Using Expert Interviews

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Outline

General
• Introduction
• Who is an expert?
• Why use expert interviews?
• Critiques
• Interview types
• Interaction types

Practical
• How do you select experts?
• How do you approach?
• How do you interview?
• How to use data?
• Why follow-up is important?
• Used expert interviews over last 15 years
  – Based on reading on
    • Qualitative research
    • Informant interviews
  – Experience but not systematized or methodologically grounded

• Methodological literature
  – General literature on interviewing not really suitable
  – 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
Who is an expert?

- Expert according to Harrison (2001)
  - ‘elites’ that have access to high levels of information

- Expert according to Meuser & Nagel (2002)
  - 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

- Broad definition
  - Broader than what we would use in daily life
  - E.g. medical doctors: expert on certain topics in their community

- Not neutral
  - Important for selection
Expert knowledge

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

Often overlap
Why use expert interviews?

• For all parts of the policy cycle.
• Triangulation:
  • In combination with literature study, document analysis, etc.
  • To improve the quality of your data or as the main body of data.
• To get information you would not get otherwise.
  • What do you want to know?
    • What you can find in books?
    • What was in the newspapers?
  • NO = waste of time for everyone.
  • There should be an added value.
Critiques

- **Negative**
  - Information obtained not objective.
  - Setting of an interview can influence data. Reinforced by the interactive nature of expert interviews (in which interviewer participates), which are rarely rigorously standardized. Not repeatable.
  - Smaller set of data.
  - Possible flaws in the information provided by experts.
  - Danger of anecdotic information.

- **Positive**
  - Different views broadens your own view on topic: no black-and-white stories.
  - For factual information: double-check with experts setting out from diverging perspectives and with documents.
  - Aim of expert interviews is not to find inter-expert coherence per se.
  - Repeat if possible (for master thesis difficult).
Argue for differentiation of expert interview types
- Explorative expert interviews  
  Technical knowledge
- Systematizing expert interviews  
  Process knowledge
- Theory generating expert interviews  
  Explanatory knowledge

Argue for differentiation of 6 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
• When used
  – Used as first orientation in new fields
  – Better structuring of a 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 example
Explorative expert interview

• Internet filtering
  – Questions asked in this phase
    • What are the main themes of the debate?
    • What are the main problems?
    • Who are the main players?
  – Who would I interview?
    • Milton Mueller expert on internet governance
    • Fabienne Brison expert on intellectual property rights Europe
    • Tomas Lipinski expert on intellectual property rights US
    • Belgacom, Telenet and ISPA strategic cells
    • Companies producing filtering software (Philips, Audible Magic)
    • IFPI, MPAA strategic cells
    • EFF, etc.
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.
• eEurope plus indicators
  – To what extend can survey methods used by the EC be used in the accession countries?
  – No knowledge available on very specific topic.
  – Interview with various research/survey companies/institutions in these countries.

• Interview Questions
  – How does carrying out surveys in accession countries differ from the rest of Europe?
  – What difficulties do you encounter when carrying out surveys?
  – How do you collect addresses and how do you select respondents?
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.
Interview types example

Theory generating interview

• Epistemic groups in telecom reform
  – 80s-90s Telecom reform in North and South
  – In South supported by consultants from North
  – Background and experience in the North has impact on how they conceptualize problems.

• Interview questions
  – What are the general problems of telecoms in the South?
  – Are market reforms as carried out in the North a possible solution for the South?
Interaction types
Framework

- Description on the basis of 7 characteristics
  - Dimension of typology
  - Communication during interview
  - Status of interviewer
  - Style of questioning
  - Advantages
  - Disadvantages
  - When used?
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
How do you select an experts?

- 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 do you select experts

• 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 successful)
  – Go through umbrella organizations
How do you approach?

- 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 time span in advance e.g. 45 min - 1 hour
How do you 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
How do you 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 do you 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 use data?

• **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 use data?

• 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
Why follow-up is important!

• 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
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