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Traianou, Anna. 2024. The issue of 'vulnerability' in researching political elites. *Education Inquiry*, ISSN 2000-4508 [Article] (In Press)

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The issue of 'vulnerability' in researching political elites

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Abstract

Much sociological research in education and elsewhere has focused on understanding the perspectives and experiences of 'marginalised' or subordinate groups, along with those of members of the occupations and organisations involved with them. However, since the 1980s and 90s a small tradition of work has emerged concerned with 'studying up': focusing on the role of elites (e.g. Ball 1990; Walford 1994; Troyna and Halpin 1994). Initially, studies of politicians, government officials, pressure groups, and their networks, tended to assume that they belonged to close-knit groups which could be easily identified (Walford 2012). However, the shift in the 2000s towards the notion of the governance of education reframed this research to include global policy actors who occupy 'multiple spaces' and policy networks, being 'simultaneously national and transnational', and therefore more difficult to identify (Grek 2021:18; see also Yates 2004). The aim of this focus on elites was to document the operation of elite power in shaping educational institutions and in resisting 'struggles for social transformation' (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994: 123). The term 'elite' is not always defined within this literature, but is generally used to describe individuals or groups who ostensibly have closer proximity to power or who are able to claim distinctive professional expertise (Ball 1994; see also Morris, 2009; Khan 2012; Maxwell 2015). Despite this growing body of work, there have been few reflexive accounts analysing the ways in which this research is conducted and the challenges encountered by policy researchers (but see Addey and Piattoeva 2021; Lancaster 2017; Duke 2002). More specifically, the ethical aspects of research associated with interviewing 'elites' involved in educational policymaking remain underexplored (Addey and Piattoeva 2021).

One ethical issue that has been addressed in studying marginalised or subordinate groups is vulnerability. In this paper I want to suggest that this is also relevant in studying elites, following up on some suggestions by previous writers: Smith (2006: 651) makes a brief suggestion that 'we need to make room to consider the possibility of "vulnerable elites"'; while Neal and McLaughlin (2009) refer to a *multi-layered* vulnerability in their reflective account of their research on the Commissioners of the *Parekh Report*. At face value, the concept may seem inapplicable, because of the assumption that vulnerability and power are negatively related: since elites have power, it might be concluded that they cannot be vulnerable. However, I will suggest that the issue is more complicated than this. Indeed, discussions in the research ethics literature have already shown that the concept of vulnerability is itself by no means straightforward.

Subject to particular criticism has been the idea – built into research ethics codes, and the procedures employed by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and Research Ethics Committees (RECs) – that certain categories of research participant are *intrinsically* vulnerable, so that heightened protections must always be placed upon research projects involving them.¹ Typical categories of the vulnerable include: young children, people with learning difficulties, sex workers, prisoners, people in poverty, and those suffering from serious illnesses. However, there can be reasonable disagreement about who should, and who should not, be included in this list. For instance, some commentators challenge treating children as vulnerable because this implies that they lack competence or are powerless (Morrow and Richards 1999; Farrell 2005; Wright 2015). Furthermore, members of the categories designated as vulnerable vary considerably in relevant respects, for example as a result of their intersectional positions. More fundamentally, at least one writer has challenged the very appropriateness of the concept of vulnerability in the context of research ethics (van den Hoonaard 2018, 2020; see also Levine et al 2004). Van den Hoonaard argues not only it is difficult to determine who is vulnerable, but also that designating potential research participants as vulnerable often results in their being excluded from studies, so that their perspectives are ignored.

There is a more general criticism, too. This is that research ethics cannot properly be a matter simply of following a set of rules, such as those specifying who is, and who is not, ‘vulnerable’. This is because, in doing research, there are multiple ethical and methodological considerations that must be taken into account, and these will often conflict. So, judgments have to be made in particular situations about what is the priority and how conflicting ideals should be interpreted and reconciled (Hammersley and Traianou 2012).

In this paper I will explore the issue of vulnerability in the context of my own recent research. I will begin by discussing further some of the complexities surrounding the concept of ‘vulnerability’, arguing that there needs to be clarification of in what respects particular participants may be vulnerable. Often this seems to be interpreted solely in relation to the capacity to provide informed consent, but this is only one aspect of vulnerability. A quite different interpretation is vulnerability to particular kinds of harm (Traianou and Hammersley 2023). I will conclude by discussing how these complexities apply in the context of researching political elites, drawing on research in which members of a Greek political elite were interviewed (Traianou 2021).

What is vulnerability?

In the broadest terms, ‘vulnerability’ can be interpreted as an inability, for whatever reason, to protect one’s own interests (Feinberg 1984). In the context of ethical regulation, the focus has

¹ See, for instance: [Research with potentially vulnerable people – UKRI. Van den Hoonaard 2018 reviews what a wide range of ethics regulatory bodies, in several countries, say about vulnerable groups and how they should be treated by researchers](#). A very large number of social categories have been listed as vulnerable at one time or another, see Sieber 1992:93. For a brief history of the origins of the concern with vulnerability and subsequent interpretations of the term, see Levine et al 2004.

been primarily on those who may not be able to provide informed consent to participate in a research project. Van den Hoonaard (2018:305) writes that ‘The concept of vulnerability has been the keystone test in medical research when researchers had to know whether a research subject had the capacity to understand and give consent to being researched’. And, as he goes on to note, in social research, too, ‘vulnerable’ is often taken to mean ‘potentially incapable of providing genuine informed consent’, whether through an inability to understand the information provided or to exercise autonomous decision-making. However, in ordinary usage, the usual meaning of the word ‘vulnerable’ is rather different from this focus on informed consent. A common definition is: ‘susceptible to attack or injury, physical or non-physical’ (See entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Given this, of the various ethics principles listed in professional and institutional codes and texts on research ethics, minimising harm is the most relevant to this second definition of ‘vulnerability’, though it would also need to include the protection of privacy and prevention of exploitation by researchers or others. While they overlap, these two interpretations of the term are not isomorphic: it is the case that those deemed incapable of providing informed consent may be more susceptible to harm than others, but the converse is not necessarily true. In this article I will focus primarily on the second interpretation of ‘vulnerability’ as ‘susceptibility to the threat of harm’.

It is important to emphasise that vulnerability, in both the senses I have discussed, is a matter of degree (Gordon 2020:35). Thus, it has often been pointed out that the notion of fully informed, entirely free, consent is a mirage (Wiles 2003:ch3). Indeed, in practice, participants may often gain relatively little understanding of what will be involved in the research process even when they sign a consent form. This can be for a variety of reasons (insufficient background knowledge; unwillingness to spend the time and effort to become informed; obscure or complicated forms). And people may not be entirely free to consent, or to refuse consent, for instance as a result of kin-group, peer-group, or organisational constraints (Hammersley and Traianou 2012:82-98). Similarly, the likelihood and severity of harm are also matters of degree (Hammersley and Traianou (2012:62-4). We are all vulnerable to some threats of harm, given that, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s words, we are ‘rational dependent animals’ (MacIntyre 1999).²

So the key question is not who is and who is not vulnerable, but rather concerns *degrees* of vulnerability.³ Where vulnerability is taken to indicate the need for extra protection, some threshold must be assumed above which this is required. Thus, judgments have to be made about *how* vulnerable the participants in a study are. And it needs to be remembered that individual members of any category deemed vulnerable will vary in their level of vulnerability, so that these decisions have to take account of all the relevant characteristics and social

² The relationship between vulnerability and dependence has been a matter for particular discussion within feminist philosophy: see Purcell 2013; Mackenzie et al 2013; Mao 2019; Polychroniou 2022. Here, the importance of embodiment and emotions has been emphasised. Equally important has been an insistence on a positive sense of ‘vulnerability’, implying a responsiveness to others (Gilson 2014).

³ An alternative way of thinking about this is in terms of ‘layers of vulnerability’: see Luna 2009.

relations of the particular people involved.⁴ Part of what is involved here is their intersectional position: people are members of multiple categories, and judgments about their vulnerability may differ depending upon which category is prioritised. Treating ‘vulnerability’ as a relational term also implies that people are not vulnerable per se, but are susceptible to *particular kinds* of threat, that relate to different *sources* and *types* of potential harm, ranging through physical injury, psychological damage, material loss, and tarnished reputation, as well as obstruction to ongoing activities.⁵

While the vulnerability of the people they study is an important issue that researchers must take into account, it should not be assumed that they have an all-encompassing responsibility to keep participants safe from harm. I have already suggested that there is a background threshold beyond which the small likelihood and/or low likely severity of a harm means that it can be ignored by the researcher. Equally important, there are some kinds of vulnerability that, arguably, researchers can legitimately treat as outside of their responsibility to control. This is recognised in some ethics codes, and by IRBs/RECs, when they insist that researchers have a responsibility to report crimes or abuse that they discover in the field. Such reports will, after all, probably cause harm to those whose actions are being reported. Here, vulnerability to arrest and criminal prosecution or to other kinds of penalty, on the part of lawbreakers or abusers, is excluded from the responsibility of researchers.⁶ There are some other types of harm that are often treated as beyond the responsibility of researchers as well, for example the impact on key decision-makers when discrepancies are documented between stated policies and what actually happens on the ground. What this makes clear is that the limits to researchers’ responsibility must also be given attention.

Relatedly, it is important to point out that social researchers are never in total control of the situations in which they operate; nor are they all-powerful in relation to participants. The researcher may be a postgraduate student or a junior member of staff on a temporary contract, they may belong to a minority or oppressed group, while the participants could be relatively high-ranking members of an established profession, or managers in a large organisation (see, for instance, Ozga and Gewirtz 1994; Grek 2011; Grek 2021). And, as I have already noted, the latter may seek to use their power to serve their own interests, for instance asking the researcher for confidential information as a *quid pro quo* for facilitating access to data (for an example, see Alcadipani and Hodgson 2009:136). Indeed, to a considerable extent, researchers are always dependent on the cooperation of research participants to get access to data:

⁴ For the case of prisoners, see Mitchelson 2017; for that of psychiatric patients, see Bracken-Roche 2016; and for that of migrants see Maillet et al 2017.

⁵ For further discussion of types of harm, see Hammersley and Traianou 2012:ch3.

⁶ The preoccupation with researchers reporting crimes or abuse may be a further indication that what drives ethical regulation is institutional concern to avoid public criticism – such as complaints that a researcher was aware of some crime or abuse but did nothing about it – and potential legal action on this basis. I am not denying that the risk of reputational damage and/or legal prosecution can be a genuine concern on the part of funding bodies, universities, etc, but rather that it should be a secondary matter, and that frequently what seems to be involved is an effort to eliminate all possibility of institutional liability, even though public criticism, and certainly legal liability, are relatively low risks in the case of social research.

gatekeepers may block entry to sites where observation could take place, or to key informants; people in the field could refuse consent to be observed or interviewed or may actively obstruct the research. Such problems are, perhaps, especially likely to arise in carrying out interviews with informants who come from high status social groups or powerful elites (Neal and McLaughlin 2009). As Ozga (2021: 204) has pointed out in the field of education policy research ‘where debate is endemic, explicitness in research choices is needed, so that the different conceptualisations, understandings, and interpretations we make are revealed through clear articulation and analysis of the processes of intellectual work...’.

In the remainder of this paper I will illustrate the complexities involved in dealing with the vulnerabilities of participants from my own research on the making of national education reforms under conditions of structural adjustment and severe austerity in Greece (Traianou 2021 see also Traianou 2023).

The research project: studying a Greek political elite

During 2015-18 the Leftist Syriza-led Government of Greece worked closely with the OECD in the production of two policy reviews for education (OECD 2017, 2018). The work was carried out as part of the reform package of the third ‘structural adjustment programme’ (SAP) which Greece agreed with its external creditors (IMF, European Central Bank, European Commission –officially known as ‘the Institutions’) in August 2015. In relation to education, the OECD, asked to facilitate implementation of post-2010 New Public Management (NPM) reforms (MoU 2015: 22), entered a lengthy engagement with Greece, in several phases across a period of two and a half years. As I have argued elsewhere (Traianou 2021), the third SAP was more controversial (in terms of its implementation) and more complex (in terms of its negotiation) than the previous two programmes. For one thing, despite Greece’s policy change after 2015 to engage constructively with the Institutions and the OECD in the implementation of the third memorandum of understanding (MoU), this did not resolve all their differences. Unlike ‘crisis countries’ like Portugal (Carvalho and Costa 2017) and Spain (Verger 2014) where the OECD was an invited adviser, Greece had not requested the organisation’s involvement, indeed the Government continued to have strong reservations about the core policy framework it was promoting, of school autonomy and accountability. My project focused on the ways in which the composition of each of the two reviews was shaped by the interplay of national and external actors with diverse political orientations, and the effects of this process on national policy. I argued that the two reviews helped significantly to modify the education conditionalities of the third MoU, by delaying NPM reforms and by depoliticising teacher tenure. Indeed, the reports helped to unlock EU funding for the making of teacher permanent appointments (Traianou 2021).

I employed a historical case study methodology treating Greece as a ‘bounded system’ (Stake 1995: 47): as a case with distinct characteristics compared with other EU and OECD member states as they navigated post-2008 crises (Traianou 2021). I worked from what were acknowledged to be key documents in the educational policy history of the 2010–2019 period.

I also kept a systematic record of media coverage across the political spectrum and of sectoral websites during 2015-2019. Predominantly, though, the project relied on narrative interviews with seven policy actors who were part of a particular ‘elite’ policy network. This network included leading politicians, academics, and teachers. Its members were explicitly affiliated to Syriza, the governing party at the time. These actors had been seconded from their permanent posts (academia, schools) to work on aspects of education policy and they held key positions in the two organisations responsible for education policy in Greece – the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Institute of Education Policy (IEP). All seven male actors had played, at various times, significant roles in the negotiations with the OECD and the Institutions and had contributed to the production of the two reports (OECD 2017; 2018). Most of them had interconnected public biographies and overlapping social connections, as well as links with other national and international networks.

Several of these actors were involved in organising a public forum/dialogue for education and in holding press conferences where they presented the progress of the negotiations. In other words, they were ‘visible’ and seemingly easy to contact (Alvesalo-Kuusi & Whyte 2018). But, as I discovered, they also placed high value on ‘privacy and exclusion’ (ibid.). Indeed, gaining in-depth data about a highly significant process of crisis negotiation between a national government and international organisations proved far from easy.

I also realised that my own positionality – my identity as a Greek national who works abroad, my political orientation, my relationship to some of the informants, and my academic affiliations created complex relationships. To some extent I could operate as an insider researcher, someone who shared ‘an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants’ (Dwyer & Buckle 2009: 54). This enabled me to delve into the tense social-political climate at the time of the fieldwork. But being a member of a group ‘does not denote complete sameness within that group’ (ibid. see also Adler P., Adler P. 1987). I was not a member of the policy network I was studying, has and having worked and lived abroad for more than twenty years I was also an outsider researcher (Mannay 2010) and was not doubt seen that way by the elite participants. I had met two of the potential informants before the 2015 elections in research contexts, and I believed that I was regarded as someone who shared similar political ideas. At the same time, I was sceptical and quite critical of the post 2015 Government’s actions and policy direction. But, in any case, as Howard Becker (1967) pointed out long ago, even though researchers may try to be impartial, they will often be seen as being on one side or the other.

The interviews took place in a number of different settings: in cafes and bistros, but also sometimes in the policy actors’ own offices. They were conducted between April 2019 and November 2021 in a schedule that was to some extent disrupted by the pandemic and the fluctuations of national politics. Four of the interviews were conducted when the informants were still in their official capacities. The rest of the interviews were conducted after the 2019 general election results when the informants had left office. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. The interviews focused on the actors’ interpretations, tactical decisions and

evaluations in the course of their encounters with global organisations and other national actors and policy communities.

In the next section I discuss how the research relationship was negotiated throughout the research process from gaining access, collecting interview data, analysing and publishing the research.

Navigating between ethics and strategy in the research process

It is not easy to gain access to elites, and once access has been obtained it is not easy to get one's questions answered (Walford 2012). Social relations in the field are sometimes presented as a matter of finding strategies to build rapport, in other words to encourage people to provide the data required for the research project (Ostrander 1993). Any reluctance or resistance is treated as a barrier to overcome (Harvey 2011). In my dealings with members of a Greek political elite, I was aware that some of them sought to limit and manage my access to data, and I recognised that I needed to find ways to build trust with them so that they would give me access to more of the data. However, at the same time, I was aware that the blocking tactics and reluctances on the part of my informants were not simply motivated by a desire to promote their own interests, they were also trying to protect themselves from reputational damage. Moreover, this was a reasonable concern on their part, and one that I ought to respect. After all, they had been involved in a high-stakes game. The contested nature of the OECD's agenda was reflected in the media and Parliament where for both the Right and the Left the OECD was the vehicle of the third MoU package. Trade Unions and most of the political Left were critical of government strategy. In their narratives, elite informants expressed their disappointment at the lack of support from the political Left, the hostility of the Institutions and of some members of the OECD teams and the political significance of the two OECD reports in the modifications of the conditionalities of the third MoU. In this context, their actions during the negotiations had implications for their reputational standing with significant others. In short, I concluded that there were ways in which they were vulnerable, and should be treated as such.

More than this, members of elites usually have insider information about events and processes that have wide implications for people within their societies. They, and/or others, may feel that some or all of this should be kept secret, even though they understand that there are grounds for a public right to know, or that research on these events and processes can be valuable. And members of political elites often see little gain in cooperating with researchers. On the other side, researchers studying elites, very often, aim to get informants to divulge information that they might otherwise have kept back, using strategies similar to those long practised by investigative journalists (Dexter 2006). But these strategies raise ethical questions about security issues: should all aspects of intergovernmental negotiations be made public?(see Shils 1956). As I noted at the start, members of elites have often been treated as 'fair game' for researchers to deploy such strategies. In this context, it has sometimes been argued that the usual ethical requirements, such as obtaining informed consent, must be suspended, on the grounds that members of 'elites' do not need protection, and indeed that their activities can

legitimately be exposed to publicity (Gallihier 1980; Gaztambide-Fernández 2015). However, this may need to be reconsidered. In my own research I found that I had to tread a delicate line between pursuing the research as effectively as possible and recognizing ethical responsibilities to my informants.

In all my initial contacts with potential interviewees I used my professional credentials, standing, affiliations and personal connections as strategies for gaining access. To some extent I relied on contacts who were peripheral to the policy process but whom I could nevertheless mention in my initial contacts with potential interviewees. As Cassell (1988: 85) points out, ‘everyone who might possibly know someone, must be contacted and asked if they will give introductions, vouch for one, and otherwise help one’s enterprise’ (see also Winker 1987). I tried to present my research topic as ‘harmless’ (Ozga and Gewirtz 1994) by explaining that I was interested in understanding the Europeanisation of education during the post-2015 period. I did gain in this way their oral consent to be interviewed, though inevitably a degree of deception was built into the process (Wiles 2003). However, despite their warm initial expression of willingness to meet me, potential interviewees were slow to agree a time and place. All informants wanted to know more about me and my research before they agreed to be interviewed. Often, I would get no further replies to our initial email exchange. Telephone arrangements proved to be more effective. I soon realised that I had to keep on reminding potential informants (email or phone) that I was ‘around’ and available to conduct the interview at short notice – one of the interviews took place on a Sunday morning, another was conducted on a public holiday. There were indeed times when I felt I was treating potential interviewees as ‘quarry’ to be pursued by any means possible (Dexter 2006:35), not a comfortable position to be in for both the researcher and the researched.

I was acutely aware in organising appointments and conducting interviews that ‘gaining access is not the same as establishing the trust required for getting useful data’ (Ostrander, 1995:135; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; 2019: Ch4) and that some relationships required careful management both before and after the interview, and within the interview encounter itself. In general, much of the time, I did not ask challenging questions regarding their perceived ‘compliance’ with the demands of supranational organisations, as implied by some of the press and by the political Left. I presented as the ‘ignorant’ outsider willing to learn from knowledgeable others. Dodge and Geis (2006:80), in the context of their research with white collar prisoners, talk about a “‘babe in the woods’ approach: pretending ignorance and inviting the informant to “teach” you, as only he or she would be able to do”. My positionality as a Greek national who works abroad and probably my gender (see Gewirtz and Ozga 1994) made it easier for me to adopt this approach.

Such an approach is necessarily highly contingent in what it produces. On one occasion a key informant had agreed for the interview to take place during a break of a conference he was organising. A common contact had put us in touch who I believed had given me a positive recommendation (Winkler 1987). But the informant had not specified the date of the interview ‘it’s a very busy period but your research is important. Come to my conference if you’re around

this week’, he said. I decided to turn up on the first day of the conference to introduce myself. I also made sure that the interviewee was aware that I was talking about the broad focus of my research to one of the keynote speakers that I knew, and he then introduced me to the informant, who was about to leave the room. The keynote speaker commented to me, in the company of the informant: ‘I hear you have planned to talk about important things’ he said.

Like other researchers (see Lilly and Ayling 2020; Jobber 2021), in employing such tactics I tried to use my academic post to reinforce the image of someone who is established not only internationally but also nationally, fearing that I would not be taken seriously by a male informant and a well-established Greek academic. Despite cordial introductions I was taken aback when as we were approaching the location of the interview – a near-by bistro chosen by the interviewee – he asked me to remind him of my name, what I do and the name of the person who put me in touch with him. The informant seemed to speak openly and with confidence about his role in the negotiations: ‘please record the conversation. I’m a sociologist and therefore familiar with the research process’. But as the bistro was full of people known to the informant, including conference delegates who acknowledged him as a respectful public figure and academic, I was careful in asking questions that might ‘put him on the spot’. During the interview, I often felt that the informant was taking control of the research relationship to protect himself (see Dodge and Geis 2006), and that I was complicit in this.

Some of the interviewees, especially those who occupied a lower position in the hierarchy of the policy network, were very cautious about releasing information: ‘the memory escapes me’ said one of them when I asked him to say more about their meetings with external organisations. Despite our pre 2015 research relationship, this informant got very nervous when I asked if I could record the conversation: ‘people used to take notes now they record conversations and upload them on social media’, he commented, before he, very reluctantly, agreed to be recorded. On this occasion, I made a conscious decision not to ‘play-up’ my identity as a senior academic. Instead, I presented myself as also wanting to discuss our common research interests about teachers’ working conditions. In this way, I managed to [re]establish trust which allowed me to pursue my interview agenda. Such strategic use of researcher positionality has been employed by many social scientists researching elites, as a way of gaining access to them, and then building trust with them (Gewirtz & Ozga 1994; Herod, 1999; Grek 2021). Unlike the bistro interview, it proved much easier eventually to exercise some pressure for further information from this informant because of our previously existing relationship.

After the 2019 general elections, it became easier to arrange interviews with key informants, since they were no longer in post. As I became known and trusted among them, I found that some were interested in knowing who else I had spoken to (Hunter, 1995; Lancaster 2017) and often made suggestions about who else I should speak to. I was open about who I had already talked with, and this often helped to build further rapport; though I never revealed what one had said, respecting their confidentiality. It was through this route that I eventually managed to get access to a person who had been particularly significant in the negotiations. However,

during the interview it was clear that he had prepared what he was going to tell me; and when my allocated time was coming to an end, he started looking at his watch to warn me that my time was up. At the same time, he showed me an important state document which was not in the public domain, as evidence of the ways in which the national government managed the external pressure to implement reforms. He was initially reluctant to give me a copy: ‘we’ll see’, he said, ‘I would not want this document to be quoted in publications’. He did subsequently send it to me; perhaps he needed time to make a judgment about my credibility and political affiliations. I did not quote from the document, though I learned much from it (see also Milana 2021).

So, while some of my informants were clearly conscious of the need to protect themselves, I also felt a responsibility to protect them. In other words, given the highly politicised context, I treated them as vulnerable since they could be identifiable as sources of information or as participants in the processes of international negotiation I was documenting. This was especially true given the relatively small number of people who were directly involved in these events. I was careful in selecting data for inclusion in published articles, using publicly available documents as cited sources wherever possible. This was partly because of my fear that anonymization might not be successful (Hammersley and Traianou 2012 ch:5). Many researchers have discussed their dilemmas about how to balance their commitment to knowledge production with potentially exposing respondents’ identities, choosing to withhold information to reduce the risk of harm to informants (see Baez 2002). I found that resolving such dilemmas was not easy. One interviewee revealed a particular incident which involved several members of both negotiating teams. The incident, according to the informant, had resulted in a significant change in the content of the final OECD report (OECD 2018). The informant said to me: ‘Write about it, very few people know about what happened just before the publication of the final report’. In the end, I decided that the disclosure of this information could potentially jeopardise the delicately balanced politicised policy processes that were still underway.

I also worried that my analysis could be misinterpreted by the policy actors I had interviewed, or by those in other policy networks, the media, and other political parties. I decided to offer informants the opportunity to send me feedback on my analysis, a technique for establishing credibility that some researchers have called ‘respondent validation’ (Lincoln and Guba 1985:314; Birt et al., 2016). I did this initially by inviting some of them to a research seminar where I was giving a paper on the study. Not everyone attended or responded to my invitation. Nevertheless, contact was made (via zoom and email) a few months later by two participants. One of them emailed me a draft chapter he had written about the trajectory of Greek education policy. Later, I was contacted again by the same person who encouraged me to talk to him about what I was writing in order to clarify some aspects of policy. He said he was also happy to provide feedback on my draft paper. The day of the meeting, he sent me my draft article with a few corrections in red on the first couple of pages, including corrections to my written English. He did not disagree with my account, he told me, and he made suggestions about other people I could talk to that he could put me in touch with. At that point I decided there

was a risk to my autonomy as a researcher (see Traianou & Hammersley 2021) and did not encourage further communication. This was respected by the informant. Despite his promise he did not send me any further comments. I did not make any significant changes to my analysis. A few months later I received an invitation to his book launch.

I tentatively concluded that he, and others, felt that they had been protected from unnecessary damage to their reputations. I had endeavored to do this without compromising my analysis of the complex political events in which these informants had been involved. But difficult, and necessarily questionable, decisions had had to be made.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the complexity of the concept of vulnerability, and that designating some social categories as vulnerable and others as not vulnerable is unsatisfactory. I examined some of the problems surrounding this concept, noting the need to recognise differences in degrees and types of vulnerability. I also emphasised that there were limits to the responsibility of researchers to protect participants. Research on elites is a particularly interesting case from this point of view, since elite members are usually regarded as powerful, from which it is often concluded that they are not in need of protection. More than this, they are frequently viewed as ‘fair game’ for researchers to use whatever strategies they can deploy to encourage them to divulge the inside information to which they have access.

I argued that a middle way is needed here if research is both to meet ethical standards and to be effective in gaining the data required to understand the role of elites and the consequences of their actions for policy and practice. I illustrated this through a discussion of my own research on members of a political elite in Greece. I showed how it was necessary to navigate contacts with potential informants, seeking to overcome the power imbalance between me and them, while at the same time recognising the need to respect their concerns and fears about divulging information. As many other researchers have noted, the research relationship is messy and untidy. It involves difficult encounters and continual self-reflection. I had not anticipated the informants’ degree of emotional involvement in the production of the two OECD reports. I empathised with their accounts while at the same time trying to preserve my autonomy as a researcher.

My paper contributes to both to the literature on researching elites and to the field of research ethics, by problematizing further the concept of ‘vulnerability’. I argued that protecting elite participants from harm was an important requirement, even though this ethical commitment had to be balanced against my responsibility to document the exercise of power and its consequences for Greek society.

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