Expert Interviews.
Methodology and Practice

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Expert Interviews as „qualitative“, less standardised interviews

- Narrative Interviews
- Focused Interviews
- Dilemma Interview
- Group interviews
- ....
- Expert interview – what is special? Compared to Elite Interviews?
Expert interviews a special method?

Yes, because of:

1. Methodological considerations: The definition of experts und expert-knowledge

2. Practical issues: „Quasi-Expertise“ while interviewing, interaction during the interview, access
What is an expert interview or elite interview?

- Who is an expert?
- Belongs an expert necessarily to the elite(s)?
- Means being member of the elite(s) necessarily being an expert?
„Elite interview“ (Dexter, 1970, p. 18)

„It is an interview with any interviewee ... who in terms of the current purposes of the interviewer is given special, non-standardized treatment.“ ie:

1. Stressing the interviewee’s definition of the situation
2. Encouraging the interviewee to structure the account of the situation
3. Letting the interviewee introduce to a considerable extent … his notion of what he regards as relevant …
Who is the Elite?

- Relational terms: depends on the images of the top of a society, a network of persons capable of making decisions or influencing processes which are important for many (of the society); e.g. decisions in companies affecting jobs, processes of change with regard to welfare, or interventions which set up public agendas (Dexter: „the influential, the prominent, the well-informed“, 19)

- Power, not wealth, not birth, not education
Who is the Elite? (ctd)

- A dynamic formation with heterogenous parts, changing compromises and different forms

- Areas of Research on Elites:
  - Political and Community Elites
  - Business Elites
  - Professional Elites (Medicine, Law, Clergy)
  - Mass Media Elites
Who is an expert? Different approaches

1. *Voluntaristic*: „Everybody is an expert for his/her life.“ → What is special from a methodological point of view? Could also be covered by other forms of interviews; critical about power; but how to deal with expert-laypeople differences?

2. *Constructivist*: expert role is ascribed by researchers; experts have special knowledge; experts are made by society (special knowledge and specific functions) → close to societal ascription; tendency not to reflect on this.
Who is an expert? Different approaches ctd.

3. Sociology of knowledge: experts have special knowledge which is related to their professions (Sprondel); focus on conscious knowledge (Schütz) (not implicit or tacit knowledge) → relation to profession is problematic (e.g. NGOs); disposability of knowledge has not been reflected
Further elaboration on „expert knowledge“

• Technical knowledge (specialized knowledge, administrative competences…)
• Process-related knowledge (about interactions, decision-making, organisational constellations…)
• Interpretative-evaluative knowledge („Deutungswissen“); everyday knowledge or comments; everyday theories

→ „expert knowledge“ is an analytical category which is generated by the researcher
Who is an expert?

- Relational term, ascribed by the researcher according to the leading research questions.
- An expert has special „expert knowledge“ which is related to a special professional field. „E.k.“ includes expertise as well as implicit /tacit knowledge about maximes of action, rules of decision-making, collective orientations and social patterns of interpretation. „E.k.“ has at least partially the chance to be realised in practice. If so „e.k.“ structures the conditions of action for others in a relevant way. Elites are a special group of experts: the top (most powerful) decision-makers.
What makes experts relevant for research?

• If the research question focuses on technical or process related knowledge, this will be the most important criterium for recruitment.

• If the research interests focus on the analysis of a specific configuration of knowledge experts are interesting because of the practical consequences of their expert knowledge for others. Experts are in this sense responsible for the planning, implementation or controlling of a solution (to a problem). They have privileged access to decision-making processes and people.
What is an expert-interview?

• An interaction between an interviewed person and one or two interviewers

• Expert interviews are about a person’s special knowledge and experiences which result from the actions, responsibilities, obligations of the specific functional status within an organisation/institution.

• Researchers are not interested in individual biographies, not single cases, but in the expert as a representative of an organisation/institution, insofar as he/she (re-)presents the (re)solutions or decision-making structures.
Differentiating between experts and the elite
Research Interests and Expert Interviews

- The explorative expert interview, which is applied in little investigated field for explorative purposes.
- The systematizing expert interview, which aims at the reconstruction of the expert’s special “objective” knowledge in a specific field.
- The theory-generating interview, which is not limited to the analysis of the expert’s special “objective” knowledge but also to the reconstruction of implicit knowledge of action and interpretation.
Restrictions to get access to experts

• Time restrictions
• Preference of status adequate dialogue partners (networking)
• Group specific language (e.g. medical or juridical terms)
• Hypersensitivity to any research because their sensitive information could make experts (elites) vulnerable to political or legal harm (Dexter)

→ The higher the position/status of the expert the more difficult is the access for (jun.) researchers.
Sampling/Choice of interview partners

- Expert status often ascribed by researchers
- Who are the important persons in your field? (Literature, mass media, documents, exploratory talks) (theoretical sampling and snowball)
- Ask for recommendations at the end of interview
- Start with a list of key-persons, add others according to recommendations or gained/missing informations/different positions (iterative process)
How to get access?

• Sampling (identification of pot. relevant experts: media, www, informal talks …)
• First contact:
  - Presentation of the researcher/interviewer
  - Presentation of the research and the conditions of the interview
  - Date, place, duration
How to motivate experts for the interview?

• Instrumental: via knowledge exchange (gaining new knowledge, knowledge check, ..) which could be helpful for decision-making or innovation → interviewer as consultant, co-expert

• Image: Status benefits from the involved research institution, professor; search for public understanding → importance of institutional background of the researcher

• Social situation: often isolated, interests in distinguishing oneself ("sich profilieren")

• Altruism: contribution to scientific progress; helping young researchers
## Social conditions for the production of an interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>Interviewer</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Expectations regarding the topic, the situation, the persons, social relation</td>
<td>Sympathy, social status, distrib. of roles, distance/closeness, obligation, interests</td>
<td>- Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Style of talk, style of self-performance</td>
<td></td>
<td>- (Social) capabilities of interviewing</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Good or bad memory</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Style of questioning, verbal/non-verbal signals</td>
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<td>- Willingness to talk</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Emotional reaction to the said; personal experiences; how to deal with non-understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Emotions</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Topic guide, rules of interviewing</td>
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### The Presented
- What? How?

### Situation
Topic/expectations to the topic
- time and place, tape-recorder, research context, rules of communication
Typology of interaction with expert interviews

Interviewer as

• a) Co-expert or b) expert from another culture of knowledge
• Layperson
• Authority (evaluator)
• Accomplice (common normative background)
• Potential critic (diverging normative background)
Expert-interviews are gendered

- Experts often will be male and white (mirror of the societal gender and ethnic relationships)
- „Doing gender while doing interviews“:
  - A) Gendered content of the interviews:
    - by directly addressing man/women
    - by implicitly taking up gender issues (e.g. via gender-role stereotypes)
  - B) Interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (demonstration of paternalism or superiority or unwillingness/reluctance; feedback-effect; catharsis effect)
Expert-interviews and interaction

• Interactive situation is not a disadvantage.
• You should be aware of pot. interaction-effects.
• Try to be professional (first contact/telephone: background of the interview, use of tape recorder, adequate dress, be aware of your status)
• Check carefully who are the experts in your field and do not annoy them by not interviewing keypersons (social relationships between experts)
• Interviewing experts needs training and careful preparation
6 Steps analysing of expert interviews

1. Transcription
2. Paraphrasing
3. Headlining
4. Thematic comparison
5. Scientific conceptualisation
6. Theoretical generalisation
Seeking applications to wider theory (generalisation) / policy strategies

Developing explanations

Pot. Establishing typologies

Scientific Conceptualisation

Thematic Comparison

Identifying concepts/themes

Interviews: Paraphrasing

Interviews: Transcription

RAW DATA
Multi-lingualism and qualitative Interviews

• Internationalisation of research, comparative research and migration

• Collaboration with trained interpreters/translators rare. Often laypeople or 2nd generation co-interpreters

• Little reflection on both sides: Translators/interpreters know little about empirical research; researchers know little about translation (studies)
## Multi-lingualism and research phases

| Research design       | Ressources: time, money, human resources  
|                       | Improvement of own language skills?  
|                       | Collaboration with interpreters or translators?  
|                       | Co-Interpreters?  
|                       | Training of interpreters?  
| Data generation       | If collaboration: Clarification of roles, seating arrangements (etc.)  
|                       | Consecutive interpreting or whispering simultaneously?  
|                       | Enough time!  
| Data analysis         | Transcription; Translation- when?  
|                       | Controlling of transcription;  
|                       | Collaboration with translators or co-interpreters - how?  
| Reporting             | Selection and translation of quotations  |
References


• Littig, B., Pöchhacker, F. (2014). Socio-translational collaboration in qualitative inquiry: The case of expert interviews In: Qualitative Inquiry (forthcoming)