normal" people (Desmond, 2004). The literature on elite interviewing indicates several specific challenges that researchers are likely to face (Liu, 2018). Such issues could be, for instance: gaining access to elites; time constraints during the interview; and power inequalities between the researcher and participant (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Brandl and Klinger, 2006;
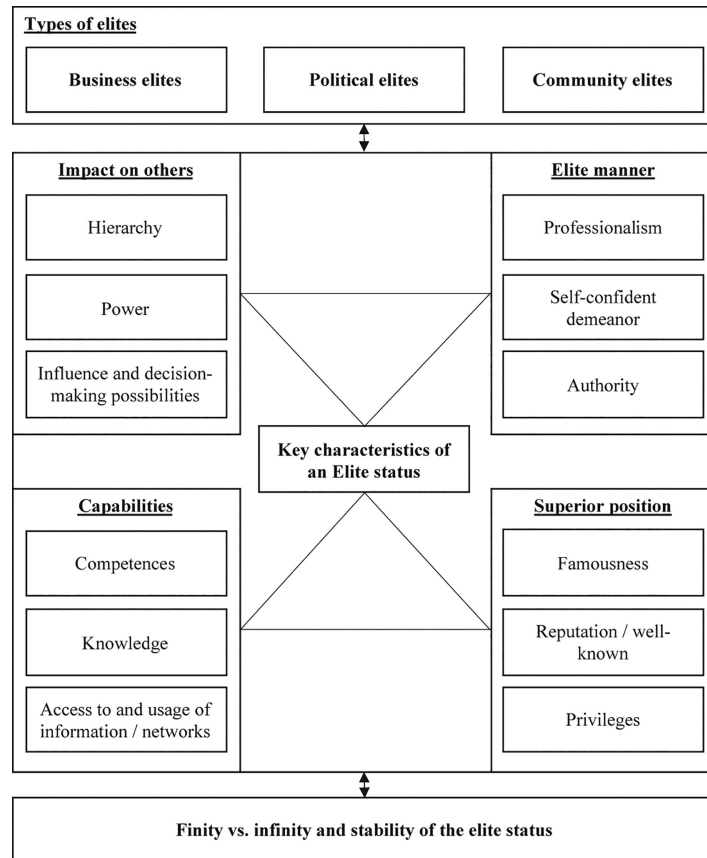
Figure 1.
Conceptual framework
of elite characteristics

Source(s): Authors own creation

Thomas, 1993). Interviewing elites can be a challenging experience (Harvey, 2021; Mason-Bish, 2019), it is nevertheless important to have effective research methods with which to understand the elitist influence in an institutional and organisational environment (Nakpodia and Adegbite, 2018). We advance our argument and transfer an elite perspective to the context of entrepreneurs and owner-managers, which will be discussed in the following section.

Developing an initial local elite understanding of entrepreneurs and owner-managers of small and medium-sized entities
The discussion hitherto provides an important conceptual background and context, both for developing a helpful understanding of elites in a local entrepreneur and SME owner-manager context but also subsequently regarding methodological considerations for scholars doing research in the entrepreneurship field. Later on, an in-depth methodological discussion will provide the core contributions of the present paper.

Our understanding of elites used in this research does not follow a dualistic divide between elites and non-elites (Smith, 2006). Alternatively, while Moyser and Wagstaffe (1987) provided a useful account on the understanding of elitism and methodological consequences to study elites, they also reminded us that: "for many studies, it is not at all necessary to vindicate in any precise

terms the basis for selection of elite individuals". When looking at the SME and entrepreneurship literature, "owner-managers" are frequently the focus of scholarly scrutiny (Casidy and Nyadzayo, 2019; Fleming *et al.*, 2016; Lobonţiu and Lobonţiu, 2014). This is not surprising, given the impact an owner-manager has on the SME – owner-manager characteristics play a vital role regarding business performance (Lloyd-Reason and Mughan, 2002; Sjögrén *et al.*, 2011) but also on the employees of the company. In addition, importantly, SME owner-managers may also potentially have impacts and influence in relation to the wider local community context (Fassin *et al.*, 2011; Ortiz-Avram *et al.*, 2018; Schlierer *et al.*, 2012). Within this reflexive and reciprocal community, SME owner power and dynamics may of course vary depending on particular regional and national cultural factors. Certainly, such a local community impact may not apply for micro-firms (Betton *et al.*, 2021) but can indeed be assumed for larger SMEs.

Regarding the term "owner-manager" there can be identified some terminological vagueness, and indeed terms such as "entrepreneur" and "owner-manager" are frequently used interchangeably in the literature (Ardley *et al.*, 2016; Lau and Chan, 2002). While some, e.g. Moran (1998), prefer to use the term "owner-manager", we rather see both terms as synonyms, as both indicate that someone owns and runs an independent firm. Equally, concerning research addressing senior executives of large firms (Kincaid and Bright, 1957; Welch *et al.*, 2002), we can also assume a similar elite status for owner-managers, but this will be limited and bound to a given local context.

Owner-managers of SMEs do not seem to fulfil the characteristics of members of an ultra-elite, although it is likely that in their local context, they may hold highly prestigious and influential positions (especially if, for example, they are the main employer in a town) (Hoffmann-Lange, 2007). As noted, context must be seen as an important issue from which authority and power can be derived, given for instance the standing, community links and networks of an owner-manager. The influence of local elites has been observed already in other settings, such as a policy context (Liu *et al.*, 2010; van Baalen, 2021). However, Zuckerman (1972) notes that ultra-elites tend to be easily identified, this might not be the case for owner-managers, especially for a researcher outside of the local context. Regarding this, Cochrane (1998) underlines the challenges of identifying local elites. Generally, elites tend be highly visible and easily identifiable but at the same time hard to reach (Ma *et al.*, 2020; Marland and Esselment, 2019). Transferred from a political context, one may argue that local and regional elites might show a higher willingness to participate compared to, for instance, top elites of large corporations (Walgrave and Joly, 2018). From our point of view, having reviewed the relevant literature, more focussed research on the elite status of SME owner-managers seems to be a timely, pressing and promising avenue of further research. Moreover, the local context is a novel and relatively unstudied area and thus points at the value of studying elites in different cultures and contexts. Harvey (2021) sees the urgent need to reflect and provide guidance on interviewing elites for scholars in the management and organisation context more extensively. Hence, we hope that this paper initiates and provides important guidance for such a reflection contributing to the quality of research approaches in the entrepreneurship field.

Research approach

This manuscript resulted out of an extensive research project, which primarily aimed to understand the sustainability and social responsibility engagement of manufacturing SMEs in a certain regional and cultural context, which was in the southwest of Germany (Kraus, 2016; Kraus *et al.*, 2020) Conducting interviews with entrepreneurs and owner-managers was a major source of information during the research. In total, for the main study, 30 interviews were conducted, supplemented by further interviews during a pilot study. Consequently, extensively reviewing the literature on interviews as a research method, but also elites and elite interviewing, was done throughout the research project

and thereafter while writing this manuscript. The underlying research project and the experiences and observations throughout the fieldwork with entrepreneurs stimulated the idea to connect the elite with the entrepreneurship literature, as many elitist behaviours could be observed when talking extensively to the various participants, such as showing a dominant and self-confident attitude during the interview, their protection by external gatekeepers, their reports on how they have an impact on the entire company, and so forth. We are convinced by the fact that we can learn a lot from the elite interviewing literature in the entrepreneurship field and more explicitly reflect on the knowledge produced there and how this may help us to generate high quality and meaningful primary data. The overall literature analyses elite research in the context of several data collection methods, such as surveys, ethnographic observation (also in the form of shadowing), archival research and so forth (Bussell, 2020; Cousin *et al.*, 2018; Walgrave and Joly, 2018). Interviewing is an established major method in social science research, and hence in management and organisation studies (Javadian *et al.*, 2020; King and Horrocks, 2010; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin *et al.*, 2012). While we focus here on (individual) interviewing, parallels may certainly be drawn to other methods which involve direct contacts to participants such as focus groups or observational approaches.

Literature reviews have a long-standing tradition in research and gathered momentum in the last years (Kunisch *et al.*, 2018, 2023), while certainly currently dominated by the phenomena around systematic literature reviews (Hiebl, 2023). Systematic literature reviews offer several advantages related to the transparency and possibility to recreate the search process for literature (Booth *et al.*, 2016; Gough *et al.*, 2017; Tranfield *et al.*, 2003), however, naturally, they also restrict the flexibility to search and use literature, especially in contexts where several disciplines might inform phenomena under research. Therefore, we have used a more traditional approach and applied a broad, narrative literature review (Baumeister and Leary, 1997), which allowed us to include various sources, such as research books and articles and we have used literature from the entrepreneurship field, management and organisation science but also from the policy discipline. Moreover, reflecting on the research philosophical backgrounds of the author team, this research tends to be rooted and informed by social constructionist research traditions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998; Karataş-Özkan and Murphy, 2010). Our search and review process of the literature was done iteratively, in a form of hermeneutic tradition (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). We are convinced that we have integrated a very useful and comprehensive stock of relevant literature (we can of course not claim to have completely covered all literature) which has been previously published on the research topic. While we draw important conclusions from the literature, we complement them with the reflection of our experiences and observations of the underlying research project introduced above. These reflections are mainly based on post-interview protocols generated after the interviews and extensive discussions within the research team. The post-interview protocols included the following categories: token of the interview; duration; place (meeting room, office etc.); disruptive factors; pre-recording issues; interview phase (willingness to share information, openness, non-verbal issues, behaviour); post-interview talk; and additional notes (mainly reflection of the interviewer on the management of the interview situation). Besides content-related considerations, also reflections on the elitist behaviours of the participants, such as dominant behaviours, confident attitudes etc. have been documented within the post-interview protocols. Issues of rigour and especially validity have been intensively discussed in social sciences research and more precisely also within qualitative research originating from more quantitative traditions (Kvale, 1995; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Call-Cummings (2017) usefully reflects on communicative validity within a specific research project by means of practical cases. Critical reflections on the role of the researcher, the role of participants as well as the context of the research can be seen as important elements to ensure the rigour of research, as also indicated by Mason-Bish (2019).

We argue that our reflections can substantially and importantly contribute to the methodological discourse in similar elite entrepreneur and SME owner-manager settings and provide practical guidance for fellow scholars. We are aware that entrepreneurs and owner-managers might not be considered as local elites in all economic, regional and cultural contexts, but we believe that there are various similar contexts to this research, that merit being reflected from a local elite perspective. We further pick this point up below when discussing the limitations of this research. As signalled above, in relation to this work we hence address an important gap in literature by focussing on, and conceptually identifying, an elite SME owner-manager context. The discussion begins by considering how to negotiate access to local elite interview participants, it then moves on to address procedural issues of local elite interviewing and concludes by exploring how the quality of local elite interviews can be enhanced. It directly includes discussion in literature as well as the reflections on our experiences and combines them usefully.

Methodological considerations and findings in relation to interviewing SME elites

Ensuring access to SME local elite participants

Negotiating access is one of the most critical issues in elite interviewing (Cochrane, 1998; Dicce and Ewers, 2020; Goldstein, 2002) and this was corroborated in the present research on SME owner-managers. Shenton and Hayter (2004) argue that there are mainly two problems of access. First, it is necessary to secure entry into the organisations that will form part of fieldwork, and secondly it is necessary to convince individuals to participate and open up. Elites tend to be set apart and protected from the mainstream and consequently there can be significant barriers which restrict access. Elites are usually separated from external contact by gatekeepers (Marland and Esselment, 2019), such as their personal assistants and this is the case for most owner-managers of medium-sized SMEs. So direct contact is rarely possible. The issue of negotiating access is widely reflected in the methodological literature (Dicce and Ewers, 2020; Hertz and Imber, 1993; Mikecz, 2012) and was also experienced as a challenge in the present study. The literature reports that problems regarding access vary across different research projects and contexts (Marland and Esselment, 2019; Ostrander, 1993; Smith, 2006). Phillips (1998) identifies mainly three factors, which determine access:

(1) The nature of the elite itself;

(2) The actual timing of the interviews as well as their relationship with the policy process, and finally;

(3) The sensitivity of the topic under research.

Ward and Jones (1999) suggested that the personality of the elite plays an important role. Access is hence influenced by individual personal characteristics, such as whether someone is closed, uncertain, arrogant, self-important, and so forth, which we, as researchers, cannot control but need to reflect on, as will be discussed later. The nature and the sensitivity of a research topic affects access as well. Regarding policy initiatives, Walford (2012) states that: "Access is likely to be particularly difficult where a policy initiative is controversial and fiercely contested." This idea can also be readily understood in relation to other fields, such as the study of organisational sustainability or ethics, as the meaning of these concepts can be vague (Okoye, 2009). In a similar vein, issues determining the success of a firm, such as technologies customer relationships etc. can be topics which lead to a restriction of access. We also experienced that a firm refused to participate and responded that they did not want to share information with externals and hence some SMEs may indeed act like an "isolated fortress" (Curran and Blackburn, 1994). The reluctance of some SME owners and

entrepreneurs to participate in the research was also because, despite their prominence and status, they had little experience of being interviewed. This contrasts with other elite groups, such as politicians and celebrities, who tend to be experienced interviewees who regard interviews as an integral part of their role.

Furthermore, elites are often "time poor" and therefore not available for an interview (Empson, 2018; Galaskiewicz, 1987). For us, in a local elite SME owner-manager context, timing had a severe influence on the success of arranging interviews (Desmond, 2004; Empson, 2018; Ward and Jones, 1999). For this reason, a recommendation is that the timing of the fieldwork must be carefully planned, and potential time restrictions of the target group need to be anticipated. Exemplarily, in our case, the main part of the fieldwork had been planned in a period that was expected to be most convenient to potential participants which was January till the beginning of August. The overall period of the fieldwork can be considered as quite extensive and this period was interrupted by several phases of public holidays, which may increase the possibility of participation. Doing fieldwork with SME local business elites indeed is a challenging undertaking and requires a flexible and thoughtful approach and perseverance.

The literature reports on slightly covert approaches for sensitive topics (Jackall, 2010; Yeager and Kram, 1995). It is, of course, beyond dispute that research activities should be conducted in an ethical manner (Burnham *et al.*, 2008; Delaney, 2007; Goldstein, 2002; Harvey, 2011). Informed consent and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity are key aspects regarding this. Harvey (2011) notes that he tries: "to be as transparent as possible". In addition to this, Lilleker (2003) reminds us that:

> If the work could be deemed controversial it may be necessary to couch your request in fairly broad terms, providing broad areas rather than specific questions . . ..

Regarding research ethical considerations, we argue that it is necessary for every research team to reflect intensively on the nature and sensitivity of the research topic and objectives and on the effects of a completely open or potential slightly covered approach on the success and on the results of the research project. This is very much an individual decision, which constantly requires reflection. In a local elite context, one may argue that participants are also aware and experienced businesspeople, and therefore need less "protection".

There are various approaches to negotiating access. First, cold calling indicates approaching a firm without using any personal contacts or networks. Secondly, one may use personal networks of potential participants or people who have a higher status, such as a known scholar. Thirdly, respectable sponsors or associations with a reputable institution, such as a well-known research university might help to gain access, and fourthly snowballing, which implies using contacts of people who have already participated in a study (Brandl and Klinger, 2006; Herod, 1999; Laurila, 1997; Moore and Stokes, 2012; Useem, 1995; Walford, 2012; Werning Rivera *et al.*, 2002). Online business social networks like, LinkedIn or Xing in Germany have also been proposed to negotiate access (Dicce and Ewers, 2020; Harvey, 2010). However, in the present research, Xing was tried at the very beginning of the fieldwork and did not work as the requests were neglected. We can hence assume that using online social networks in local SME owner-manager elite contexts is of limited value and we recommend a more direct and personal mode of approaching a local elite.

Burnham *et al.* (2008) and Laurila (1997) indicated that participation is more likely in projects in which interviewees have a personal interest and, for instance, research in the broad domain of ethics does not seem to fall under these areas of interest (Jackall, 2010; Yeager and Kram, 1995). In a similar vein to the discussion of Sabot (1999), participation sometimes is likely, if the interviewee is eager to address a perceived problem. This was indeed the case in the present research where one SME owner-manager felt that the needs

of the SME sector are considerably neglected in political discourse and in research. McDowell (1998) stated that:

A great deal depends on luck and chance, connections and networks, and the particular circumstances at the time.

Many non-participating owner-managers did not offer any explanation regarding why they refused to participate; others referred to time restrictions, a focus on more local claims and, finally, a considerable number stated not to participate in studies *per se*. However, we experienced that SMEs that are in more rural regions and/or in smaller villages, which seem to be rather invisible to the public tend to be more willing to participate than SMEs located in major industrial centres or urban regions. Sabot (1999) usefully reports on her experiences of negotiating access to local and foreign governmental elites in France and Scotland. She experienced difficulties in accessing elite participants in her hometown in France but found it relatively easy in Scotland. In-keeping with Herod (1999), Sabot (1999) explains this reluctance by observing that local researchers, as insiders, constitute a potential threat to the reputation of the firm, whereas researchers from different regions are regarded as non-threatening outsiders. We argue that this could be a useful strategy for research teams especially, in elite SME owner-manager contexts given the locality of the research areas.

A considerable number of the contacted firms stated that they receive a lot of requests from universities, doctoral students, postgraduate and undergraduate students as well as commercial institutes. Therefore, a fair number of firms refuse *de facto* to participate, as an evaluation and a selection of the projects would cost them too many resources. Indeed, much earlier Kincaid and Bright (1957) noted that there seems to be the view by business executives that the participation in research projects seems something that should be avoided and Laurila (1997) correctly indicates that members of management can easily isolate themselves from the world. The reluctance experienced of elite SME owner-managers declining to participate in academic studies seems to contradict the experience of Delaney (2007), who argues that organizational elites are often intellectually interested in scholarly projects. Given the practical orientation and central position within the firm of many SME owner-managers as well as the daily operational challenges may speak against an overly academic or intellectual interest or curiosity of many SME owner-managers.

The underlying research project was at the very beginning not intentionally aiming at conducting interviews solely with elite participants, we strongly discovered these phenomena throughout the research process. Nevertheless, also in relation to our conceptual elaborations in the first part of the manuscript, our research may also provide some guidance in terms of sampling criteria to directly identify local elite owner-managers and entrepreneurs. Given the limited visibility and its restriction to local contexts, the identification of this specific group of potential participants is a challenging task, especially for "outsiders" of such local contexts, which researchers typically are. We can postulate a two-step approach when compiling a sample consisting of local elite owner-managers. As a first step, external observable information can be used to identify potential elite participants. Given that the "impact on others" can be considered as an important characteristic, which may increase the "elitist" position of people, it is recommendable to identify firms that have a greater impact on, for instance, the local community by providing substantial jobs or tax payments. Therefore, typically this may not necessarily constitute micro-firms but rather SMEs with a certain revenue volume or employee headcount, depending on the individual fieldwork contexts. Moreover, frequently elite owner-managers are engaged in several associations, such as chambers for industry and commerce or community councils. As a useful second step, it may be the case that short pre-interview co-ordinations with the potential participants take place, which may disclose further elitist behaviours or manners.

The development of an individual profile of potential elite participants, can then be considered as a useful exercise.

In summary, we have experienced the process of negotiating access to elite owner-managers as an important burden and threat to the research project. Often, we felt that it was a messy, sometimes chaotic, and frustrating part of a research project but, similar to Cochrane (1998) agreed interviews felt like a success, perhaps even like "a small victory". For us, a direct and persistent way of approaching potential participants worked well and sometimes we had to contact an owner-manager several times until he ultimately agreed to participate. Some of them then remarked that the hard work of trying to gain access should pay off, which also illustrates the world of German SME owner-managers dominated by hard work and diligence and so forth. Importantly, Ostrander (1993) indicates: "Gaining entree is the first source of valuable data in any field research project." It became also evident that especially regarding elite SME owner-manager, that the power relationship between researcher and participant is a different one (Ozga, 2011) as soon as we have entered their sphere.

Procedural issues of interviewing elite owner-managers

Regarding procedural issues of elite interviews, the literature offers helpful recommendations. These must be carefully reviewed regarding whether they will work in the individual context of a research project and from an epistemological point of view – how they might affect the knowledge constructed during the interview situation (Harvey, 2010). Here we argue that the format of the interview is likely to have a strong influence on the kind of knowledge generated by an interviewee.

Odendahl and Shaw (2002) indicated that the environment in which an interview is conducted influences the nature and richness of the data. This leads to the conclusion that the location where an interview is conducted is an important issue (Mikecz, 2012). We can distinguish here between different levels. The location of the interview can be assigned to the private sphere (for example the home of the participant), the official sphere (for example the company) or the public sphere (for example a restaurant, café and so forth). And then, when looking at the official sphere, is there a difference whether the interview has taken place in the office of the participant or in a meeting room? The former may allow a much more personal insight into the elite world of the participant than perhaps a meeting room. Hunter (1993) argued that the place of an interview indeed has an influence on the degree of formality or informality. Hence, if an interview conducted in the office of the participant, it is more likely that the participant presents herself or himself in line with this formal position. Furthermore, Hunter (1993) reports on his experiences researching elites in their "backstages" (such as exclusive clubs) and, as usefully highlighted, there may be several levels of backstage. Public spaces may have the disadvantages of noise, interruptions, and the neutral nature of the location (Mikecz, 2012) but may perhaps be more convenient for busy business people (for example an interview at an airport lounge) and could also perhaps support a greater control of the interview, as the participant is outside of his "own territory" (for example Thomas, 1993; Ryan and Lewer, 2012). We propose to conduct local elite interviews in the official sphere of the participant, when it is intended to gain insights into the professional business context of the elite participants. We are convinced that this provides data, which is richer and more detailed than without context. We hence recommend that whenever possible interviews should be conducted as close as possible to the environment of the research subjects and preferably in a personal face-to-face setting.

Interviews can be conducted in a structured, semi-structured or unstructured way (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin et al., 2012), depending on the paradigm of the researcher or the research team, the objective of the research (for example type of research questions and

required data) as well as taking account of the specific personality of the respondent. When interviewing clergymen, Aldridge (1993) used semi-structured interviews, as he felt that a highly structured approach would not have worked, given the fact that his participants tend to be in a position of authority and that contradicts a strict, predetermined protocol of the conversation. This is also supported by other scholars in the domain of business elites (Liu, 2018; Richards, 1996; Schoenberger, 1991). Like that, Tansey (2007) argued that asking open-ended questions and allowing participants to speak freely is a major advantage of flexible interview styles (Kezar, 2003; Schoenberger, 1991). A semi-structured approach seems to be widely used in elite interviewing (Conti and O'Neil, 2007; Healey and Rawlinson, 1993; Leech, 2002; McEvoy, 2006; Phillips, 1998; Richards, 1996). Richards (1996) emphasised that a key requirement is flexibility and somewhat similar Leech (2002) indicated that, the less structured the interview is, the more the interview tends to be capable of developing new perspectives and fresh ideas, especially regarding topics that are ill-defined, ill-understood or conceptually complex. It further allows elite SME owner-manager participants to present their worldview and to a certain extent allows them to act from a safer and known position. However, the potential increasing inconsistency might reduce comparability of the data across interviews.

With regard to sensitive or critical issues it is often advisable to couch questions in rather broad areas (Lilleker, 2003). The literature further suggests to move from straightforward to more challenging questions (Leech, 2002; Slote Morris, 2009) and leave sensitive questions until near the end of the interview so that it was possible to establish a rapport with the elite participant before asking critical questions (Healey and Rawlinson, 1993; Richards, 1996). From the present's paper's experience and point of view, it is debatable whether rapport can be established in the course of a one-hour interview. Developing adequate rhetorical strategies may help to reach a deeper level of information and understanding (Empson, 2018), which also includes adequate probing (Berry, 2002). Leech (2002) usefully reminds us that: "One of the most important rules about asking questions has to do with shutting up" and Dexter (2006) states that: "They would prefer a discussion, or still more, perhaps, something which sounds like a discussion but is really a quasi-monologue stimulated by understanding comments". Indeed, we also experienced that "quasi-monologues" provided useful accounts of how elite SME owner-managers see the world and the relevance of the themes introduced to the interview. Sometimes we experienced, that participants provided lengthy accounts of aspects not directly relevant to the research objective but as many spoke with so much personal involvement and pride about their achievements, so it can be recommended to let them tell their story to not endanger the personal relationship to the participant and hence the rest of the interview. In these situations, time restrictions then played a less important role. Furthermore, these accounts provided rich data and context of this specific local elite world.

The literature also reports on interview styles which are more confrontational (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). From our view, an overly offensive style is likely to increase the danger of political and confrontational disputes, which would not necessarily be conducive to stimulating a reflection of elite SME owner-managers behaviours, consequences, and impact (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2010; Wedel, 2017). Given the status and nature of elite SME owner-managers and the tendency of SMEs to be suspicious to outsiders, a confrontational style as useful methodological choice needs to be critically evaluated. In contexts such as Germany, or for example Asia, where status, formal positions and hierarchies play a culturally important role, the applicability of confrontational styles is limited. Finding an appropriate balance here is demanding and highly individual and indeed challenging task for the research team. However, to achieve our research goals, we need to have control over the interview situation respectively understand what is going on in such a situation. This is an important issue in the elite interviewing context.

Ensuring quality of interviews with local elite owner-managers
Quality in qualitative organizational research has been discussed for a considerable period developing important guidance and advice for qualitative research (Amis and Silk, Michael, 2008; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008; Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Jonsen *et al.*, 2018) and very recently in the elite context (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). Berry (2002) comments that: "Interviewers must always keep in mind that it is not the obligation of a subject to be objective and to tell us the truth." However, this should not infer that elite participants tell us about the untruth *per se*, whatever truth is from an ontological point of view, but rather that researchers should be aware of carefully reflecting what is said by the participants, as elite participants, by their very nature, provide a subjective account of the phenomena under scrutiny. Similarly, Phillips (1998) notes that interviews tend to reveal only an incomplete and partial picture of the topic under study for several reasons. Ryan and Lewer (2012) indicate that participants may, for instance, be reluctant to share their honest and deepest personal accounts due to loyalty to their organisation or other people, a tendency of elites to speak collectively or just because a matter of trivialisation as the issue was not considered as important. According to the present research, this is even more an issue when owner-managers speak about their own organisations, which commonly represent a major part of their life. Of course, the reliability of responses could also easily be affected by failures in the memory of participants, especially of events that happened a while ago (Richards, 1996) as well as post hoc rationalising of events (Mikecz, 2012). Anyway, speaking about truth is, from a philosophical point of view, given the variety of paradigms with conflicting ontological positions hardly possible (Crotty, 1998; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Davies (2001) provides three main criteria for evaluating the quality of elite interview data. His elaborations include the following points:

(1) The information should be first-hand reporting;

(2) Executives of a higher hierarchy tend to be viewed as more reliable than, for instance, a junior officer;

(3) It is suggested to generate something like an informant's "track record" that allows to check how reliable a participant is compared to other sources.

These points are useful in studies on business elites, especially in a SME owner-manager context, however, for instance, establishing a track record is much more complicated due to the limitations of publicly available material. Nevertheless, responses in interviews can be compared across interviews and with secondary sources and critical probing directly within the interview situation may uncover inconsistencies of what is said by the elite SME owner-manager. From our perspective, the overall critical and reflective stance within the interview is an important element ensuring the quality of data generated by interviews and requires *ex post* discussions and reflections of the entire research team to develop a higher level of understanding on the nature of data.

Natow (2020) indicates that commonly elite interviews are combined with a review of available documents and the literature emphasises the importance of preparation prior to the interview (Empson, 2018; Laurila, 1997; Phillips, 1998). When researching elites who have a public profile, such as politicians (Pierce, 2008) or executives of large corporations (Healey and Rawlinson, 1993; Thomas, 1993), this is possible. However, in the case of less well-known local elites, such as SME owner-managers this can be a difficult exercise because relevant public information is limited. In the present study, we experienced that in some instances pre-interview preparation was hardly possible. We consequently decided that the first question in the interview focussed upon gathering background information on both the participant and the organisation. This issue is of course by far more important when the focus of the research is on the elite participant itself rather than on the firm. Again, gathering in-depth

pre-interview contextual information was mostly very difficult, especially as an outsider of a local context. Regarding this, it is important to note that Burnham *et al.* (2008) indicate that an elite participant will likely show more respect towards an interviewer who is able to ask well-informed and penetrating question. We therefore recommend a profound and comprehensive pre-interview preparation, so that a well-informed and self-confident interview can be conducted. When interviewing local elite owner-managers, in most of the cases only limited information will be available, it then worked well for us to collect as much as information beforehand and actively use the information at the beginning of the interview to appear familiarised and knowledgeable about the local context and naturally for a novice researcher the interview situation is more difficult than for an experienced researcher. This directly leads to the question of how the elite participant sees the interviewer and what kind of relationship exists between both.

Parry (1998) indicates that her background (for example affiliation to the University of Cambridge, Commonwealth scholarship) allowed her to be seen by some elite participants, in a sense of meritocracy, as a member of the elite class. Personal characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity can be considered to have a severe impact on the data, dependent on different cultural settings (Yamak *et al.*, 2016). For us, this implies that rapport between the interviewer and the local elite participant is not only established within the interview situation but also in advance, as elites may also try to investigate the researcher prior to the interview (Ostrander, 1993). We have experienced that for local elite owner-managers personal issues tend to be more important, compared for instance to a politician who usually has contact with a diverse variety of people every day, which is not the case for local elites who tend to have more stable and less varied external relationships. The difference between SME owners and entrepreneurs and other elite groups is further accentuated by the amount and quality of research material available to interviewers as they prepare for the interview. For elite groups such as politicians and celebrities there is often a plethora of biographical and autobiographical material available to help the interviewer prepare for the interview (Zuckerman, 1972; Rice, 2010). However, for the SME owner and entrepreneur there is most often a paucity of relevant background and contextual information to inform the interviewer. Similarly, on a cautionary note, Odendahl and Shaw (2002) indicate that age can have a severe influence as a young researcher may perhaps have greater difficulties to be taken seriously while an older researcher may establish a greater authority more easily (Empson, 2018; Liu, 2018). We believe that characteristics such as experience, education, gender, and age can constitute an issue, which should be critically evaluated within research teams and inform the interview strategy. This of course is a very context sensitive and individual decision within the single research project. However, we need to be aware that information that emerge from the respondent are variable in context of the researcher such as gender, age, status etc. (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2004) and the extant literature on elite interviewing seems not pertinent to ontologically subjectivist stances and even that multiple interviews (by different interviewers) can facilitate multiple insights to enhance understanding of the experiences of the elite SME owner-managers.

Managing power relations can generally be seen as an important issue in elite research settings (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). However, it cannot be assumed that an interviewer is powerless *per se*, and power can shift between interviewee and interviewer and can be regained during an interview (Empson, 2018) as for instance illustrated by the reflections of Perera (2021) comparing two interview situations with senior academics. Other scholars report of participants commenting on the research topic, shaping questions and so forth (Conti and O'Neil, 2007). Hence, there may be a severe power distance between a researcher and an elite participant as, Conti and O'Neil (2007) go on to illustrate through: "The persistent questioning of my legitimacy, the difficulties pinning informants down for an interview, frequent interruption and disregard took its toll on my self-esteem." Reflecting on our

experiences with local elite SME owner-managers, we did not experience a disrespectful behaviour, or a questioning of the own legitimacy and nor did we experience a severe power imbalance. Rather, interview situations could be characterised as constructive, open and we noticed a certain positive interest on the side of the interviewees. Because SMEs and owner-managers tend to be invisible to the public community and much of the debate commonly focusses on large multinational enterprises, we can assume that those owner-managers who decided to participate in our study indeed had a personal interest in the topic as well as wanted to share their thoughts and views.

Regarding data generated from an interview, Ostrander (1993) implies that sometimes elite participants try to exercise control over how the data are used. This would threaten the integrity of research projects if finally, individuals or organisations under research influence the analysis and decide what will be published or not. Delaney (2007) further refers to what he calls the "shared colleague" problem. This suggests that participants expand their role as a source of knowledge and try to frame the project as well as speculate about the results. This would be a major problem and consciously changes the nature of the data generated through interviews when participants analyse their viewpoints and how these may fit into the research project. With regard to this, we recommend introducing research projects in rather broad terms, not disclosing too much information. If necessary, more detailed explanations can be provided after completing the interview. For us, the post-interview discussions then also had been an important source for further information (for example information on the interview situation and feelings during the interview but also additional information). In general, post-interview cooperation could influence the quality of data (Mikecz, 2012). It could be an option to send interview transcripts to participants and ask them to confirm them or add additional information. Due to the time restrictions of elite participants retrieving feedback could be a challenging and time-consuming issue. Given this, we have decided to not send out transcripts for validation and none of our participants requested these.

Odendahl and Shaw (2002) suggest different ways for the researcher to show his or her expertise and knowledgeability, such as handing over business cards, referring to former projects or publication records. However, the literature also reports on occasions in which a subordinate role, for instance by female researchers that are perceived as unthreatening by elite participants, could induce that highly sensitive information is revealed (Desmond, 2004; Parry, 1998). Solarino and Aguinis (2021) emphasise the importance of being knowledgeable to be able to control the elite interview situation. Ultimately, the research context and objectives will determine which strategy should be followed. According to our experiences, to appear knowledgeable and interested in the experiences of the elite participant, following a neutral and collaborative approach and selectively being persistent or provocative, may work well for many elite interview situations, especially in local settings. Like the suggestion of Richards (1996), at a later stage in the fieldwork we referred to statements of earlier interviews to enhance our status as interviewer and increase the credibility of the data by means of cross interview comparisons. At a later point, the introduction of the research project included the number of already conducted interviews to illustrate our familiarity with the topic under scrutiny but also the experience in various local elite contexts. This worked well for us, and reactions of elite participants show that this information mostly has a positive effect. We did not experience, as partly indicated by the literature that this could be interpreted as a sign of breaking the confidentiality agreement between researcher and participant (Slote Morris, 2009), as sensitive information must not be revealed. Treating information in a confidential manner could also be tested by participants and behaving correctly may increase rapport and trust with the interviewee – interviewer relationship (Empson, 2018; Ma et al., 2020; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). However, regarding an ontological point of view, we sense that great parts of the elite interviewing literature have an underlying assumption of objectivity in the

sense of a single reality that can be observed and described and by means of positionality and "manipulation" this reality can be captured.

Aberbach and Rockman (2002) show that less structure and open-ended questions could increase the quality of data in elite interview studies (Aldridge, 1993; Stephens, 2007). Showing a good etiquette, respecting the participants, being friendly and polite (Odendahl and Shaw, 2002) can be seen as further important considerations in an elite context. Regarding a German elite context, Drew (2014) specifically highlights the adherence of cultural expectations and social norms (such as here punctuality, attention to detail, reliability etc.), which certainly is an important issue for other cultural settings as well. The very nature of elites, for instance, their ability to be confident speakers (Stephens, 2007) or more generally their confidence, as they are used to the fact that their views and thoughts usually matter in the lives of other people (Ostrander, 1993) as well as the possibility of a power difference (Mikecz, 2012), implies that sometimes it could be hard for a researcher to preserve a critical distance to the participant and not to be too overly affected by the behaviour of some elites. In the context of SME owners and entrepreneurs, this can be particularly challenging as by their nature many elites of this type are skilled negotiators who expect to be able to shape and influence social interactions (Artinger *et al.*, 2015; Audretsch and Fiedler, 2023). Critical reflection and discussions within the research team or with senior fellow academics may help preserving a distant position and applying a similar interview style throughout all the interview situations, can be seen as helpful strategies. Regarding this, writing a post-interview report to reflect upon the nature of the interview was for us a helpful tool and increased consistency and the possibility of reflection.

Finally, we want to emphasise that comprehensively describing the composition of the sample is an important issue of transparency and quality (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). Goldstein (2002) reminds us that it is quite frequent not possible to interview a part of the sample initially considered for participation and that this nonresponse rate may lead to an unbalanced view on the phenomena under study. This seems to be especially the case for elite participants in local contexts, as often there simply are not so many potential participants available. For instance, it could be that pivotal potential participants cannot be convinced to participate and hence others, who are more accessible, must be selected instead (Lilleker, 2003).

Conclusion
Synthesis of contribution to knowledge
The current paper investigates a novel, under-researched and important area within the field of entrepreneurs and SME owner manager elite interview research. By so doing, it combines an elite perspective which is widely used in the field of political science and, to a lesser extent in management and organisation research, with an SME owner-manager perspective. We argue that several elitist characteristics, such as hierarchy and power, competences, professionalism, as well as reputation, also apply to entrepreneurs and owner-managers from a local context perspective. Like elites in general, such as CEOs from large corporations, also SME owner-managers possess a similar position from this local community perspective, as they are for instance, also separated from the other members of the local community by gatekeepers or benefit from several privileges. We are convinced that viewing SME owner-managers as a local business elite has important implications for conducting research in entrepreneurship and SME and owner-manager settings. We will move on to summarise our main findings and recommendations in the following section.

Methodological implications and recommendations
Based on our understanding of a local elite owner-manager understanding we have developed several important recommendations for the fieldwork in SME and entrepreneurship research.

We have used a comprehensive collection of literature and reflected on our experiences made in a comprehensive interview study with more than 30 owner-managers in the region of southwest Germany and develop methodological and practical recommendations and guidance for scholars in the SME and entrepreneurship and organisation field to increase the quality of fieldwork and understanding of owner-manager contexts. According to this perspective, we are convinced that especially the following points need to be carefully addressed in fieldwork in comparable settings like ours. The following summary in Figure 2 provides a concise understanding of important aspects:

Based on the literature, we have developed the above shown major methodological categories (limited access to local elite owner-managers, procedural issues within the interview situation and ensuring quality of generated data), which provide important guidance for conducting fieldwork. In addition to what has been discussed in the elite interviewing literature, we have experienced that local elite participants in our contextual setting, expect a more persistent and flexible attitude of negotiating access, while not being overly demanding, given the resource scarcity, which can be often observed in SME and entrepreneurship contexts. This persistence may equal the hardworking mentality of many owner-managers and entrepreneurs and may represent an important gate for being initially accepted as an interviewer. The interview situation in the context of elitist behaviours and elite phenomena is challenging, as extensively discussed in the elite interviewing literature. This is also the case for local elite owner-managers and entrepreneurs. However, given the fact that the world of owner-managers tends to be more strongly determined by personal relationships (family, employees, business partners, community etc.), we experienced that building trust and showing familiarity with these local connections and valuing them facilitates the conduction of an interview in such contexts. This familiarity does not mean being "uncritical" but may perhaps be seen as a fundament for open, critical discussions and elaborations and may support capturing the honest worldview of the local elite participants. Finally, we argue that respecting the local elite context leads to a higher quality data, as we as scholars in the course of a fieldwork are somehow positioned within this local elite world but

Methodological categories	Core elements, which need to be considered…
Limited access to local elite owner-managers	• Also local elites show the typical elitist behavior and demand a respectful and appropriate treatment • Access is very limited and negotiating access is different compared to other elites, such as from the political class • Diligence and hard work are core issues of the elite owner-manager world and scholars should be prepared to proof their perseverance when negotiating access
Procedural issues within the interview situation	• The interview situation with elites is challenging, this is also true for local owner-manager elites • Personal aspects, trust and so forth naturally play a more important role in these settings as owner-managers tend to have closer personal relationships (e.g. family relationships within the firm) • It is important that owner-managers have the space and the possibility to show us their worldview
Ensuring quality of data generated in local elite owner-manager interviews	• We seek that local elite owner-managers provide an honest account of their thoughts and views • Most of the elite interviewing literature has the underlying assumption an objective, single reality, which is not the case in many constructivist and subjectivist ontological positions • Critical evaluation and reflection of research teams on the positionality, knowledgeability of local contexts and so forth is a key to ensure quality

Figure 2.
Summary of major issues identified in the process of conducting interviews with SME owner-managers

Source(s): Authors own creation

at the same time also act as critical and informed observer of the phenomena under research. This naturally requires a constant critical reflection on the own positionality, the relationships to the local elite participants and critical discussions within research teams.

Implications for society and policy
We are convinced that the findings and recommendations of this paper have significant implications for future policy making and society in general. Specifically, the casting of SME owner-managers and entrepreneurs as elites, and adopting an interview approach that reflects this, generates new and valuable insights into their behaviours, traits and characteristics. In essence, the use and adoption of elite interviewing protocols and procedures has the potential to enhance our understanding of the behaviours, traits, characteristics, challenges and issues faced by SME owners and entrepreneurs and as a consequence policy makers will be better placed to make effective and impactful decisions that will benefit local communities and wider society. To visualise in concrete terms, it is widely recognised that achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) is in the interest of broader society (e.g. Tung, 2023). In this SDGs context, by way of tangible example, concepts such as humane entrepreneurship are already being examined (Dębicka *et al.*, 2022). Such research on humane entrepreneurship (offered here as a tangible example) would benefit from qualitative research, which has the advantage of revealing depth of human experience (Patel, 2016). Thus, our current paper that reveals how the elite distinctiveness of SME owner-managers manifests and how this affects the process of conducting interviews with them contributes to the broader UN SDGs realisation agenda, by way of lubricating such deeper future research.

Limitations of this research and avenues for further research
We believe that our discussion provides a considerable contribution to knowledge, first by framing entrepreneurs and SME owner-managers as local elites. Conceptualising a local elite perspective certainly is worth to be addressed in-depth in an explicitly dedicated way. The major contribution is methodologically by providing a comprehensive discussion of key findings of the elite interviewing literature and transferring them to the entrepreneurship field as well as by complementing reflections and recommendations for the fieldwork in the context of SME owner-managers. However, it is important to note that our research is characterised by limitations, which may limit the applicability of our findings. Our recommendations are developed in the context of SME owner-managers in the southwest of Germany and transferability to other cultural and contextual settings might be limited, although we believe that our findings also apply to other contexts. However, it certainly requires more research to understand in detail in which cultural and regional contexts entrepreneurs and owner-managers can be considered as local elites. A local elite understanding of SME owner-managers might not be the case for micro-firms, as a certain local impact can be assumed for an elite position. Moreover, our experiences and discussion are tailored on interview studies and other data collection methods may pose other challenges and require other strategies as those discussed here, although we believe that a number of recommendations can be transferred to other inductive methods. Our elaborations are also informed by constructivist ontologies and our suggestions are hence directed towards inductive, qualitative research rather than quantitative techniques.

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