Expert interviews

Application, implementation and evaluation in political science

Felix Goldberg and Achim Hildebrandt

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Summary

Expert interviews are used in political science in a variety of ways. They serve as a source for the plausibilization of unexpected phenomena or contribute to the understanding of causal mechanisms. In larger-scale studies, they are often a source of data for qualitative and quantitative analyses with a corresponding number of interviews. Good preparation is essential for the success of the expert interviews. The selection of experts and the cover letter have a decisive impact on the response rate. When conducting the interview, the interviewers should ensure that the interview takes place on an equal footing in terms of subject matter and language. Standard qualitative and quantitative methods can be used for evaluation. Expert interviews are therefore suitable for smaller projects such as final theses as well as for large-scale research projects.

F. Goldberg - A. Hildebrandt ( )✉
Institute for Social Sciences, University of Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany
E-mail: felix.goldberg@sowi.uni-stuttgart.de ; achim.hildebrandt@sowi.uni-stuttgart.de

1   Introduction: The use of expert interviews

Expert interviews are used in political science when researchers seek access to information that is not publicly available or only available to a very limited extent. The expert interview is a method of empirical social research that focuses on the *knowledge* of the interviewees and not on their *personal views* (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 12). This knowledge provides the data basis for explorative or theory-generating questions, the aim of which is to systematically approach a hitherto largely unexplored field for the first time and thereby generate hypotheses (Kaiser 2014, p. 29) or inductively form theories (Bogner and Menz 2009, p. 66). Expert interviews are also useful for systematizing knowledge or conducting theory-based investigations (Kaiser 2014, p. 30; Bogner and Menz 2009, p. 66). In this case, expert interviews are intended to provide data for analytical purposes such as content analysis or quantitative hypothesis testing. Finally, expert interviews are suitable for understanding unexpected or causally insufficiently explained cases, e.g. mechanisms behind statistical correlations or outliers in quantitative analyses (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 242).

The number of interviews depends, on the one hand, on their importance within the study and, on the other, on the available resources such as time, personnel and budget. If the aim is merely to check the plausibility of outliers or to work out the mechanism between two phenomena, a few interviews can often be sufficient to gather enough information. However, if the interviews are the central data source of a larger study, several interviewers are usually required, as well as considerably more time and effort in preparing and conducting the interviews.

This chapter offers a practice-oriented introduction to expert interviews in political science for advanced students and researchers. The focus is essentially on the preparation, conduct and evaluation of interviews. The illustrative examples are taken from expert interviews with political representatives of associations and companies as part of the German part of the research project "Agendas and Interest Groups" (AIG). The aim of this project is to find out under what circumstances content gets onto the political agenda and which actors drive these issues forward (Berk- hout et al. 2017; Leech et al. 2017), with the 400 to 500 expert interviews representing the central data source. The second example illustrates just how different experts can be: As part of a research project to investigate non-voting long-term unemployed people, interviews were conducted on behalf of the "Denk-

fabrik - Forum für Menschen am Rande" of Neue Arbeit interviewed long-term unemployed people as experts (Tertelmann 2017, p. 23-25). The aim of this study is to explore the motives of long-term unemployed non-voters. In the preliminary study used here, 44 interviews were evaluated. While the expert interviews were conducted in larger numbers in both projects and are the central data source, the projects differ in the characteristics of the experts and in the data analysis. While lobbyists are often highly employed and belong to entrepreneurial elites, the long-term unemployed are often counted among the socially and politically disadvantaged. In contrast to the AIG project, the think tank's research team evaluates the data qualitatively. The examples show how the characteristics of the study and the interviewees affect the design of the interviews.

2   The selection of experts and experts

The question of who is the expert who should be interviewed is anything but trivial. For a long time - basically to this day - there has been disagreement in the literature as to who may or may not be called an expert (see, for example, Meuser and Nagel 2009a; Bogner and Menz 2009). According to Gläser and Laudel, the interviewees are "sources of specialized knowledge about the social issues to be researched" (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 12). Bogner et al. (2014) propose a more differentiated conceptualization based on Hitzler (1994): "The expert is […] not characterized solely by special knowledge in the form of subject-specific competencies, but by his or her ability to establish connections to other bodies of knowledge and forms of knowledge and to reflect on the relevance of his or her own knowledge" (Bogner et al. 2014, p. 14). Ultimately, the definition and selection of experts depends on the research interest.

In pragmatic terms, researchers must find the contact persons who presumably have the relevant information about the object of investigation (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 243). In practice, this leads to very different individuals acting as experts. For example, when it comes to how political issues get onto the government's agenda and how interest groups are involved, political analysts and lobbyists are probably the right people to contact (Leech et al. 2017). They are characterized by slightly varying but mostly leading positions within associations or companies and, in addition to knowledge of their own professional activities - in this case the main interest of the researchers - also have practical knowledge of political processes. This example stands for the majority of political science studies that rely on expert interviews. For these studies, representatives of the political-administrative system (e.g. from parliaments, parties, ministries or interest groups) are usually interviewed.

The second example, on the other hand, illustrates a broader understanding of experts and their role by having researchers interview the long-term unemployed to investigate political alienation. The starting point for this approach was that politicians and public sector employees - who are otherwise often used as interviewees - often have no contact with the long-term unemployed and are therefore not suitable as exclusive interviewees (Tertelmann 2017, p. 29). Compared to lobbyists, the long-term unemployed are on a different hierarchical level. At the same time, their knowledge is limited to a narrower section of political life. Nevertheless, they have specific knowledge - namely that from the lives and perspectives of the long-term unemployed - that is withheld from most academics.

Researchers often have to make compromises between expertise and response rate. The higher people are in the hierarchy, the busier they are and the lower the probability of participation (Gorden 1969, p. 117). Especially when it comes to obtaining information about more general or higher-level processes, there is often no way around managers. However, when it comes to very specific questions, managers at lower levels may be the right people to contact, as they often have specialist knowledge but less of an eye for the big picture.

If only a small number of interviews are planned, the selection of experts is correspondingly more important. Particularly in the case of exploratory questions, for example to explain outliers, it is likely that specialist knowledge will be sufficient to answer open questions. However, if the expert interviews are to cover a somewhat larger part of the research project with limited resources, contact persons who contribute information on various aspects with somewhat less depth could be the right choice. On this point, researchers should pragmatically weigh up what appears feasible within the scope of the study against the required depth of information.

3   Planning and preparing the expert interview

The above examples show that a careful selection of interviewees is required. Once the potential interviewees have been identified, the next step is to make contact. This also requires some preparation and research.

Before making contact, researchers should consider how they can convince the selected experts to participate. The interview should therefore be tailored to the interviewee (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 247-248). This means that the length, language and cognitive requirements must suit the interviewee. Lobbyists in Berlin, for example, have little time, so the interview duration was set at around 45 minutes. Some agreed to participate on the condition that the interview did not exceed 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted by research assistants who are familiar with the lobbyists in their field.

everyday language. In the Denkfabrik project, the interviews were designed to last up to two hours (Denkfabrik 2017, p. 342). In order to address the interviewees in their usual language, the interviews were conducted by long-term unemployed people who were specially trained for this purpose (Schultheis 2017, p. 15-16). The extent to which such an effort is necessary and possible depends on various aspects, such as the staffing of the project, the importance of the interviews, but also whether such a measure is expected to provide better access to the interviewee. Overall, the preliminary considerations serve to encourage the addressees to participate through the targeted selection of contact persons, a suitable interview length and an appropriate approach.

The first contact should always begin with a letter (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 160; Rubin and Rubin 2012, pp. 79-81). If possible, this requires the full names and addresses of the potential interviewees. With a bit of luck, these can be found on the organization's website or elsewhere on the Internet. If it is not possible to identify contact persons online, it is always worth making a phone call. If the organization does not provide any information about contact persons, a generally addressed letter should be sent to the organization as a last resort with a request for forwarding to and feedback from competent employees.

The cover letter should be well thought out. It serves the purpose of convincing the potential interviewees to participate in the interview (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 159). The language should be adapted to the interviewees. A cover letter should include information about the project, a description of how and why the person was selected, information about the interview, the mode of the interview, an explanation of how the data will be used and the further procedure for making contact. Taking these points into account, the cover letter should be as concise as possible. In addition to the content, attention should also be paid to the form. An appealing format speaks for the seriousness of the request (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 161).

The information on the project is often one of the deciding factors for acceptance or rejection. As a rule, interviewees have no 'hard' incentives, e.g. monetary incentives, to take part in a survey. The aim must therefore be to emphasize the relevance of the research on the one hand and to arouse the personal interest of potential interviewees on the other. At the same time, you should not reveal too much information. Too detailed information on the research question or even hypotheses could influence the response behavior of the interviewees and thus distort the results (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 159). A pragmatic middle way should therefore be found between openness and the least possible influence on the interviewees. For more complex projects such as theses or dissertations, it may make sense to enclose a more detailed description separately and to concentrate on the essentials that concern the respective interviewees in the cover letter. The length of the interview also has an effect on the willingness to participate (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 164). Particularly in the case of busy people, care should be taken to keep the interview

as short as possible. The scheduled 45 minutes in the interview with the lobbyists is a period of time that can be kept free in hectic Berlin without using up too many resources. In the Denkfabrik project, the interviews were scheduled to last up to two hours (Denkfabrik 2017, p. 342). In reality, they lasted just over an hour on average, but sometimes several hours (Tertelmann 2017, p. 30). Gläser and Laudel (2010) assume an average conversation length of up to around one and a half hours. In general, however, the average interview duration varies considerably depending on the research field (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 162-163). If only a few interviews are planned, it may be worthwhile aiming for longer conversations. This increases the depth of information at a manageable additional cost, but reduces the response rate.

Finally, an approximate time frame for the interview should already be given in the cover letter. This sounds restrictive at first, but usually has a positive effect (Thomas 1995, p. 9), as it makes it easier to find a date. If the interviewee does not have time in the proposed period, it is worth asking whether they would be available on another date - even if this means more work for the researchers (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 164).

Further contact is usually made by telephone or email. Mentioning in the cover letter when and how the respondents will be contacted enables them to prepare for this and, if necessary, to seek contact on their own initiative. Making contact by telephone has the advantage that there is a direct personal exchange, queries can be clarified and the appointment can be arranged (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 162). It is now common for large organizations in particular to request an email with a digital version of the cover letter. It is advisable to reaffirm the anonymity and confidentiality of the interview in this letter.

If at all possible, the interview should take place in person. On-site interviews increase the willingness to participate (Christmann 2009, p. 211-212). *Face-to-face interviews* also offer the best opportunity to create a pleasant conversation atmosphere that encourages the interviewees to talk. Furthermore, the interviewers can make use of non-verbal gestures and capture these. It also gives the interviewees the opportunity to provide the researchers with additional sources of information such as brochures. The interviewers can also monitor the interview situation and document any disruptions or anomalies (Gläser and Laudel 2010, pp. 153-154). Telephone interviews, on the other hand, harbor the risk that interviewees may be engaged in other activities during the call. This reduces attention and therefore possibly the precision and quality of the information. In addition, interviewees can simply hang up and end the call (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 153). In addition to the disadvantages of telephone interviews, e-mail interviews also provide incentives to keep answers as brief as possible. Furthermore, the interviewees do not even have access to acoustic information (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 154). Here, too, it is important to weigh up what is needed and what

can be achieved. Telephone interviews can be attractive if a large number of interviews have to be conducted with as little effort as possible and the disadvantages of telephone interviews do not significantly influence the results of the research project.

Most interviewees insist on anonymity. Unless the ethical guidelines of the university or the client dictate otherwise, anonymity should be guaranteed at the latest upon request (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 250). In any case, this question must be clarified beyond doubt before the interview begins. The interviewers should discuss the use of the data from the interview before the interview. The interviewees must agree to this and the researchers must adhere to the agreement without exception (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 250). If the interviewee is quoted verbatim and not anonymized, the document should state their name and the date, e.g. "(Interview with Max Mustermann on 01.02.2018)". If anonymity is assured, verbatim quotations can still be used, provided they do not allow any conclusions to be drawn about the interviewees or their organizations. The interviewees are often numbered consecutively at this point (e.g. interviewee 1, interviewee 2 or lobbyist 1, lobbyist 2). Such references are also useful if you use the statements as evidence for your own argumentation without quoting them verbatim.

In principle, the interview situation is characterized by a tension between source citation and data protection. One of the basic rules of scientific work is to substantiate statements with sources, in this case with the date of the interview and the name of the interviewee. The explicit consent of the interviewee is required for direct quotations. If this consent is missing, other sources must be used or the statement must be cited as speculation or conjecture without a source. If anonymity is guaranteed, care must be taken to ensure that statements based on the interviews do not allow any conclusions to be drawn about the interviewee or their organization. Accordingly, location details or proper names must also be anonymized. When quantifying the data, it should be ensured that any variable labels or comments do not conflict with the guaranteed anonymity.

4 The guideline in Expert interviews

Expert interviews are usually structured using guidelines. Interview guidelines have the advantage that they delimit the interview both in terms of length and content without taking away flexibility (Meuser and Nagel 2009b, p. 52). When used in several interviews, they offer a minimum of intersubjectivity and comparability (see also Kaiser 2014, p. 6) and prepare the interviewers professionally for the interview (Meuser and Nagel 2009a, p. 77). There are numerous tips for designing the guidelines, including in Rubin and Rubin (2012) for qualitative interviews in general and in Gläser and Laudel (2010) specifically for expert interviews. In the following, the

The construction of a guideline is discussed using the two examples of expert interviews.

Guides for expert interviews and most other forms of qualitative interviews (see the article by Robert Kaiser in this volume on open-ended interviews) usually have a tree structure. The general question types in an interview are main questions, *follow-ups* and *probes* (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 119). In addition, guidelines often contain interviewer instructions. The main questions are the overarching questions that serve to answer the research question in the interview. They are often referred to as "tour" questions (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p.116; Leech 2002, p. 667). Such main questions are defined in advance and provide the basic structure for the guide and the interview. Many guidelines even contain only a single main question (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 116). The AIG project had several main questions. The first set of main questions was aimed at a low-threshold start to the interview, in which the interviewees only reported descriptively about their department: "First of all, I would like to know something about you and your working environment. How long have you worked here and in what position? What does your organization look like in terms of people and departments involved in policy issues and advocacy?" These questions provided insights into the interviewees' experience as a lobbyist and their positions within the Government Relations department. In addition, the interviewers gained information on the lobbying resources available to the respective organization.

As a rule, each main question is *followed* by a series of *follow-ups*. The aim of these follow-up questions is to generate depth of information, i.e. further explanations or background information. These are either aimed at different aspects of the main question or ensure that there is sufficient material for analyzing the interview. Some of these questions can be prepared to help the interviewer. In principle, however, they are spontaneous questions which, in addition to providing the necessary level of information, also ensure that the interview situation approximates to an everyday conversation (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 117). Often, planned *follow-ups* do not even have to be asked because they are answered in the natural flow of speech anyway. For the above-mentioned tour question of the AIG project, there were the following follow-up questions, among others: "Are there specialized employees for public relations, political analysis, lobbying, etc.?" "How many employees are in these departments?" Or: "How long have you been working here?" In the think tank project, *follow-ups* included questions on biographical background, such as "How long have you been unemployed and how did this come about?" Or "How has your life changed as a result of unemployment?" Other questions related to participation in elections, such as "When was the last time you voted?" Or "What would have to happen for you to vote again"? (Denkfabrik 2017, p. 344-345). In both cases, the questions in the guide also served as a checklist for what information should be obtained.

Probes - sometimes also called *prompts* (Leech 2002, pp. 667-668) - are primarily intended to steer the interview. They are intended to guide the interviewee, for example

to perform or bring them back to the topic (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 118). These are not usually specified in the guidelines. Simple expressions of attention such as "Mhm" or "Yes" as well as follow-up questions on topics do not differ significantly from everyday conversations and fall into this category. The task of tactfully guiding the interviewee back to the topics of interest to the researchers is more difficult. The simplest case is when another topic has already been discussed, but further information is required. "May I come back to the topic of populism? Do you see any possibility for politicians to counteract this at all? Specifically in relation to the incorporation of monuments by nationalist ideas that you mentioned earlier." This passage from an AIG interview shows how information previously provided by the interviewee can be used to steer the conversation back into the intended channels.

Interviewer instructions, which are also included in the guidelines, are not communicated to the interviewees. They serve as a reminder to the interviewers, e.g. what needs to be announced or explained before the interview and what they should pay attention to during the interview (see also Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 144). These instructions can be very general, such as "Please explain at the beginning that the study aims to investigate the life situation of long-term unemployed people […] and their relationship to politics" or "Answers that were not asked at all can also be interesting" (Denkfabrik 2017, p. 344). However, they can also be very specific, such as in the AIG project: "Find out what the organization's position is on each of these issues" or
"find out to what extent the government/legislator is currently active in these areas."

When choosing questions, researchers should - if possible - be guided by existing specialist literature or other documents from the subject area. Knowledge about the subject of the study is essential in order to ask the questions in such a way that the answers provide the information that interests the researchers (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 135). These questions should be formulated in such a way that the interviewees understand them with certainty (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 132). "In which arenas of interest representation were you active with this topic and how often?", for example, is a very technical question and more difficult for the interviewees to understand than "How often were you in contact with the following actors regarding this topic?" In addition, the questions should be as open as possible so as not to restrict or even anticipate the answers. This is particularly important if little is known about the object of investigation (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 136; Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 135). If much is already known about the object of research, the questions can be more focused by targeting specific aspects of a more complex topic (Rubin and Rubin 2012, pp. 138-139). The opening question of the AIG interviews (see example of main questions above) was initially very open and invited the interviewees to talk about the staffing of the association and the processes in the relevant departments. From concrete

However, the lobby departments were of particular interest. The other questions were therefore aimed at distinguishing PR departments from government relations departments and lobbyists from other specialists.

5   Conducting expert interviews

As already mentioned, it is important that expert interviews take place on an equal footing and in a pleasant atmosphere. The framework conditions for this should be controlled by the interviewers. The fact that you are usually talking to people you have never been in contact with before and usually have a recording device with you makes for an unusual 'artificiality' of the situation (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 121). Less experienced interviewees can also be nervous. There are several smaller and larger tips that can help to reduce these circumstances to a minimum.

First of all, thorough preparation for the interview helps. In order to be able to speak on an equal footing, the researchers must be at least roughly familiar with the subject area (Meuser and Nagel 2009a, p. 473). Otherwise, the interviewees could lose interest in the conversation, or basic explanations could become too central and there would be no time for questions about the actual subject of the study. The interviewer should ensure that the competence shown does not result in a lack of detail in the answers (Leech 2002, pp. 665-666). The interviewees could assume that the interviewer is already familiar with the subject. In this case, *probes* would have to be used. The easiest way to do this is to choose an authentic interview style in which you feel comfortable and with which you identify (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 252). The most important rule is to remain respectful throughout anyway (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 252; Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 172).

Preparation also includes knowing the guidelines. Guidelines should structure an interview in an open way (Leech et al. 2013, p. 224; Meuser and Nagel 2009b, p. 52), i.e. the questions are asked flexibly and their order adapts to the course of the interview. The specific wording of the questions should also result from the course of the interview. Deviating from the precise formulation in the guide is therefore anything but a bad thing; on the contrary, it is desirable if it contributes to a natural flow of conversation that encourages the interviewees to tell their stories. Knowledge of the guideline also ensures that the interviewers are able to correctly assess the statements of the interviewees (Leech et al. 2013, p. 225; Pickel and Pickel 2009, p. 454).

Choosing the right clothes is the second point of good preparation. Acting at eye level also involves making a good first impression. The aim should be to minimize the social distance in outward appearance (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 167; Gorden 1969, p. 131). In conversation with a business lobbyist

or lobbyists, a shirt and jacket are entirely appropriate. In an interview with the long-term unemployed, however, a jacket would immediately imply a social hierarchy that could have a significant influence on the course of the conversation.

Thirdly, it is helpful to draw the interviewee's attention away from the interview situation and the recording device. After switching on the recording device, the interviewees can draw attention to themselves, for example by asking whether they should say anything else about the project or the course of the interview (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 107). It is also helpful not to place the recording device directly between the interviewees, but slightly apart - but not hidden - so that attention is not constantly drawn to the recording. If there are no data protection concerns and the technical function is guaranteed, you can consider using the recorder function of the cell phone instead of a special recording device. Mobile phones have the advantage that they are often left on tables these days and are therefore not immediately associated with an interview situation.

A recording is essential if the interviews are a main source of data and/or parts of the interview are to be quoted verbatim. A recording makes it easier to reconstruct the interview. Statements made on the basis of the evaluation of the interview are more reliable and the transcripts enable exact citation and coding of important passages (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 157). Recording can or should be avoided if the topics are either so sensitive that the existence of the recording could significantly influence the interviewee's willingness to provide information or if the interviewee explicitly or implicitly - e.g. due to obvious discomfort - does not consent to a recording (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 100). In addition, a recording is not necessary if the interview only serves to uncover causal mechanisms or to answer narrowly defined questions. In these cases, it is important to be able to understand and reconstruct certain facts. This understanding is independent of the existence of a transcript. If you were not allowed or did not want to record the interview, a thought log should be created directly after the interview (Leech et al. 2013, p. 227).

Once these preparations have been completed, you are ready for the actual interview. Learning how to conduct an interview works best in *trial and error mode*. Every interview is different, no matter how well prepared you are or how elaborate the guidelines are. However, there are a few principles that can be used as a guide when conducting interviews (see Rubin and Rubin 2012 and Gläser and Laudel 2010 for more details). The most important are *permanent spontaneous operationalization* (Hopf 1978, p. 111) and *controlled spontaneity* (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 112). By permanent spontaneous operationalization, Hopf means the fact that the researchers must constantly be able to translate abstract research questions into concrete questions in the interview. At the same time, they must translate the concrete answers from the interview back into general statements about the object of research in order to be able to assess whether sufficient information about the object of research has been provided (Hopf 1978, p. 111). In doing so, it can't do any harm to list the most important variables of the study - if already known.

already in mind and mentally tick them off. The paradoxical-sounding concept of controlled spontaneity is understood to mean that the researchers should come as close as possible to the situation of everyday communication in order to obtain as much information as possible, although the distribution of roles between interviewer and interviewee must be maintained (Hopf 1978, p. 107). When organizing the interview, it is important to actively listen to the interviewees in order to find out whether the content of interest is being delivered and to pick up on what has been said and keep the conversation going (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 173; Leech 2002, p. 666).

Active participation in the conversation facilitates the inclusion of follow-up questions, follow-up questions or questions about details (Rubin and Rubin 2012, pp. 102-104; Gläser and Laudel 2010, pp. 174-175). If follow-up questions are also not answered adequately, it is advisable to postpone the question and ask it again in an alternative formulation at a later point in time when it is thematically appropriate (Berry 2002, p. 682). The alternative wording is important, as otherwise the interviewees could become annoyed or get the impression that they have already answered the question. In addition, the interviewer should give the interviewee pauses to think and not interrupt them (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 173).

These tips do not answer the question of the right and perfect questioning technique. After all, there is certainly not just one way - the decisive factors for the success of the interview are the interviewer's spontaneity, authenticity and good professional preparation. They should always keep an eye on the time and the progress of the guide. In principle, it is important to stimulate narratives from the interviewees (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 118; Meuser and Nagel 2009a, p. 473; Berry 2002, p. 681). Sometimes, however, it is useful and correct to catch the interviewees and lead them back to the topic if they digress or digress too much (Berry 2002, p. 681). This is especially true when time is limited. Here too, the flow of conversation should not be rudely interrupted. A charming variation is to refer to the time if you have a limited interview window: "I would like to talk to you more about this, but looking at the clock, we should move on to the next topic". Busy people are often grateful for this, as the time saved also benefits them. If time is not of the essence, it is initially legitimate to let the interviewee continue talking. Even if they do not touch on the core of the research, longer explanations often provide background information or aspects that were previously unknown to the researchers. However, if it is necessary to interrupt the interviewees, it is important not to give them the feeling that you are not interested in what they have to say (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 140). This could affect the atmosphere and cause future answers to be unintentionally short. The easiest way, as in the example with the *probes*, is to ask a question about a topic that has already been discussed. This query only briefly interrupts the flow of speech and steers it in the desired direction. It becomes more difficult if there is to be a major change of topic. Then the appropriate interruption depends above all on the

interview situation. First, you can try to signal non-verbally to the interviewer that you would like to interject a new question or query. If these *probes* fail, the only option is to politely refer to the original or next question - a good time for this is when the interviewee pauses to breathe or think (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 180).

The interviewees should also be led back to the contents of the guidelines if they try to turn the tables. In the interview with the lobbyists, there were questions about the public presence and opinion on the topics that the interviewees were working on. For many, this was not easy to answer. Instead, they asked "What do you think?" or "Have you ever heard of it?" This role reversal between interviewer and interviewee harbors two risks: Firstly, the interviewer runs the risk of relinquishing control of the conversation. This would correspond to a conversation in everyday life. However, in an expert interview, the interviewer is required to obtain as much relevant information as possible under time pressure. To this end, the distribution of roles must remain clear. Secondly, answering these counter-questions would obviously influence the interviewee's response behavior. Instead, the interviewers should point out, for example, that it is about the subjective perception of the interviewee. If the interviewee absolutely demands an answer, you should briefly state your point of view and explain that it is a personal opinion, but that you can also understand a different position (Rubin and Rubin 2012, p. 84). This approach preserves the authenticity of the interviewer and does not destroy the relationship of trust that usually develops between the interviewer and interviewee.

In general, questions that are difficult to answer are challenging for both sides. If the interviewees refuse to answer despite pausing to think, the researchers should encourage the interviewees to give an assessment anyway. For example, by emphasizing that there is no right or wrong answer. Sometimes it can also be useful to ask for the interviewee's gut feeling. Uncertain data always says more than no data at all. The uncertainty of the answer is clear from the transcript. If a memory record is made, the uncertainty should be noted in it.

At the end of the interview, the interviewee should be given space for feedback and their own questions. At this point, you can also clarify the availability for telephone follow-up questions or a follow-up interview. If the interviewee is interested in the research results, these should be made available if possible (Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 191). If the sample of interviewees is not yet complete, it is worth asking for other potential contact persons (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 244; Gläser and Laudel 2010, p. 192). In the best case scenario, networks can even be identified.

Immediately after the interview, the interviewees should note down important impressions and information about the environment and the course of the interview. Handwritten notes during the interview are possible, but can influence the conversation. For sensitive information, it can be considered

This can be interpreted as a signal that one may have revealed too much (Schmid 1995, p. 317). The notes provide meta-data on the interview, which enable a subsequent review of unwanted external influences, e.g. effects of interviewers or interruptions. Such validity checks and the transparent handling of them increase the quality and acceptance of the data (Potter and Hepburn 2012, pp. 557-558). In addition, such data offers the opportunity to better understand and interpret certain reactions of respondents (Kaiser 2014, p. 87).

6   Evaluation of expert interviews

In principle, expert interviews can be sources for qualitative and quantitative -
i. in the sense of quantified data. As a rule, the transcript is used for evaluation; recommendations on this can be found in Kaiser (2014, pp. 95-97), among others. In the following, these recommendations will be related to the area of expert interviews using the two sample studies. The evaluation of an interview basically takes place in three steps: 1) reduce data, 2) reorganize data, and 3) present data (Roulston 2014, p. 301).

The aim of *data reduction* is to limit the material to the scope necessary for further analysis (Roulston 2014, p. 304). Researchers should proceed in a systematic and theory-based manner. Presuppositions can help to identify and remove irrelevant information. However, care should be taken not to become blind to important statements that contradict the presuppositions but nevertheless make a decisive contribution to understanding. The exclusive application of already known concepts would also limit the gain in knowledge. In the AIG project, important topics that were later to be coded into variables were identified in advance on the basis of theory (Leech et al. 2013, p. 228). There were ready-made sheets for interview summaries that contained various thematic sections. The relevant passages from the transcripts were then copied into these immediately after transcription. Excerpts from the interviews that do not contribute to the pre-selected areas cannot be found in the summaries - but are still available in the transcripts to be edited later if necessary. In the study on the long-term unemployed, the researchers took a more exploratory approach: They first looked for appeals to society and politics in the interviews and then summarized these into higher cate- gories (Kern and Tertelman 2017, p. 54).

Reorganizing the data is already a preliminary analytical stage. Interview passages are often assigned to classes or types. This is usually done by coding the data (Roulston 2014, p. 305). Coding is the most complex and important process of data processing. An elaborate codebook is required for intersubjective traceability. The selected categories of codes must be exhaustive and selective. *Exhaustive* here means that all passages of interest can be assigned to a code. *Selective* means that the coding must distinguish between the different characteristics of a passage.

clearly differentiated (Krippendorff 2013, p. 132). The aim of these codes or categories is to identify passages that are scattered throughout the texts but are related in terms of content (Meuser and Nagel 2009a, p. 476). On the basis of these categorizations, the researchers can begin with the actual evaluation of the data - the interpretation. This involves generating an argumentative pattern from the data that serves to answer the research question. A major challenge when reorganizing the data is avoiding tautologies: The formation of categories is theory-driven. This entails the risk that the categories are selected in such a way that they correspond to the hypotheses formulated in advance (Roulston 2014, p. 306). One antidote is the reverse approach: Look for text passages that do not correspond to what is expected (Rouls- ton 2014, p. 306). In this way, the researchers are sensitized to the diversity of data in their interviews. Using a codebook, the statements of the interviewees in the AIG project were converted into numerical values. The interviewers' summaries accelerated the coding of the statements, as the researchers knew where to look for the relevant statements. The researchers in the study on the long-term unemployed focused on obtaining qualitative statements. They summarized and condensed statements on the appeals to society and politics (Kern and Tertelman 2017, p. 54). This made it possible to identify the demands of the long-term unemployed. In both cases, the systematic structuring of statements - once by means of a codebook into quantitative data and once by filtering specific statements - was the preparatory step for systematic data evaluation.

The presentation of the data can take many different forms. If the interviewees have given their consent, verbatim quotes can be included. The knowledge gained by the experts can be summarized, systematized and presented as a model (Roulston 2014, p. 305). Descriptive statistics of quantified data are often presented to provide an overview of the interviews and their coding. If there is a sufficient number of interviewees, the data can be used for multivariate analyses, although this tends to b e the exception. The first publications from the AIG project contain tables on the distribution of the most important variables and preliminary multivariate analyses with the already coded data (Leech et al. 2017; Berkhout et al. 2017). The researchers who dealt with the long-term unemployed presented the interviews in abbreviated form and initially provided preliminary answers to their research question with excerpted statements. In the first case, the data was used to test hypotheses; in the second case, to gain initial insights into a hitherto largely unexplored area of participation research. Although quantitative studies have often investigated statistical correlations between long-term unemployment and political participation, the motives of the long-term unemployed have been largely ignored (Velimsky 2017, p. 42).

Regardless of whether you are working with small or large numbers of cases, it is advisable not to rely exclusively on expert interviews. Expert

interviews are the sum of subjective perceptions of facts that are of interest to the researchers. In an ideal world, the distortions of subjective perceptions would balance each other out across all interviews, as they are random. However, it can rarely be assumed that the distorted perception arises independently of the question. In addition, the number of expert interviews in many studies is too small for random errors to be balanced out. Therefore, if possible, a triangulation of the data sources should be carried out. In the AIG project, for example, the statements of the interviewees were compared with Internet sources or official data from the Bundestag. Another option is to ensure that a particular issue is examined from different points of view when selecting the experts (Hildebrandt 2015, p. 253).

7   Conclusion

Expert interviews are used in political science in many different ways. They are used for exploratory and theory-generating purposes. In these areas of application, a few interviews with very focused questions are often sufficient. They are also used in a theory-driven way, sometimes even as the main data source for larger studies. In this case, a sufficient number of interviewers are required to conduct the interviews in roughly the same period of time.

Regardless of how many interviews are sought or how important the interviews are in a research project, researchers always face the same challenges. The first is the selection of experts. Here it is important to find a pragmatic balance between the research interest and the available resources. The second step is to prepare for the interview. The development of a guideline takes a lot of time, but prepares the researchers for the interview and enables them to conduct the interview in a structured manner. The final step is the evaluation. Here too, expert interviews prove to be flexible. When it comes to checking the plausibility of unexpected results, it is sufficient to simply pass on the knowledge to the researchers, who refer to the findings from the interview in their interpretation. If transcripts are available, data can be prepared for extensive qualitative content analyses as well as for quantitative models.

8   Annotated Bibliography

The monograph by Gläser and Laudel (2010) describes the various phases of expert interviews in great detail and always with examples. Particular emphasis is placed on the design - including the structure and types of questions - of the interview guide. This is a great help for researchers.

who are still inexperienced in constructing guidelines. The authors also provide valuable tips on conducting interviews. The anthology by Bogner et al. (2014) contains many practical tips on preparing and conducting expert interviews as well as some examples of their use. The volume provides a good overview of different forms and areas of application of the method. The English-language volume by Rubin and Rubin (2012) provides another very detailed and also very practice-oriented overview of qualitative interviews in general. In addition to good tips on creating a guideline and evaluating interview data, the book focuses primarily on questioning techniques when conducting interviews.

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