Expert Interviews and Interview Techniques for Policy Analysis

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Introduction

- Used expert interviews over last 15 years
  - Based on reading on
    - Qualitative research
    - Informant interviews
  - Experience but not systematized or methodologically grounded

- Methodological literature
  - Scarce, only few articles available
  - One book (Bogner, Littig, Menz)

- This presentation
  - Based on own experience
  - Systematized on the basis of literature on method
  - ‘Recognized’ much of my own experience
## Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Main source</th>
<th>Other Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media and Democracy Gabon</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Political Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk research (official, legal docs), literature study, content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Cooperation in Higher Education</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Policy Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk research (policy docs, project evaluations, etc) literature study, comparative analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecommunication Policy South Africa</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Policy Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk research (policy docs, project evaluations, etc), literature review, statistical evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mCDN FP5 project</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Business Strategy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Desk research, literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITEA Mid term review</td>
<td>10 tel.</td>
<td>Project Evaluation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Desk research, project outcomes evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eEurope Plus Indicators</td>
<td>15 tel.</td>
<td>Evaluation of indicators</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Desk research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FP 5 IST Programme Evaluation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Project Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Desk research, project outcomes evaluation, survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ePaper</td>
<td>5 (10)</td>
<td>Business Strategy</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Literature review, Desk research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advantages of method

- **Exploratory phase**
  - Fast access to new or unknown field
  - Quick way to obtain specific information
  - Less time consuming than many other methods

- **Experts**
  - Have high insight in *aggregated* and/or *specific* knowledge
    - Processes, Group Behaviors, Strategies, etc.
    - Information difficult to explored by other methods
  - Often networked person
    - Easily leads to other interviews
  - Motivated persons
    - Often willing to cooperate and exchange
    - Problems of influencing less problematic
Who is an expert?

• Expert according to Meuser & Nagel
  – Person who is responsible for the development, implementation or control of solutions/strategies/policies
  – Person who has privileged access to information about groups of persons or decision processes
Who is an expert?

- **Expert knowledge not neutral**
  - Experts and counter experts
  - Experts are part of the societal debate
    - Have direct or indirect decisional power
  - Play a vital role in the definition of problems
  - Expert fields not neutral
    - Characterized by power relations
    - Processes of reproduction - ‘conservative’ towards renewal

- **Important to keep in mind:**
  - Selection of experts
  - Interviewing phase
  - Interpretation of interview texts
Expert knowledge

• Three dimensions
  – Technical knowledge
    • Very specific knowledge in the field
    • Details on operations, laws, etc. influencing field
  – Process knowledge
    • Info on routines, specific interactions, processes
    • Expert has knowledge as she/he is directly involved
  – Explanatory knowledge
    • Subjective interpretations of relevance, rules, beliefs
    • Ideas and ideologies and their inconsistencies
    • Interviewee him/herself and his/her routines/thoughts focus of interview
Methodological critique

• Knowledge obtained not neutral
  – Experts and counter experts
  – Interview setting influences information obtained

• Effects of interaction rather high
  – Procedures not rigorously standardized
  – Open non-structured dialog in which interviewer actively participates
  – Danger of anecdotal and illustrative ‘information’
  – Not inter-subjectively repeatable
Methodological defense
Bogner & Menz

• Argue for differentiation of expert interviews types
  – Explorative expert interviews - Technical knowledge
  – Systematizing expert interviews - Process knowledge
  – Theory generating expert interviews - Explanatory knowledge

• Argue for differentiation of interaction types
  – Interviewer as co-expert
  – Interviewer as expert outside of field
  – Interviewer as lay person
  – Interviewer as authority
  – Interviewer as confederate
  – Interviewer as possible critic

• Argue in favor of interpreting interaction effects as part of data production
Interview types
Explorative expert interview

• When used
  – Used as first orientation in new fields
  – Better structuring of problem
  – Used for preparing interview topic lists or surveys

• Interview preparation and practice
  – Can be very open and unstructured
  – Structure interviews on basis of basic topic list
  – No emphasis on comparability or aggregation of information
  – Topic lists can vary according to expertise interviewee
Interview types
Systematizing expert interview

• When used?
  – Focus on exclusivity of expert knowledge
    • When person has gained expertise in praxis
    • Based on expertise or exclusive position
  – Used for information which otherwise not accessible
  – Focus on comparability and aggregation

• Interview preparation and practice
  – Focus on systematic and full disclosure of information
  – Open more detailed topic list
    • However allow for interviewee to answer extensively
  – Different interviews follow same trajectory to be able to compare and aggregate data.
Interview types
Theory generating interview

• When used
  – Interviewee more than information source
  – Focus on subjective aspects of experts knowledge
  – Focus on motives, routines, implicit beliefs impacting on functioning of experts and systems

• Interview preparation and practice
  – Questions focus on motives, beliefs, routines of experts
  – Often related to the function of experts less on knowledge
  – Open questions
    • but often part of systematizing interviews
  – Different interviews follow same trajectory to be able to compare and aggregate data.
Interaction types
Interviewer as co-expert

- Dimension of typology
  - Knowledge level comparable
- Communication during interview
  - Symmetric, high level of interaction, many questions by expert
- Status of interviewer
  - Knowledge of terminology and field
- Style of questioning
  - Dialog, permanent questions, in depth questioning, intervening
- Advantages
  - High level of discussion and information generation
- Disadvantages
  - Remains within framework of field, technical details
- When used?
  - Explorative or systematizing
  - Facts and data oriented questions
Interaction types
Interviewer expert outside field

- Dimension of typology
  - Knowledge level of equal standing
- Communication during interview
  - Symmetric, high level of interaction, many questions by expert
- Status of interviewer
  - Knowledge of terminology and less of field
- Style of questioning
  - Dialog, permanent questions, in depth questioning, intervening
- Advantages
  - High level of discussion and information generation
  - High explanation of motives and orientation
- Disadvantages
  - Remains within framework of field, technical details
- When used?
  - Explorative or systematizing, facts and data oriented questions
Interaction types
Interviewer as lay person

• Dimension of typology
  – Low level of knowledge of the field

• Communication during interview
  – Asymmetric in favor of interviewee ➔ monologue, paternalistic

• Status of interviewer
  – Low status of interviewer, low level of interest of interviewee

• Style of questioning
  – Broad questions which can generate longer answers
  – Naive subsequent questions

• Advantages
  – High level of confidence by interviewee ➔ pressure to explain

• Disadvantages
  – Interviewer can not guide the interview

• When used?
  – Explorative interview, theory generating when focused on motives, norms,
Interaction types
Interviewer as authority

- Dimension of typology
  - Evaluator, higher field knowledge
- Communication during interview
  - Asymmetric in favor of interviewer \( \Rightarrow \) legitimation strategies by interviewee
- Status of interviewer
  - Institutional background, high expertise, power position
- Style of questioning
  - More authoritarian style of questioning
  - Frequent and critical subsequent questions
- Advantages
  - Expressive presentation of interviewee
- Disadvantages
  - Avoiding of certain topics, withholding information
- When used?
  - Not recommended but unavoidable when formally evaluating
Interaction types
Interviewer as confederate

- Dimension of typology
  - Same normative frame of thinking
- Communication during interview
  - Sharing of experiences, informal style of dialogue
- Status of interviewer
  - Personal relation, shared experiences
- Style of questioning
  - Informal style of questioning, Different types of questioning possible
- Advantages
  - High trust between partners
  - Access to confidential information ➔ Agree on how to treat this type of info
- Disadvantages
  - Normative framework and assumptions not questioned
- When used?
  - Explorative, systematizing and theory generating
Interaction types
Interviewer as potential critic

- **Dimension of typology**
  - Different normative frame of thinking
- **Communication during interview**
  - Declining to answer, short answers, critical return questions
- **Status of interviewer**
  - Interviewers (or institutional) position known as ‘critic’
- **Style of questioning**
  - Critical and biased questioning
  - No verbal and non-verbal confirmation by interviewer
- **Advantages**
  - Detailed explication of normative stance and assumptions
- **Disadvantages**
  - Disruption of dialogue
- **When used?**
  - Not recommended, can be interesting in theory generating interviews
How to Select interviewees

- Explorative and systematizing interviews
  - Different actors, points of views involved
  - Different aspects or fields impacting issues
  - Use interviews to snow bal selection
    - Ask for other experts and fields involved
    - Ask for experts with similar or deviant views
  - E.g. Business modeling
    - Interview different actors in value chain
  - E.g. Evaluation of FP 5
    - Interview project manager, financial officer, EU responsible for project, etc.

- Theory generating interviews
  - Interviewees in the same group
  - Sharing a common background or function
  - Makes generalizing about specific group possible
    - E.g telecom consultants as an epistemological group
How to Select interviewees
Development Cooperation in Higher Education
How to Select the right interviewees

• Do not necessarily go for the top shots
  – Sometimes have a good overview
  – BUT may lack expert knowledge on issues of interest
  – Are over committed and thus less time to commit
  – Experts on lower level might have much more detailed knowledge

• How to find them
  – Snowballing
  – Specialized literature review
  – Specialized conference reviews
  – Directly call companies (although mostly less successfull)
  – Go through umbrella organisations
How to Approach interviewees

- Are interviewees open to cooperate
  - Not uniform answer, but mostly positive
- Way you take up contact influences willingness
  - Approach actors only after first study of the field
  - Letter, eMail or Phone:
    - Explain what the goals, content and function of the research is
    - Convince by knowledge ↔ detailed and well formulated mail
    - NOT: ‘can we meet to talk’, ‘hi, I’m a first year student’
    - Explain own affiliation, client, background
    - In case of no response, ask again (phone)
    - Clearly fix timespan in advance e.g. 45 min - 1 hour
How to Prepare interview

• Preparation
  – Become a quasi-expert
  – Only start after sound preparation
  – The younger you are, the better you have to prepare
    • Risk of sliding into lay person interview
    • Paternalistic non-disclosing attitude

• Interview guide or topic list
  – How to construct depends on type of interview
  – Basic open interview guide (main questions)
  – But also prepare some interjecting questions

• Interview questions
  – Systematizing interviews
    • Goal comparative analysis
    • Gathering empirical data
  – Theory generating interviews
    • Goal hypothesis falsification
How to Conduct interview

• Before starting the interview
  – Start with outlining goal and set up of research
  – Explain scope of the interview
  – Explain processing of information
    • Aggregation per type of actor or sector
    • No individual citation or individual citation, etc.
  – Explain how you will handle confidential information
    • Send written interview, text or text excerpts with citations

• To Record or Not to Record
  – Ask whether interviewee agrees with recording
  – Explain why you are recording
    • E.g. Only for own recollection, No direct citations, etc.
  – If interviewee not confident, don’t record
    • Will otherwise impact on information gathering
How to Conduct interview

• Interacting during interview
  – Not important to stay ‘neutral’ as in qualitative interviews
  – Share some of your own knowledge, thoughts, insights
    • Will keep interviewee interested and balances positions
    • Methodologically not problematic
    • Expert is not easily influenced and is used to defend position

• Interaction depends on interaction type
  – As co-expert
    • Stimulate discussion, but leave enough room for open answers
    • Intervene when interviewee departs from subject
  – As critic
    • Intervene with more critical questions
  – Interview interaction types can be mixed
    • E.g. Start as co-expert and evolve towards critic
    • BUT never slip into conflicting positions
  – End with a ‘cut the crap’ section !!! STOP RECORDING !!!
How to Transcribe

• General remarks
  – Discourse and how views are expressed not important
  – What is thematically similar or different is important
    • Generalization, systematization
    • Explaining differences

• Transcription
  – Write out spoken text or paraphrase
    • No need to take into account non-verbal communication, pitch of voice, etc. (Not a narrative interview)
  – Transcribe only relevant parts
    • Leave sidetracks out
    • Transcription and summarization of less well structured phrases
    • Respect the flow of text but identify different themes and thoughts in separate paragraphs
    • BUT represent the full meaning of interviews
How to Label and ordering

• Labeling
  – Label each paragraph
    • Keywords, themes, issues, preformulated hypothesis
    • Multiple labels per paragraph

• Ordering
  – Sort paragraphs in separate document
  – According to themes
    • Clustering of themes and sub themes
  – According to actors
    • E.g value chain, different networks cable/telecom
  – Construction of table of contents
How to Analyse

• At the level of themes
  – Write text looking for communalities, divergences, conflicting points of view
  – Which experts don’t answer questions, don’t hold opinions, etc.
  – Why?
• Over the themes
  – Generating insights between the themes
  – Identify relations
  – Build typologies and generalizations
• Integrate with literature and theory
How to Process sensitive information

• Sensitive themes or sectors
  – Work in aggregated form
  – Use different interviews per type of actor
  – E.g. CDN in telecom: different interviews in different countries
  – Clearly indicate this BEFORE interview or brainstorm

• How to handle confidential information
  – Use for your own understanding
  – Use in aggregated form
    • (only if you do not disclose your sources)
  – State this in the methodological part
How to End in beauty

• Feedback
  – Important and often forgotten
  – Send email or letter to thank afterwards
  – Send report or synthesis at the end
    • State this before the interview
    • Creates a win-win situation
    • Makes it possible to go back ...

... without having to blush
Bibliography

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• Website
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