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Robert Kaiser

Research Interviews

A Practical Guide to Qualitative
Data Collection with Experts
in Political Science

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Preface

Qualitative interviews are playing an increasingly important role as a method of data collection in political science. This is not only due to an increased interest of students and researchers in a promising but also challenging method of collecting qualitative data. Its importance mainly stems from changes in the epistemological interest of political research itself, especially in relation to dynamics of increasing delimitation of political spaces, the growing complexity of political problem-solving, and the informalization of politics.

The planning and conducting of qualitative interviews are demanding processes of obtaining, analyzing, and interpreting data, for which generally accepted standards are only slowly developing. These processes consist of distinct steps, which must be successfully completed to guarantee the quality and reliability of the data collected.

Against this background, this book aims to provide a practice-oriented and problem-focused introduction. It is based on a German-language textbook that was first published in 2014 and in an expanded and updated edition in 2021. For this English-language version, the original text of the second edition was machine-translated and then comprehensively revised and adapted for an international readership.

Caldonazzo, TN, Italy
May 2024

Robert Kaiser

Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Definition of Qualitative Expert Interviews	4
1.2	About the Book	6
2	The Conceptual Phase: The Nature of the Expert and Types of Knowledge	13
2.1	Expert Interviews in Political Research	14
2.2	Fields of Application of Qualitative Expert Interviews	16
2.3	The Role of the Expert	20
2.4	The Importance of Different Types of Knowledge	22
2.5	Ethical Aspects of Expert Questioning	24
3	The Operational Phase: Interview Guide, Interviewees, and Interview Situation	27
3.1	The Interview Guide: The “Translation” of the Research Question(s) into Interview Questions	27
3.2	The Pretest of the Questionnaire	36
3.3	The Selection and Contacting of Interview Partners	37
3.4	Conducting Expert Interviews	41
3.5	The Documentation of the Interview Situation	45
4	The Analytical Phase: Securing Interview Data and Theory-Guided Analysis	47
4.1	Securing the Results: Transcription or Memory Protocol	49
4.2	The Coding of the Text Material	51
4.3	The Merging of Interviews and the Identification of Key Statements	55
4.4	Expansion of the Database	58
5	The Interpretational Phase: Making (Scientifically Relevant) Sense of Expert Interviews	61
5.1	Theory-Guided Analysis and Interpretation	61
5.2	The Insufficient Justification for Conducting Expert Interviews	66
5.3	The Lack of Reflection on the Type of Knowledge that Is to be Gained through Expert Interviews	67

5.4	The Selection of the “Wrong” Interview Partners and the Failure to Acquire the “Right” Interview Partners	69
5.5	The Suboptimal Yield from Expert Interviews	71
5.6	The Lack of a Theory-Guided Analysis and the Overvaluation of Interview Data	75
6	Annotated Literature Selection	77
	References	79

In political science, interviewing experts from ministries, administration, and parties, as well as from nongovernmental organizations or companies, plays a significant role. It is conducted in studies that are more application-oriented and of a policy-advisory nature, but also in investigations that serve to reconstruct political processes and their impacts and effects. With regard to the various sub-disciplines of political science, expert interviews are primarily conducted in the field of international politics, comparative political science, policy analysis, and political sociology.

Research interviews can take place in very different ways. Thus, in a first step, quantitative, often survey-based analyses can be distinguished from qualitative case study investigations. While in the latter an open, interpersonal, and communication-oriented interview situation is established, quantitative studies are based on closed questions, in which the formulation and order of questions and answers are defined in advance, so that a “face-to-face” interaction is basically not necessary. The fundamental difference between these two methods is thus immediately apparent in terms of the role and situation assigned to the respondent. While the interviewee can choose his answers within his own reference system in the case of open questions, closed questions force him to choose between predetermined alternatives, which may not even correspond to his experience and perception.

These methodological differences are based on a distinct interest in different kinds of knowledge. Open interviews address social constructions and processes that are to be *understood*, while closed surveys aim at the *measurability* of statements about behavior or attitudes. Such a “measurement” requires that the result is not distorted by the type of question. The interview situation must rather be kept constant for all participants, while an exact repetition of an interview situation is not possible in open inquiries. For this reason, quantitative surveys work with fully standardized survey instruments, whereas qualitative inquiries rely on questionnaires that are to a different degree structured depending on the research interest. Quantitative-standardized survey methods are not the subject of this textbook.

Therefore, reference is made here to relevant introductions (e.g., Behnke and Behnke 2006; Eichhorn 2021; Jacob et al. 2011; Porst 2011; Punch 2005).

On the side of qualitative interview methods, the degree of openness varies according to the respective research interest (see Kaiser 2020). In a second step, we can therefore differentiate between approaches which are not all commonly applied in political science, but prominent in other social science disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, or ethnology.

The *narrative interview* (e.g., Kim 2016; Schütze 1983) is less interested in concrete information than in a presentation of biographical phases and events from the life of the conversation partner. Accordingly, we are dealing here only to a limited extent with an interview situation structured by the interviewer. In such interviews, the interviewer primarily acts as an active listener who is often content with some concluding questions that may arise from the respondent's narrative. Narrative interviews are particularly beneficial wherever political or societal actors can be questioned about their active participation in political or administrative processes of reform or institutional transformation. Fritz Schütze, who has contributed significantly to the development of the method of the narrative interview since the 1970s, examined decision-making and power structures that had emerged during the municipal administration reform in Germany using a biographical research perspective. This reform of the 1960s to the 1970s was considered a crisis phenomenon at the municipal level, which triggered different interest constellations and interaction patterns of local politicians depending on the strategies chosen for the merger of municipalities. The narrative analysis provided insights into the interweaving of interests of local politicians, which would hardly have been generated by a standardized survey.

A similar configuration can be found in the *ethnographic interview* (Spradley 1979), where the goal is to research attitudes, values, or everyday routines. As with narrative interviews, the respondent ultimately determines the course of the interview situation through his answers. Ethnographic interviews can be partially structured by a few predefined questions and often complement participant observation, where the researcher is interested in a direct experience of his research subject. Ethnographic interviews have found their way into political science primarily through the "discovery" of the micro-political level of analysis. The representatives of this research direction are interested in the collection of the "everyday-routinized" and "informal" side of politics (Nullmeier et al. 2003, p. 36). With this methodological approach, Nullmeier et al. were able to show in their study on higher education policy that the established procedures and instruments showed an enormous institutional persistence due to the change-resistant behavior of the actors involved. Thus, the researchers were able to show that established routines and policy principles are indeed changeable, but the modifications primarily serve to preserve established basic patterns. Ethnographic research offers an important complement to more traditional approaches of policy analysis, although it is obvious that its field of application is limited because not many political negotiation and decision-making arenas provide access for this type of field research.

The *expert interview* is now clearly distinguished from these two former types of interviews. Here, the interview partner is chosen as a “supplier of information,” which is why biographical data do not play a similar role compared to the narrative interview. In addition, the interviewer has the task of controlling the conversation so that the expected information can actually be generated. Overall, it can be stated that these different types of qualitative interviews differ in terms of the degree of structuring of the interview situation, regarding the interest in knowledge and the role of the interviewer (cf. Table 1.1). We can also determine that qualitative expert interviews are characterized by several specific features. In contrast to quantitative surveys, the data obtained from qualitative expert interviews cannot be meaningfully statistically evaluated due to the openness and low standardization of the data collection instruments. Therefore, interpretative methods of data analysis are applied to all qualitative inquiries.

Based on these differentiations, a number of characteristics can already be determined for the qualitative expert interview, which require deeper consideration.

As a first characteristic, we have already mentioned that the typical field of application for qualitative expert interviews is the *case study*. In political science, we understand a case study to be an investigation that refers only to a single or a few, often comparable, cases. The case study thus does not strive to consider all existing cases, but to deeply understand the peculiarities of the individual case or a small number of cases. In principle, case studies can either have a (stronger) descriptive or causal interest in knowledge. The first variant asks for the characteristics of a social phenomenon; in the second variant, the causes of their emergence or the change of a phenomenon is investigated. With regard to our topic, this means that such interviews can either be used to obtain information about characteristics and properties of a process, an institutional order or a political program, or to reconstruct the causal mechanisms that can explain their change.

In order to achieve this goal, such case studies usually process complex theoretical explanatory approaches that must be translated into the “experience world” of the respective conversation partners in advance of the concrete interview situation. Our experts are therefore not directly confronted with our research questions, but

Table. 1.1 Comparison of different types of qualitative interviews (source: own elaboration)

	Ethnographic interview	Narrative interview	Expert interview
Field of application	Participatory observation	Historical case study	Case study
Degree of structuring	Open/ semi-structured	Open	Semi-structured/structured
Types of knowledge	Attitudes	Biographies	Information
Rolle des interviewer	Conversation partner	Active listener	Interviewer
Interview situation	Symmetrical	Asymmetrical (in favor of the interviewee)	Asymmetrical (in favor of the interviewer)

with questions that are adapted to the reality of their context of action. Nevertheless, the results of expert interviews allow the researcher to later provide answers to his research questions.

This requires an operationalization of the research question(s) that ensures that information generated from interviews can be related back to the theoretical context of the analysis in a later phase of the investigation. This translation of the own research context into the experiential world of the expert is crucial, and it is achieved by the *interview guide*. The interview guide is the data collection instrument for qualitative interviews, with the help of which the researcher also structures and controls the interview situation. This structuring of the interview situation is thus the second important characteristic of qualitative expert interviews. A third characteristic refers to the different types of information that can be obtained from expert interviews. Basically, interviews are conducted under the assumption that exclusive knowledge, which only the expert possesses, represents an important gain for the analysis of politics. This knowledge, as we will discuss later in more detail, can be differentiated into “operational knowledge,” i.e., knowledge about the organizational processes of coping with political problems; into “contextual knowledge,” understood as knowledge about institutional or socioeconomic conditions under which such political problem-solving strategies are developed and implemented; and into “interpretive knowledge,” which provides information about subjective perceptions and attitudes of the expert toward the phenomenon under investigation (cf. Meuser and Nagel 2009). One of the most important tasks of the interviewer is to prevent a “let go of the conversation” (fourth characteristic), because otherwise there is a risk that interesting insights may be gained, but not the information that is indispensable for answering the research question. This aspect constitutes the fifth characteristic, in the description of the interview as an asymmetric situation in favor of the interviewer.

1.1 Definition of Qualitative Expert Interviews

Qualitative expert interviews can be defined as a systematic and theory-guided method of data collection in the form of questioning individuals who possess exclusive knowledge about political negotiation and decision-making processes or about strategies, instruments, and the effects of politics.

In the aforementioned definition of qualitative expert interviews, three central terms are mentioned that make clear that the same quality criteria apply to this form of questioning as we can generally assume for qualitative social research.

The term systematic approach primarily targets the requirement of *intersubjective comprehensibility of the methods of data collection and data analysis*. Unlike quantitative surveys, the claim of intersubjective verifiability cannot be met in qualitative expert interviews, especially because the data collection instrument does not have a sufficient degree of standardization. Thus, we must assume that a previously uninvolved researcher, even with the identical data collection instrument and by interviewing the same conversation partner, would not receive completely identical

information. Nevertheless, it is the researcher's task to disclose and describe the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation to such an extent that third parties can at least recognize and evaluate the individual steps of the procedure. In our case, this primarily concerns the naming of the criteria for expert selection, the disclosure of the guide, the description of the interview situation, and the presentation of the evaluation method (cf. Steinke 1999).

By a *theory-guided approach*, we mean that the theoretical knowledge we use for the analysis has to be linked to our interview questions, while the results of the analysis must finally again be confronted with this theoretical context. However, this requirement is not uncontroversial in qualitative social research (cf. Gläser and Laudes 2006, p. 28 f.). As we will see in the next chapter, there are indeed forms of expert interviews, for which we cannot make this requirement (such as for explorative interviews). However, it must also be recognized that the formulation of the research question(s) and their "translation" into interview questions, as well as the interpretation of the data material obtained from interviews, are subject to at least implicit considerations, which should be compatible with the stock of our already existing theoretical knowledge. This does not necessarily mean that there is a need to derive hypotheses from relevant theories and to test these in the strict sense. However, to forego a theory-guided approach would mean to limit the possible gain in knowledge from expert interviews from the outset.

The type of knowledge of the expert from which we want to benefit is associated with a third essential aspect. This concerns the *neutrality and openness of the researcher toward new insights and other relevance systems and interpretation patterns*. Occasionally, this criterion is described with the even more demanding requirements for objectivity or the so-called freedom from value judgment of qualitative social research (see Schnell et al. 2011, p. 80 ff.). However, the argument against this terminology is that in every research process a "directional decision" is already made by defining the research question(s), their theoretical context, and also by the selection of interview partners. If, for example, a study aims at evaluating the performance of the welfare state, it certainly makes a difference whether it mainly addresses the administrative performance and is therefore based on interviews with experts from public administration or whether it deals with the living conditions of recipients of social benefits for which experts from welfare associations or local aid organizations are interviewed.

It must also be obligatory that researchers who conduct expert interviews always show openness for information or assessments provided by the expert, which do not coincide with his own previous perception of the phenomenon to be investigated (Flick 1999, p. 63). This means specifically that in the interview situation the expert must have the opportunity to actually bring in his information. The requirement of neutrality also imposes on the researcher not to use expert interviews in a way that only serves to obtain confirmations for already existing assumptions. Neutrality is thus an important quality criterion especially for the selection and formulation of interview questions. For example, on the one hand, suggestive questions certainly do not meet this requirement, while on the other hand, the different types of questions that are available should be used in a way that allow the respondent to present

a perspective that is completely different from assumptions that existed in the phase of designing of the analysis. In this respect, an interview guide, as we will see later, is characterized not only by the systematic arrangement of questions on different dimensions of the research project but also by the use of different types of questions, with which different types of information can be collected.

In this context, the view that sociodemographic data about the expert plays no role in qualitative expert interviews must be challenged (Meuser and Nagel 2005, p. 74). On the one hand, it is of course true that it is not the primary aim of an expert interview to obtain information about the interviewee's professional career, life maxims, or personal values. On the other hand, however, it is also obvious that such information may be necessary in order to be able to assess the specific situational conditions under which an interview took place. For example, when interviewing experts in ministries and administration, it is important to know whether the interviewees had run through a traditional administrative career or whether they have found their way into the organization as a "career changer" because of existence of a specific expertise.

Quality criteria for qualitative expert interviews:

- The intersubjective traceability of the methods of data collection and data evaluation.
- The theory-guided approach.
- The neutrality and openness of the researcher toward new insights as well as other relevance systems and interpretation patterns.

These brief considerations on the epistemological context of qualitative expert interviews may give an impression of the analytical added value expert interviews can offer, but also of the conditions that have to be met to be accepted as a scientifically reliable method.

1.2 About the Book

As mentioned before, the main aim of this book is to provide a systematic overview of the practical steps to be taken in the process of designing and conducting qualitative expert interviews. The subsequent chapters, therefore, discuss the specific requirements and problems that exist within each of the four distinct phases of a study based on qualitative interviews. These phases are as follows:

- The *conceptual phase*, in which the researcher reflects on the reasons that justify the use of expert interviews, on the different aspects that define an interviewee as an expert, and the different types of knowledge that can be obtained by the expert interview
- The *operational phase*, in which the researcher designs the questionnaire, tests the instruments of data collection, contacts the experts identified for the study, and makes operational decisions on how to conduct the analysis

- The analytical phase, in which the data collected by the expert interviews have to be prepared in a way that allows for systematic analysis of the interview's output
- The *interpretational phase*, in which the data are used for theory-guided generalization and interpretation

Accordingly, in the next chapter (Chap. 2), we will discuss the reasons that exist in political science for conducting expert interviews. We will also look at how such interviews can be integrated into a pluralistic methodological approach and in which phases of the research process are which types of expert interviews useful. We will discuss the role of experts and the different types of knowledge that can be obtained from expert interviews. In this respect, we need to clarify under which conditions an expert can actually be considered an expert and how the respective research context relates to the different types of knowledge. Finally, we will briefly reflect on the ethical aspects that need to be considered when interviewing experts.

In the third chapter, we turn to the central steps of planning and conducting qualitative expert interviews. Here we first deal with the questionnaire as our key instrument for data collection, and we will discuss the process of translating research questions into interview questions. It will also be explained why a test of this instrument is especially recommended in situations where the researcher is venturing into a new field of study. This is followed by the presentation of the concrete steps of interview preparation, which should make clear that early planning of such interviews is a key success criterion. For the interview situation itself, there are primarily three aspects to consider. Firstly, we have to clarify what reasons speak for or against a tape recording of the expert interview. Secondly, we will discuss how it is possible to steer an interview in such a way that it produces the desired results. And thirdly, we refer to the need of immediate documentation of the interview situation which is important as it provides important hints for the later phase of interpretation. These various stages of interview preparation and their implementation build on each other. However, this does not necessarily mean that they have to be carried out step by step in the order presented. In practice, for reasons of time-saving, one will already identify and contact interview partners while the guideline is still being developed. However, this should be done with the awareness that a solid prior knowledge of the research topic is necessary for attracting potential interview partners. At the same time, it is also an important basis for the development of the interview instrument.

The fourth chapter deals with the process of analyzing expert interviews. For this analysis, the interviews must be available in text form. Accordingly, we use qualitative content analysis in this phase, in which four different steps must be carried out. Firstly, the necessary text form is created by paraphrasing or transcribing the interview. Secondly, by coding the text material, a connection is established between the expert's interview statements and our theoretical considerations. In the third step, the coding facilitates the identification of core statements and (if several interviews were conducted) the comparison of these passages that are relevant in relation to the research question(s). A fourth step consists of expanding the database. This is often necessary because expert interviews can generate information that is not

immediately comprehensible to the researcher and therefore requires follow-up research. In rarer cases, they are even so “surprising” that we have to invest time for checking the plausibility of this information using data from other sources (possibly also from other interviews).

The fifth chapter deals with the final step of theory-guided generalization and interpretation. In this respect, it is quite difficult to give general recommendations as this step is highly interrelated with the specific research objectives of the study. Nevertheless, since this final step also involves the researcher’s reflection on the quality (meaning problems and solutions that played a role during the interview process) of the analysis, we will be able to conclude on certain aspects that are likely to impact on most interview-based studies.

In line with the conception of this textbook as a compendium for concrete interview projects, these central steps will be illustrated with practical examples. In our case, these are two studies for which the author of this book was responsible. Both studies had clear differences in terms of their respective research objectives and designs. This will be useful as it will allow us to consider a certain spectrum in the use of expert interviews.

In the first study, expert interviews were used as part of a relatively extensive comparative analysis of state steering capacities in the development of modern, knowledge-based industries (Kaiser 2008). The question was which organizational and institutional prerequisites and which innovation policy measures can be held responsible for the performance of modern biotechnology industries in Germany, the United States, and Switzerland. The aim of this study was to critically examine a basic assumption of the so-called Varieties of Capitalism approach (Hall and Soskice 2001), according to which liberal market economies (such as the one of the United States) are superior to coordinated market economies (Germany and Switzerland). This assumption seemed problematic against the strong performance of the biotechnology industry in Switzerland, which was more developed in comparison to the United States, while in Germany it had been possible to establish a quite competitive biotechnology sector during the last three decades, even if it had a considerable developmental lag compared to the United States and Switzerland. The analysis should thus prove that not only the degree of market or nonmarket coordination, which is central to the “Varieties of Capitalism” approach, is the main explanatory factor but much more complex institutional configurations that can be analyzed on the basis of a systemic innovation approach. For this purpose, almost 50 experts from politics and administration, companies as well as from industry associations, and the science sector were interviewed in the three case study countries.

In this study, the key dimensions of the analysis, which were later on used for development of the questionnaire, were derived from the theoretical literature on national innovation systems. This literature describes organizational and institutional conditions as well as actor interactions for which considerable variations can be assumed across the cases selected for the study (see Fig. 1.1).

The second case was a relatively “small” study with a limited number of only four interviews (in the German part of the analysis). It represented the type of a

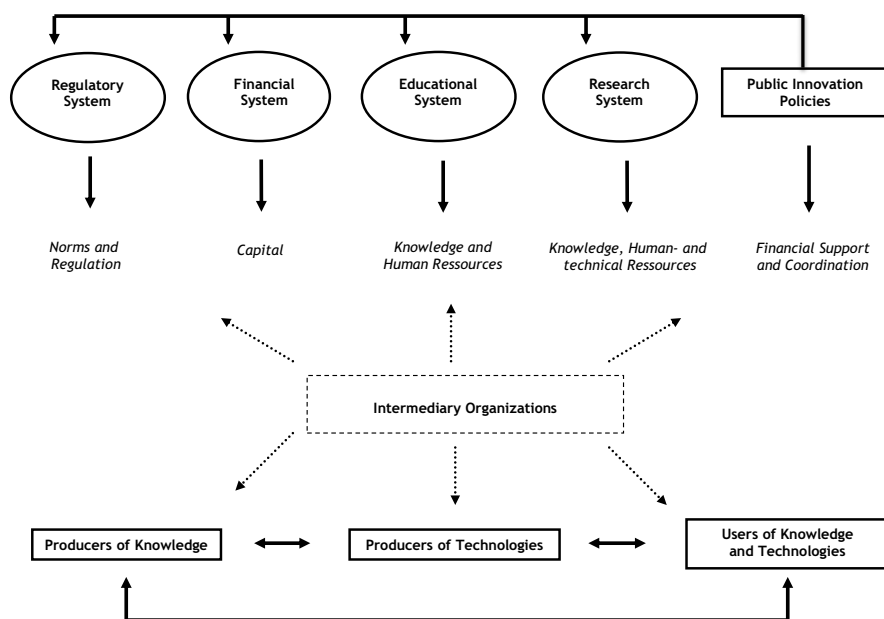


Fig. 1.1 Organizations, institutions, and interactions in a national innovation system. (Source: Kaiser 2008)

comparative case study with a small number of cases, which was, however, conducted by two researchers in two different countries and was also embedded in a larger multi-policy area-comparative research context. The research question addressed the factors of bilateral Franco-German government coordination that were in favor or hindered the formulation and implementation of common initiatives and concepts of both countries in European politics. This question was relevant against the background that despite a deeper institutionalization of this bilateral coordination through the so-called Blaesheim process, the conflicts between the governments of both countries had increased during the last decades. At the same time, however, it was also obvious that the Franco-German cooperation in European politics was indispensable because it had proven to be the “engine of integration” over decades, and even in the phase of growing tensions, it fulfilled this coordination function in European politics quite well. Ultimately, the study searched for an explanation for this coordination performance as it aimed at evaluating the impact the increased institutionalization of bilateral government cooperation had for the coordination at all (Kaiser and Brehon 2013). It was assumed that the success of the formulation and the implementation of common initiatives at the European level could have been influenced by the degree of homogeneity of the respective national preferences, the functionality of the institutionalized cooperation procedures at government level, as well as by the actual interactions of involved actors (especially at the ministerial working level).

With regard to this research question, there were several theoretical points of reference in the political science literature. For example, liberal intergovernmentalism assumes that in intergovernmental negotiations—and this applies to our example both to the Franco-German government coordination as well as to the later negotiations in the European Council—common solutions can always be found when national interests of the participating states converge, while governments mediate between the nationally formulated preferences and their own cooperation interests at the European level (Moravcsik 1993). This would suggest that good conditions for cooperation between the two states on the financing of the European Union would have existed if a solution could be found that either lay in the common interest or at least served sufficiently many individual interests. However, whether such cooperation is favored by institutions that were explicitly established for this purpose is an open empirical question. Historical institutionalism points to the phenomenon of institutional inefficiency, which may exist when institutions that were established at a certain point in the past under specific time-bounded conditions do not fulfill their original function in the further course. Thus, Germany and France had institutionalized their bilateral cooperation in the wake of considerable tensions that had arisen between them during the intergovernmental conference on the Treaty of Nice. The aim was to minimize conflicts and to increase influence in the future, especially in European policy issues, through common positioning. However, the intention to establish institutions does not necessarily mean that an institutional structure created under these premises offers a comparable benefit from the perspective of the actors in less conflict-prone phases. However, it is also one of the core assumptions of neo-institutionalism that institutions not only restrict the actions of actors but also generate options for action (Fig. 1.2). So even if the institutionalized cooperation should not have had any immediate significance for concrete

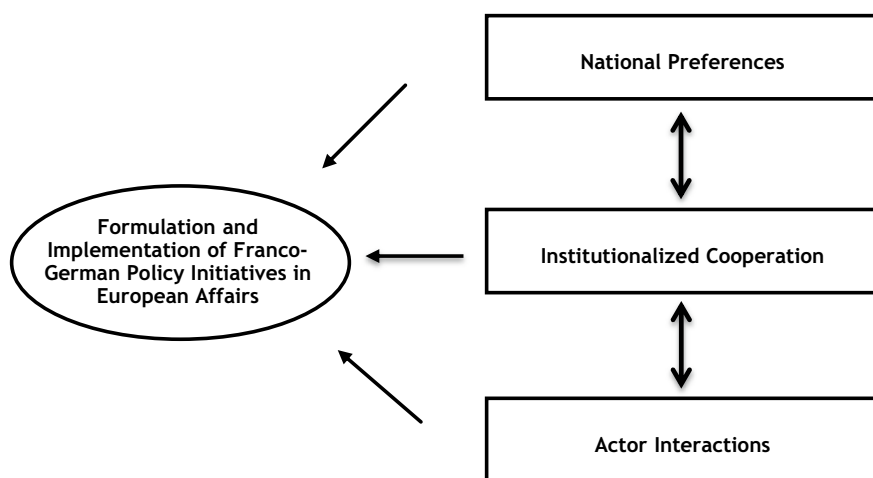


Fig. 1.2 Institutions and forms of interaction in bilateral German-French government coordination. (Source: own elaboration)

decision-making situations, this does not mean that the intention to cooperate more closely expressed through the formation of institutions could not have influenced the concrete interactions of the actors (cf. Steinmo et al. 1992; Hall and Taylor 1996; Immergut 1997).

This research question was related to various policy areas of European integration (Demesmay et al. 2013). However, we refer here exclusively to the aforementioned case study, which dealt with the analysis of Franco-German coordination in the negotiations on the multiannual financial framework of the European Union for the years 2014–2020. This case study was of considerable relevance insofar as particular (and diverging) political interests—even between Germany and France—were to be expected, especially in terms of the consequences for national budgets for net payers in the European Union. In addition, the historical experience of previous budget negotiations already showed that a consensus of all EU member state governments, which had to be negotiated in times of an extraordinary economic crisis situation, was hardly conceivable without prior Franco-German understanding (Kaiser 2011; Kaiser and Prange-Gstöhl 2012).

For different reasons, both studies thus had specific requirements for expert interviews. In both cases, a comparability of the collected data had to be ensured. While in the first case the multitude of different actors had to be considered, the difficulty in the second case emerged from the fact that the experts were interviewed by different researchers in the two countries under investigation. In addition, the collected data had to allow for references in the cross-sectoral dimension (Table 1.2).

If reference is made in the following chapters to the respective questionnaires, individual interview questions and answers, or specific steps of the analyses, the original expert interviews are not quoted. However, the information provided as examples corresponds to the data actually collected. They were only changed for better illustration of the examples.

Table 1.2 Characteristics of the expert interviews in two comparative analyses. (Source: own elaboration)

	“Innovation policy” (Kaiser 2008)	“Franco-German coordination” (Kaiser and Brehon 2013)
Type of analysis	Comparative case study (three cases)	Comparative case study (two cases)
Number and heterogeneity of experts	High/high	Low/low
Epistemological interest	Descriptive/causal	Causal
Type of knowledge	Contextual knowledge	Operational knowledge
Perspective of analysis	Structure	Process

The Conceptual Phase: The Nature of the Expert and Types of Knowledge

2

When we ask ourselves how the interviewing of experts in political science can be justified, it is useful to consider the fundamental objective of this discipline. Political science deals with the “totality of efforts and rules of the game, which are aimed at regulating public affairs in a binding manner for the whole society” (Schmidt et al. 2013, p. 7). However, these processes and procedures through which politics decides on and implements binding rules are by no means static but change over time. But how can new strategies of political decision-makers, the use of new instruments in political programs, or the change of institutional conditions for political decisions be systematically investigated?

If one is primarily interested in the results of politics, there are numerous possibilities for measuring performance based on relevant indicators. Hardly anyone would dispute that the performance of economic policy in capitalist democracies can be largely read from economic growth, the level of unemployment, the stability of a currency, or the balance of trade. However, if the research interest goes beyond the determination and evaluation of performance results and is rather aimed at understanding political strategies and decision-making processes, those data do not provide satisfactory information. Political decision-making processes can be reconstructed to some extent through the analysis of relevant documents. Laws and regulations, parliamentary debates, or party programs are usually publicly accessible sources, with the increasing digitization making it much easier for researchers to identify and analyze relevant documents. Furthermore, to a certain extent, a press analysis can also determine under what conditions individual political decisions were made. However, these sources have only limited informational value in terms of the differentiation between operational knowledge and context knowledge introduced before. While operational knowledge will hardly be found in such sources, even the potential to generate context knowledge is limited because such sources are always formulated from the perspective of the respective political actors. Important information about causes and conditions of political action can be taken from the justifications found in draft laws from governments or parliament. Positions of

societal actors are documented in the course of hearings in the parliamentary legislative process. However, those positions are always also (and often primarily) expressions of institutional self-interests of the respective actors and do not always provide a complete overview of the complexity of institutional conditions, constraints, political interest conflicts, or power conflicts that can play a role in addressing a political problem.

2.1 Expert Interviews in Political Research

The “dilemma of incomplete information” in the analysis of politics cannot be completely resolved by qualitative expert interviews. But such inquiries at least mitigate the problem of limited analytical access to the subject of investigation, especially with regard to three, closely interrelated, and recent trends.

A first trend can be described with the term *delimitation of politics* (Kohler-Koch 1998). Delimitation characterizes the phenomenon that politics, especially in highly developed industrial countries, is increasingly coordinated beyond national borders, thus at least partially escaping from traditional national political institutions, without structures for effective political control or democratic control and legitimization of politics being created beyond the nation-state. While in the “golden age of the nation-state” (Zürn and Leibfried 2005) there was a high degree of congruence between the social and political space, this congruence of the problem and the solution structure has increasingly dissolved since the last quarter of the past century. The main causes are the economic globalization, the increase in risks due to global environmental hazards or cross-border terrorism, a transnationalization of social movements supported by technological progress, and a changed geopolitical situation after the end of the East-West conflict (Mann 1997). Instead, for the binding regulation of public affairs, either functional transnational regimes (such as the WTO, the Kyoto Protocol, or the International Monetary Fund) or intertwined negotiation and decision-making structures that extend over various territorial levels (as in regional integration areas and here especially in the European Union) are becoming increasingly important. The crucial point is that this process of delimitation of politics poses a problem for political science insofar as political actors act across borders, but they primarily legitimize their actions toward voters or organization at home. From a methodological point of view, this may result in traditional sources of access for qualitative political research, such as official documents, party programs, or even press coverage, only partially revealing the motives and actions of these actors. They still refer only to national interest constellations, while important aspects of delimited political processes that are organized beyond the nation-state are not fully perceptible anymore. Expert interviews can help in this case to reconstruct negotiation and decision-making structures in their entirety, which would not be possible in the same way through alternative methodological approaches.

Secondly, we also have to assume an increasing *complexity of politics* for which there are at least two different causes. On the one hand, looking at most recent political projects, whether they concern the “energy transition” or the stabilization

of the European monetary area, shows that political action is not complex solely because it is confronted with the requirement to find a balance between increasingly differentiated and competing interests. These topics derive their complexity primarily from the need for technical know-how, which is indispensable for the development of appropriate problem-solving strategies. For the analysis of political action, this means that concepts, instruments, and effects of politics can hardly be adequately analyzed and evaluated by the researcher if he lacks the understanding for the technical dimension of the political problem. Against this background, expert interviews can also be conducted less with the aim of reconstructing political processes, but rather to gain a basic understanding of the technical problem context.

On the other hand, the complexity of politics is increasing due to instrumental change in public policy. In political science, the term “governance” has increasingly been used in recent years to capture these changes. At its core, the term refers to the fact that the state acts today less autonomously in setting and enforcing collectively binding regulations, but in various forms of cooperation between public and private actors, whereby politics can no longer be understood solely as a hierarchical arrangement of rules by state actors, but as a “management of interdependencies,” in which various collective actors are involved (Benz and Dose 2010, p. 21). As a result, we are not only dealing with an increasing number of relevant political actors. The more crucial point is that private actors in governance arrangements have lower requirements for transparency. There is certainly less democratic control on their actions as they are not subject to comparable information duties as public actors. Under this condition, the analysis of politics is limited, because publicly accessible sources will often not disclose what influence, for example, corporate lobby groups had on product regulations.

And thirdly, we also have to assume an increasing *informalization of politics*, i.e., a process in which important political decisions are still made within formal institutions and procedures provided for this purpose, but important arrangements are already made in committees or coordination procedures that are not foreseen by constitutional law and therefore do not meet comparable transparency and legitimacy requirements. There are today several examples of informal arrangements: coalition committees in the national political space (Miller 2011), the so-called trilogues in the European decision-making process (Garman and Hilditch 1998), or fundamental informalization tendencies in “transnational governance” (Greven 2005). The important point is that by focusing analytically on formal institutions and processes, essential elements of negotiation and decision-making processes can be overlooked. For their “illumination” expert interviews are probably the only alternative. However, it must also be seen that interviewing experts can certainly not guarantee that informal political processes can be fully understood. This is already the case because the informal character of these coordination forums usually has an effect beyond specific negotiation and decision-making periods in order to ensure their functionality in the future. Nevertheless, expert interviews may provide insights that would not be available with alternative methodological approaches.

Methodological challenges for qualitative political analysis:

- The *delimitation of politics*: the dissolution of the congruence between the social and the political space due to the increase in social and economic cross-border interactions and as a result of the coordination of politics beyond the nation-state
- The *complexity of politics*: political problem-solving that requires considerable technical know-how as well as the transformation of statehood and the emergence of new governance structures
- The *informalization of politics*: political problem-solving beyond formal institutions and procedures with the consequence of a lack of transparency and limited legitimacy

Taken together, we can assume that the dynamics of delimitation, complexity, and informalization cannot remain without impact on our methodological approach to the analysis of politics. Increasing informalization poses a fundamental problem for scientific analysis insofar as we must accept that political negotiation and decision-making processes, especially beyond the nation-state, cannot be fully reconstructed. Expert interviews can provide important results in individual cases and may even allow for the identification of cross-case patterns of informality. However, they are clearly not sufficient for generalizing statements about informalization in politics. Political science responds to the increasing complexity of politics, on the one hand, with a differentiation of its field of research. Today, many political scientists have become quasi-experts on climate change, on market mechanisms in the telecommunications or electricity sector, or on the various fractions of terrorist movements in the Arab world. More importantly, however, this complexity gives a certain preference to qualitative research methods while they pose a fundamental access problem for quantitative research approaches. This is the case because aggregate data, despite the rapid increase in data production by international or intergovernmental organizations, are often lacking for statistical analysis and can only be collected with great effort. In the field of these qualitative methods, expert interviews facilitate access to technical know-how, as far as it is relevant for the analysis of politics. With regard to the delimitation of politics, expert interviews are likely to be the qualitative method that is least exposed to the problem of a “methodological nationalism” (Beck 1997; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Beck and Grande 2010). Expert interviews allow for the definition of analytical categories that reach beyond the established national frame of reference of politics, society, culture, and economy and therefore better grasp the increasing global interdependencies and interactions.

2.2 Fields of Application of Qualitative Expert Interviews

Qualitative expert interviews can be used during the research process at different stages and in different forms. We will differentiate three types here: the *exploratory research interview*, the *guideline expert interview*, and the *validation discussion*.

In the *exploratory research interview*, expert knowledge is used to gain information about little-researched problems or questions. Exploratory studies are undertaken when there are no secure theoretical assumptions or reliable empirical data available for a scientifically relevant problem. The goal of such investigations is to “explore, research, or find out facts” (Bortz and Döring 2002, p. 360). It is about collecting basic information that allow for the formulation of hypotheses in the first place.

For exploratory studies, research interviews will not be conducted with an already comprehensively structured guide, because this structuring refers not only to the organization of the questionnaire itself but also in particular to the theoretical foundation of the interview questions. However, this does not mean that exploratory studies would not have a clearly defined set of question or that a guide, which at least defines preliminary dimensions of analysis, would not be useful (cf. Bogner and Menz 2005, p. 37). In this case, these investigation dimensions then arise less from conceptual considerations, but from the immediate observation of the environment. Thus, a research question could be motivated precisely by the fact that the observation of a scientifically relevant phenomenon points to a deviation from established theoretical assumptions. Exploratory studies also do not necessarily have to be characterized by a systematic selection of interview partners. Rather, the “snowball system” can also be used here, through which relevant experts can be identified by hints from previously conducted interviews.

The exploratory expert interview is often considered for preliminary studies that prepare for a much more standardized or structured analysis afterward. This is quite understandable, since exploratory interviews can provide important hints not only for the development of a guideline but—in general—for the research design of the “main investigation.” Conversely, this of course also means that for the investigation of scientifically relevant phenomena, for the explanation of which already established theoretical concepts exist, an exploratory approach is not very plausible. An exception, however, exists in cases where such exploratory interviews are not the subject of the actual analysis of the phenomenon but serve exclusively to acquire “technical” know-how. For example, to investigate the institutional conditions for the establishment of modern biotechnology industries, a basic understanding of the technological paradigm shift that has occurred in pharmaceutical research since the early 1970s is necessary. The knowledge about the preconditions and consequences of this paradigm shift is less relevant for the analysis of the institutional implications but rather important for the question of who should be considered a relevant actor for the investigation of biotechnological commercialization processes and which period of investigation is suitable to capture the central changes in the process.

The *guideline expert interview* as the second type of expert interview differs in at least two respects from the type of exploratory interview.

Firstly, such guideline interviews are subject to significantly higher requirements for a systematic and theory-guided approach. Guideline interviews aim to generate specific information about a phenomenon to be investigated, which would not be obtainable elsewhere. The specificity of the information is derived from the question of the analysis and its theoretical embedding. Secondly, guideline interviews

are particularly suitable as an analytical approach within a methodologically pluralistic approach.

The term methodological pluralism does not refer here to the combination of qualitative and quantitative analytical methods (“mixed methods”), but to the use of different approaches to sources that are relevant for a qualitative policy analysis. In this area, we only have a limited number of procedures for data collection (in the sense of data that is not already available in documents or statistics). In addition to the interviews, only a group discussion and participant observation are generally considered, which both still lead a shadowy existence in political science. As a result, the analysis of data that exist independently and without relation to our own research project becomes more important. This mainly concerns various types of written sources (official documents, official statements of political actors, press articles), increasingly also digital and visual media products as well as various types of aggregate data.

In qualitative political research, therefore, studies that rely exclusively on expert interviews are quite critical. In principle, every methodological approach in political science has specific potentials and limitations. These limitations primarily concern the availability of data, or the restrictions in the possibility of collecting data. For example, European research would undoubtedly benefit if sessions of the heads of state and government in the European Council were public or at least fully documented. In fact, the European Council meets behind closed doors, and for individual phases of these summit meetings (especially the joint dinner of the heads of state and government), not even a transcript is made. Under these conditions, participant observation is nothing more than a pious (researcher’s) wish. More importantly, however, sometimes the political process cannot even be reconstructed on the basis of publicly accessible documents. Even with regard to the European legislative procedure, the Council of the European Union was only forced by a ruling of the European Court of Justice (Case C-280/11 P; judgment of 17 October 2013) to make it publicly known which national governments had introduced individual amendment proposals to the various legislative initiatives. This reveals a particular advantage of document analysis. As long as relevant information is published, it can be researched and, above all, proven. This would not be the case if corresponding information were given in expert interviews under the premise of confidentiality of the information.

It is therefore obvious that a methodologically pluralistic approach has the advantage that possible deficits and sources of error of the individual methodological approaches can be to some extent neutralized (Voelzkow 1995, p. 56). Expert interviews initially provide an extension of the analytical tool kit for qualitative policy analysis and can thus place the interpretation of the data material as a whole on a more secure basis.

Against this background, however, it must also be clearly stated that guideline expert interviews as the most systematic methodological approach to qualitative questioning also have deficits and sources of error. Most of these sources of error are associated with the source of the data, i.e., the expert himself. Thus, the researcher can only influence to a limited extent whether the expert consciously or

unconsciously gives misleading information or retreats to purely formal positions in the interview situation, which could also be collected by analyzing publications of the respective organizations. Also, answering questions in the sense of social desirability is a fundamental problem that can justify a distortion of research results. All these problems can never be completely excluded, even with intensive preparation and systematic structuring of the expert interview. For this reason, it is important to document the conversation situation immediately after an interview (see Chap. 3), in order to minimize the risk that the results of problematic interviews will later be incorporated into the analysis without prior reflection on their quality. However, it is also true that the use of an interview guide provides the best guarantee for assessing the quality of the data collected through expert interviews.

For all these reasons, there is still a considerable, primarily methodologically justified “discomfort” (Trinczek 2005, p. 210) in the social science discussion toward guideline-based expert interviews. This mistrust is mainly due to the fact that interviewing experts is highly context-specific and dynamic and therefore is still very little standardized. While the context specificity primarily arises from the question or problem of the investigation, the dynamics are inherent to the interview situation itself, which cannot be fully predicted in advance or controlled during the conversation, even when using a guide to structure this interview situation.

And thirdly, expert interviews are also suitable for *validating scientific research results*. In this case, the data collected do not directly flow into the analysis itself but serve primarily to ensure their relevance and understandability for a readership outside the academic field. This aspect has become increasingly important in recent times for third-party-funded research, especially in cases where research funding organizations require recommendations for political practice to be derived from the scientific research results or the results to be actively disseminated among relevant “stakeholders.” Expert interviews for the validation of research results can also be quite useful in smaller research contexts. As a rule, there is the possibility to confront experts, who have already been interviewed as part of an interview-based analysis, again with the results after the completion of the project. Unlike the original interview, the validation discussion is no longer about the generation of hard facts, but about the assessment of the result. In this respect, those discussions can provide valuable hints especially for the presentation of the research results.

Variants of qualitative expert interviews:

- *Explorative expert interviews*: they serve either for gathering information on little researched topics (with the aim of hypothesis formation), the preparation of a more systematic analysis (also by generating technical know-how for the researcher), or the “opening of the field” in the sense of identifying relevant experts.
- *Guideline expert interviews*: they are more structured forms of questioning with the aim of gaining hard facts, which cannot be gained from other sources in the same way. The interview is conducted using an interview guide with the clear aim of generating specific knowledge that is necessary to answer an already precise (and theoretically embedded) research question.

- *Validation discussions*: they can be useful after completion of the empirical research program about its results, either to formulate “practical” recommendations for action or to receive recommendations for the presentation of the research results.

2.3 The Role of the Expert

In the phase of planning qualitative expert interviews, two central aspects must be critically reflected: the question of who can be considered an expert as well as the question of what types of knowledge can be generated through expert interviews.

If we first turn to the concept of an expert, from a sociological perspective, the expert can be distinguished on the one hand from the layman and on the other hand from the specialist. The former differentiation appears immediately intuitive. While the layman has general or everyday knowledge, we grant the expert a “special knowledge” that can be understood as “socially institutionalized expertise” (Sprondel 1979, p. 141). Expert knowledge is therefore tied to a function or professional role. The specialist will undoubtedly also have special knowledge compared to the layman. However, what distinguishes him from the expert is that he cannot autonomously decide on the “problem-solving adequacy” (Hitzler 1994, p. 25) of his knowledge and skills. What characterizes the expert is the “institutionalized competence for the construction of reality” (Hitzler et al. 1994). The distinction between laymen, experts, and specialists is useful, because it points out that we would readily attribute the status of “expert” to a certain group of actors in a political system, even if these actors at least in individual cases rather have “layman-like” general knowledge and must rely on the competencies of specialists in their political decision-making. Such a situation existed when members of EU countries parliaments had to decide under enormous time pressure on technically highly complex rescue packages during the Euro crisis in which they had to rely on “expert opinions” from public and private financial institutions.

At the same time, in the process of deciding on binding regulations for societal conflicts, we deal with “specialists” who can provide important recommendations for a concrete problem solution but are usually not involved in its political implementation. National parliaments often have, as the German Bundestag did in 2007, established national ethics councils which consists of “experts” who are specialized in the broadest sense in fields in which political decisions meet highly diverging moral attitudes or values in society.

Against this background, it is evident that expert interviews are not necessarily only conducted with “experts” in the strictest sense of the previously presented definition. The literature on qualitative expert interviews therefore rightly interprets the concept of the expert less strictly (see Goldberg and Hildebrandt 2020). As for political research, we can describe the role of experts in the following way.

Experts are defined, firstly, *by position and status as well as the knowledge attributed to them*. According to Meuser and Nagel (2005, p. 73), an expert is a person who in some way bears responsibility for the design, implementation, or

control of a problem solution or who has privileged access to information about groups of people or decision-making processes. In political research, it is primarily the actor who is directly involved in decision-making processes. However, the concept of responsibility is relatively broad. In the legislative process, for example, political responsibility clearly lies with the actors who are directly involved in the development and adoption of laws (i.e., members of parliaments and governments). We have to take into account, however, that laws are primarily developed in the ministerial administration, and therefore an important expert role would be sought at the departmental level of the respective ministry, where the main work of formulating the legal act is performed. Therefore, position and status do not necessarily indicate that the highest level of hierarchy within an organization necessarily enjoys expert status. Rather, it is often the case that with each hierarchical level the number of actors decreases but the degree of generalization of tasks and competences increases.

Secondly, the expert is a *carrier of functional knowledge relevant to scientific analysis*. He can provide information about assessments of situations, positions, and events for which a certain intersubjectivity can be assumed (Lauth et al. 2009, p. 168). Experts are therefore not interviewed as private individuals (Helfferich 2009, p. 163). This second characteristic indicates that relevant experts should not always only be sought in the narrower circle of political organizations. It is quite conceivable, for example, that journalists or external experts have or had privileged access to decision-makers but can provide information about the process of political decision-making much more openly than actors who were directly involved.

However, it is particularly important to consider that the *attribution of the expert role is always made by the researcher himself* with regard to the specific research problem. An expert on the revision of the European milk quota regulation will certainly not also be able to provide expertise on the need for investments in social housing. It is the researcher who has to identify and decide who has privileged information in the context of the respective research problem and is also willing to disclose it. It should be taken into account that there is usually not one expert who has all the knowledge necessary to reconstruct a fact (Gläser and Laudel 2006, p. 113), which is why the researcher not only has to ask who can be considered an expert at all but how many experts from which areas need to be interviewed in order to collect the necessary data.

Taken together, these characteristics help to understand that the identification and recruitment of experts are an extremely demanding step in preparing qualitative interviews. It presupposes that the researcher has already worked intensively in his research field that he is familiar with the relevant actors and has also developed an understanding of where relevant expertise can be assumed beyond the actors directly involved in problem-solving process. In terms of the complexity of politics, it must be assumed, on the one hand, that relevant experts exist outside the narrow boundaries of the political-administrative system. On the other hand, today the majority of political problem-solving projects has a dimension that goes beyond the borders of the nation-state, be it through European law implications for national legislation or parallel regulatory efforts within transnational regimes. Therefore, it is quite

appropriate, depending on the respective research problem, to search for experts in international organizations.

Against this background, it has been formulated that a prerequisite for successful expert interviews is that the researcher must become a “quasi-expert” (Pfadenhauer 2005, p. 113). The planning of expert interviews requires a high level of field competence on the part of the researcher, with the proof of this competence primarily being demonstrated by mastering the techniques of data collection (Pfadenhauer 2005, pp. 127 f.). This is particularly true for the moment of the interview situation itself, in which an interviewee will hardly reveal relevant information if he has the impression that the interviewer does not have sufficient knowledge about the subject of the interview. In a certain sense, this requirement also applies to the phase of acquiring interview partners, because identifying relevant experts is only possible on the basis of solid knowledge about the research problem.

Criteria for identifying relevant experts:

- *Position and status:* an expert has responsibility in the broadest sense in the process of political problem-solving.
- *Functional knowledge:* an expert has—for whatever reasons—relevant knowledge about the process of political problem-solving.

2.4 The Importance of Different Types of Knowledge

The second essential methodological reflection relates to different types of knowledge that can be accessed through the interviewing of experts.

The previous explanations have already indicated that this knowledge can essentially be differentiated as knowledge that experts have about the process of negotiation and decision about collectively binding regulations and knowledge that provides information about the framework conditions, constraints, or interest structures under which such regulations have emerged. This differentiation is found in a similar way in the literature as distinction either between “operational knowledge” and “contextual knowledge” (Meuser and Nagel 2009) or between “technical knowledge,” “process knowledge,” and “interpretive knowledge” (Bogner and Menz 2005).

Undoubtedly, the degree of exclusivity of expert knowledge is highest in terms of *operational knowledge*, or technical knowledge and process knowledge. It will be difficult to find an equivalent access to data from this area beyond expert interviews, because here the expert was directly involved in problem analysis as well as the development and implementation of a problem-solving strategy. He can provide information about the circumstances under which a problem arrived on the political agenda, which alternative solution was chosen or discarded, and how the involved actors have evaluated the institutional restrictions of different alternative solutions.

The situation is different with *context knowledge*, which, at least partially, can also be assessed using other methodological approaches. Experts do not exclusively possess knowledge about economic conditions that lead to the development of a new economic policy strategy. Such measures are rather developed under the

pressure of publicly discussed problems of increasing unemployment, low economic growth, or financing bottlenecks in the social security system. This does not mean that it would not be useful to conduct expert interviews specifically with the aim of collecting context knowledge. The reason is that in the concrete interview situation the differentiation between the different types of knowledge is less relevant, because the expert will not structure his answers according to these categories. In this respect, interesting information can be obtained especially from the combination of these types of knowledge. It is only important that the researcher is aware that when collecting context knowledge through expert interviews there is always an obligation to justify why this information could not be obtained from other sources.

The term *interpretive knowledge* refers to a specific form of knowledge that differs from the other ones in that interpretive knowledge involves subjective views and interpretations of the expert. This type of knowledge can be particularly important for studies in which actors' orientations and motivations cannot be directly derived from their interests and preferences or the respective institutional conditions. However, when dealing with interpretive knowledge, the irrelevance of sociodemographic background of an expert can no longer be maintained. To classify interpretive knowledge, it naturally plays a role in what way experts have been socialized, what party political preferences they have, whether they are religiously bound, or from which social class they come from.

Dimensions of knowledge in the expert interview:

- *Operational knowledge*: expert's knowledge about processes and routines in the decision on binding rules for solving societal conflicts.
- *Context knowledge*: expert's knowledge about the framework conditions, constraints, and interest structures in solving societal conflicts.
- *Interpretive knowledge*: subjective relevancies, views, and interpretations of the expert on procedures for solving societal conflicts.

For our consideration, this differentiation is important insofar as it draws attention to the problem of the stringency of the research design in the sense of a systematic connection between the research problem, the theoretical embedding, and the methodological approach. For example, if the theoretical assumption exists that it is indeed procedural factors that have decided on the implementation of a political problem-solving strategy, expert interviews will primarily aim at collecting operational knowledge. In these cases, it would hardly be justifiable not to use expert interviews for scientific analysis. However, if the success or failure of a political program seems to be primarily due to institutional or socioeconomic conditions and therefore expert interviews would primarily ask for context knowledge, expert interviews would only be justifiable if they actually lead to the condensation and supplementation of other available data as part of a methodologically pluralistic approach. Regarding interpretive knowledge, however, the problem arises that this type of knowledge is not always immediately recognizable in the concrete interview situation. It is usually embedded into the expert's presentation of procedural or

institutional factors. Interpretive knowledge can therefore often only be identified and interpreted as such in the later phase of analysis of the data collected through interviews.

Furthermore, these three types of knowledge can also be distinguished according to their respective status with regard to the dimensions of implicit (or tacit knowledge) and explicit knowledge (or codified knowledge). This means that implicit knowledge can be considered as the “intellectual property” of the expert because it is only available to him in his actions and evaluations but has not yet been codified, i.e., not yet written down. Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, exists in codified form, for example, as an organizational routine, as a strategy paper, or as a situation assessment. If we project our three knowledge categories onto this differentiation, it becomes clear that context knowledge can still be characterized as explicit knowledge, while the proportion of implicit knowledge increases significantly with operational and especially with interpretive knowledge.

This has consequences for the planning of expert interviews. It must be assumed that context knowledge is easier to present for the expert, because he can refer to explicit knowledge stocks that have been codified within his organization. However, if the expert interview does not aim at this explicit context knowledge but is more interested in the implicit knowledge stocks of the interviewee, this problem must be taken into account already in the development of the guideline. We should not expect that in every concrete interview situation the expert will spontaneously “spill the beans” but instead will limit himself to replicating the “line of the house.”

In principle, the researcher should not have overly high expectations of gaining implicit knowledge through expert interviews. Michael Polanyi (1958), to whom we owe the concept of “tacit knowledge,” pointed out that there are limits to the exchange of knowledge even in personal interaction. Polanyi assumed that certain information can only be communicated by a conversation partner if he assumes that this communication will actually be understood by the recipient. However, this common basic understanding only exists within specific social groups that share similar values and beliefs and therefore “speak the same language.” Even beyond this abstract conceptual level, we must therefore assume that it strongly depends on the concrete interview situation to what extent an expert opens up to the researcher.

2.5 Ethical Aspects of Expert Questioning

Interviewing experts creates a more or less unfamiliar situation for the interviewees, which they are willing to face because of their interest in the research or in the awareness of the importance of their respective field of work. However, such an interview is primarily in the interest of the researcher, so it is his responsibility to ensure compliance with ethical rules toward the interviewee. Such ethical rules for research are by no means to be understood as norms that one could simply ignore. Apart from the fact that such behavior would be unjustifiable, such ethical minimum standards have already been made mandatory by some research funding organizations (e.g., by the European Union: European Commission 2013), while basic

provisions, especially with regard to data protection, are legally regulated. Obviously, the need for ethical behavior in research may seem more urgent in some other areas of science than in political science. Where, for example, research is conducted directly “on humans” or with human genetic material, this should be immediately apparent. But even in disciplines that do research on humans and their social interactions, there are at least some rules that must be observed: the protection of personal rights, or personal data, the “informed consent,” the preservation of confidentiality, and the integrity and professionalism of the researcher.

Personal data are all those data that provide information about the personal and factual circumstances of an identifiable person. The protection of this data is regulated in many countries. Personal data can be collected in interviews, especially when they are recorded, even unintentionally (because not intended by the questions), and therefore automatically fall into the complete transcription of these interviews. As a rule, personal data may not be collected or processed in research if this is not directly necessary for the research purpose. Since we can assume that in the case of expert interviews personal data are only relevant in exceptional cases, corresponding interview passages can usually be deleted if this does not impact the meaning of the transcription. If the data is exceptionally relevant for the research purpose, anonymization of the data is inevitable in a way that ensures that a reference back to the specific conversation partner is no longer possible. In general, personal data may not be kept longer than absolutely necessary for the research purpose.

Under *informed consent* we understand that the researcher has the obligation to fully inform his conversation partner about the purpose and content of the research, to obtain his explicit consent to the use of the data generated in the interview, and to inform him that he can withdraw his consent at any time. It is also advisable to inform the conversation partner about the form and timeframe in which the research results are to be published. As a rule, it has proven to be “appropriate” to provide the conversation partners with a copy of the published work or at least to draw their attention to the publication.

The *observance of confidentiality* should be a requirement that basically needs no further explanation. However, compliance with this obligation can be problematic in practice insofar as usually not the entire interview is subject to confidentiality, but only some passages that the interviewee will most likely introduce by saying something like “if you treat it confidentially.” If the entire interview is recorded, it is easy to later identify information given confidentially. It is somewhat different, however, if the interviewer has initially refrained from recording because it was expected that sensitive data could be collected in this interview. In this case, the interviewer must already identify the relevant passages during the conversation in order to avoid the risk of violating this assurance of confidentiality in the later phase of data analysis.

Integrity and objectivity do not primarily refer to the researcher’s behavior toward the interviewee, but to the adherence to ethical principles that are generally valid within the research system. Such standards are often set by the professional associations of the different scientific disciplines. As an example, we can refer to the

code of ethics of the German Association for Political Science (DVPW). Here it is specifically stipulated that the researcher is obliged to present his results without distorting omissions and with details on theories, methods, and research designs as well as the assessment of the limits of the validity of the research results.

Ethical aspects of expert interviews:

- The *protection of personal data*: as a basic rule, personal data may not be collected and processed during the research process if it is not necessary for the research purpose.
- The *informed consent*: it requires that the interviewee is informed about the purpose and content of the research, gives his explicit consent to his participation, and can also revoke it later.
- The *observance of confidentiality*: usually only affects parts of the interview and requires the researcher to take precautions to ensure that he can still identify the related passages at a later stage.
- The principles of *integrity and objectivity* as ethical guidelines of political science research, established by codes of ethics implemented by various science organizations.

The Operational Phase: Interview Guide, Interviewees, and Interview Situation

3

With the planning and implementation of expert interviews, the phase of the research process has been reached that deals with the collection of data. This phase consists of five distinct steps. It starts with the development of the guideline document and is concluded by the documentation of the interview situation. As described above, some of these steps can be processed in parallel in order to optimize the overall time needed for the data collection. From experience, however, it can be assumed that the planning of interviews should be started at least 3–6 months before the actual inquiry. As we will see below, such a relatively long preparation time is justified, on the one hand, by the fact that conducting expert interviews already requires a good knowledge of the field of investigation. On the other hand, there are quite demanding hurdles for field access, which must first be overcome if it is to be ensured that the expert survey is actually theory-guided and methodologically reflected.

3.1 The Interview Guide: The “Translation” of the Research Question(s) into Interview Questions

The first step in conducting expert interviews is the creation of the interview guide. It is the instrument of data collection, but also the result of a translation of our research problem and our theoretical assumptions into concrete interview questions that are understandable and answerable in terms of the experts’ experience. Thus, the development of such a guide presupposes that the basic decisions about the research design of the study, and especially about the importance of expert interviews for the empirical investigation, have already been made. Against this background, the interview guide fulfills three central functions.

Firstly, it should structure the concrete conversation situation in the upcoming survey by defining the number and order of the questions. Basically, one can assume that an interview guide should not be too detailed and accordingly should not contain too many questions. How many questions are suitable for an expert interview

naturally depends on the respective research subject. However, it is possible to approach the problem of the appropriate length of an interview guide on the assessment of the expected duration of the conversation. Even if there are no objective standards for such a timeframe, experience teaches that interviews of 90–120 minutes often achieve the best results because they actually allow for an in-depth discussion of the research problem. Often an expert will give the hint when making an appointment that he only has time for just under an hour. A researcher shouldn't be overly impressed by this. As a rule, good expert interviews always last longer than the originally agreed timeframe. As for the structuring of the expert interview, the thematic structure of the guide is also important. Here, one could basically give preference to different ordering criteria. So one could arrange the questions according to their importance for the research project or even in the sense of one's own research logic, by asking different explanatory factors identified from the theory one after the other. However, both ways are not recommended. Instead, the sequence of questions and topics should follow a line of argumentation that is understandable to the expert. In this respect, it is certainly useful to move from more general to specific aspects, thus also giving the expert the opportunity to find his way into the conversation. Furthermore, in advance, especially in studies where different types of actors are interviewed, it must be considered whether a single guideline should be used, which is then not relevant in its entirety for all actors. The alternative would be to design actor-specific guidelines, which are easier to handle in the concrete interview situation. These would then also include such additional questions that should be asked to all types of actors.

In accordance with the principle of openness, it should also be considered that a deviation from the guideline in the concrete interview situation, for example, through follow-up questions that were not previously planned, must be explicitly possible. In this respect, while it is a comprehensible goal of the researcher to want to "get his questions across," this must not lead to the expert being denied the opportunity to express his subjective interpretations and relevancies from the outset.

Secondly, this interview guide must contain important hints for the conversation situation, which could be especially important for the expert with regard to the background and the conditions of the survey and should therefore not be forgotten or overlooked. These aspects should be addressed in the interview in any case, even if corresponding information has already been transmitted during the initial contact. These include in particular hints to the conversation partner about the aim of the investigation and the significance of the concrete interview for the research project ("informed consent") as well as hints about possible precautions for anonymization and the protection of personal data.

And thirdly, the guideline is the document with which the interviewer proves his status as a "co- or quasi-expert" to the interviewee. The formulation of individual questions, the introduction to different question complexes, or even just the description of one's own research project shows the interviewee to what extent the researcher has already worked into the topic. If the interviewee gets the impression that the interviewer does not know what he is talking about (or asking), the expert

interview will hardly achieve the desired goals. Therefore, the guideline can, in addition to the questions themselves, certainly contain explanatory and structuring hints. This can be particularly helpful in cases where a conversation partner asks for the questionnaire to be sent in advance of the appointment. Of course, this raises the question of what level of knowledge about the subject the expert can expect from the researcher. In this respect, a clear distinction must be made between the exploratory and the guideline-supported interview. While the former type of survey is explicitly used for the initial exploration of a scientifically relevant question, the expert will hardly expect the researcher to already have knowledge that goes beyond what the researcher could deduce from similar problems already dealt with by research. The situation is completely different with the guideline interview. Here, one must expect that the researcher at least has an overview of the current state of research and also has basic knowledge about the practical relevance of the research problem, which can be gained by analyzing documents or statistics in advance of the interview.

But how do research questions differ from interview questions and what steps must be taken in the process of developing the interview guide?

Research questions in political science are often formulated abstractly because their scientific relevance must be justified and they often already process theoretical considerations. For this reason, research questions are not suitable as interview questions because they do not correspond to the experiential reality of potential interview partners. Therefore, the “translation” of research questions into interview questions is the first essential step in developing the guideline. This “translation” can be described with the term “operationalization.” Specifically, it is about transferring our own subject of investigation into the “cultural context” (Gläser and Laudel 2006, p. 110) of the respondent in such a way that he is able to provide the information necessary to answer our research question(s). This operationalization essentially takes place in two concrete steps. Firstly, we need to find a way to concretize our research problem in such a way that suitable questions for the interview can be developed from it. And secondly, we need to consider what type of questions will best get us the information we want. These two steps could be referred to as conceptual and instrumental operationalization.

Let’s first turn to conceptual operationalization. The goal of this step is to make the research problem defined by our research question observable. It must be ensured that the data obtained in interviews can later be systematically related back to the research question and possibly to already formulated hypotheses. In this respect, this operationalization represents probably the most demanding task of the qualitative survey, because it determines the analytical quality of the expert interviews. The core issue is therefore to systematically derive our interview questions from the research problem. The fact that this cannot be done directly in one step is already evident from the fact that we will ask many more questions in the expert interview than we have formulated as research questions. Therefore, in order to observe the phenomenon of interest, two intermediate steps are needed to clarify what we want to observe and how we will do it.

Firstly, we need to identify those dimensions that make the phenomenon addressed by our research question observable at all. It needs to be clarified which factors influence the shape or change of this phenomenon. These dimensions can usually be determined from the chosen theoretical reference and/or from the relevant secondary literature. Thus, at this point in the operationalization, we have already ensured that our analysis dimensions have theoretical relevance, but we have not yet determined how we actually want to observe. The next step is to translate the analysis dimensions into question complexes. These question complexes are ultimately nothing more than instructions on how the expression of our respective dimensions will be empirically checked. These question complexes can already be included in the guideline as structuring hints. We then have to further develop them into actual interview questions that are understandable and answerable from the expert’s point of view (Fig. 3.1).

This somewhat abstract description can be clarified with the help of our empirical study examples. In the analysis of the institutional conditions for the establishment of modern biotechnology industries, a systemic innovation approach was chosen because the “Varieties of Capitalism” approach was considered deficient due to the different development paths and performance data of the biotechnology sectors in Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. Our research question was as follows: what institutional conditions and what political measures under the given institutional conditions can explain the specific performances in the commercialization of biotechnology in the three states?

The systemic innovation approach offers a number of explanatory variables for innovation behavior in modern industrialized nations. It assumes that innovations are not solely produced as a result of entrepreneurial activities, but through mutual interactions of companies with their institutional environment. The systemic innovation approach defines the financial, regulatory, and education and research systems as central elements of this institutional environment. Since this institutional environment varies considerably between nation-states, the different profile formation and the performance of national innovation systems can be systematically analyzed based on this. In particular, the approach emphasizes that state innovation policy plays a special role because it can not only directly influence the innovation actors (e.g., through public procurement or public research funding) but also by influencing the subsystems of the innovation system, it co-determines the institutional framework conditions for innovation actors. We can therefore conclude that our research problem can be observed with respect to the design of institutional subsystems and the given interactions within an innovation system (Fig. 3.2).

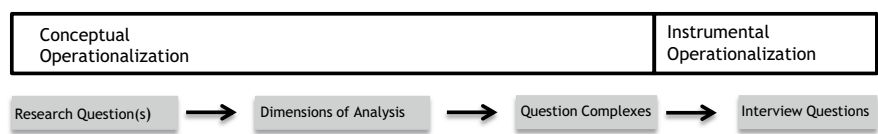


Fig. 3.1 Conceptual and instrumental operationalization (Source: own elaboration)

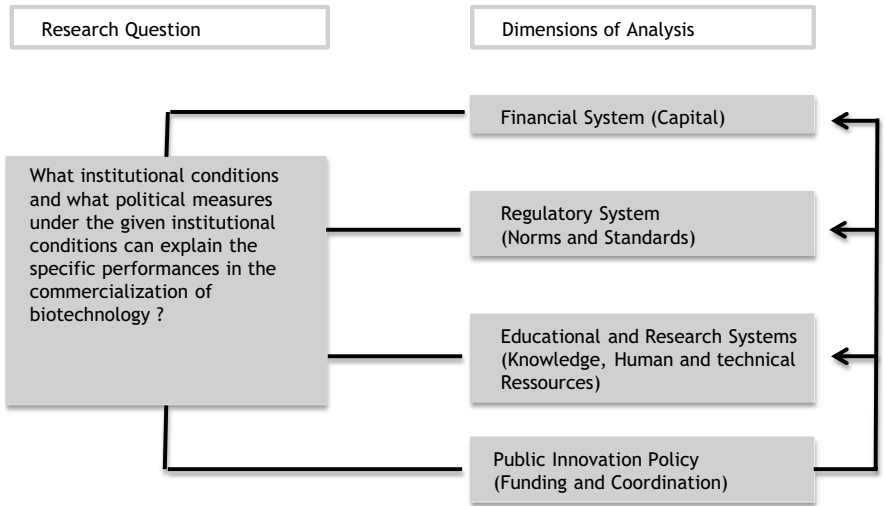


Fig. 3.2 From the research question to dimensions of analysis (Source: own elaboration)

In a second step, we now develop our question complexes from these analysis dimensions. This means that we determine according to which criteria our dimensions should be observed. Knowledge of the relevant research literature is also useful for this step. In the specific case, we have already gained the information that financial systems in capitalist states fundamentally differ into credit-based and capital market-based systems, and this differentiation has effects on the process of industrial change (Zysman 1983). We also know from the literature that for the commercialization of modern biotechnology, the availability of venture capital is an essential condition for the transfer of scientific know-how to industrial exploitation (Adleberger 1999). Since such research results already exist for our analysis dimensions, we can use them for our own investigation. In this respect, question complexes (in the sense of observation instructions) can usually be determined with reference to the relevant literature, as shown in Fig. 3.3.

With the determination of these question complexes, we are now ready to translate our conceptual considerations into the experiential reality of the experts to be interviewed. Although we would have to assume that our experts could certainly understand the term “institutional configuration of the financial system” in principle, if we were to use it in this way, it would have to be ensured at the same time that the expert is also familiar with the entire conceptual framework of our research design. However, this cannot be realized in research practice. It would also not be desirable, because the expert in the concrete interview situation should provide the necessary information based on his own knowledge bases and relevance structures. Therefore, we formulate the interview questions in a way that allows the expert to share the information that interests us, while from the researcher’s point of view it remains recognizable at all times what such information can mean for the

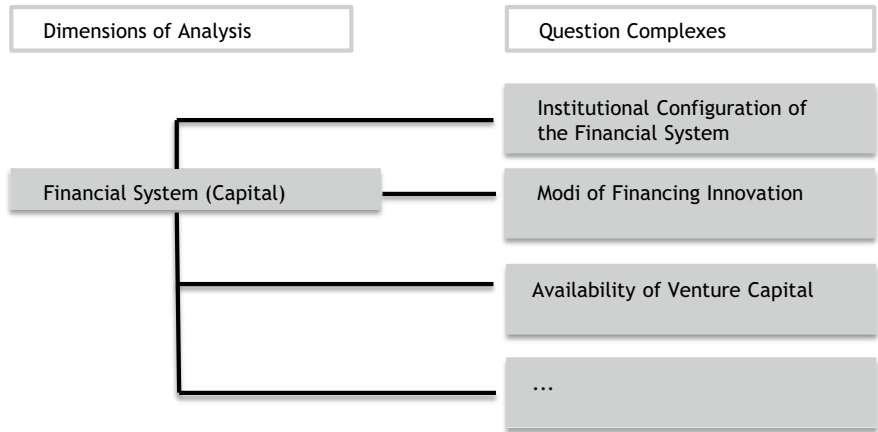


Fig. 3.3 From dimensions of analysis to question complexes (Source: own elaboration)

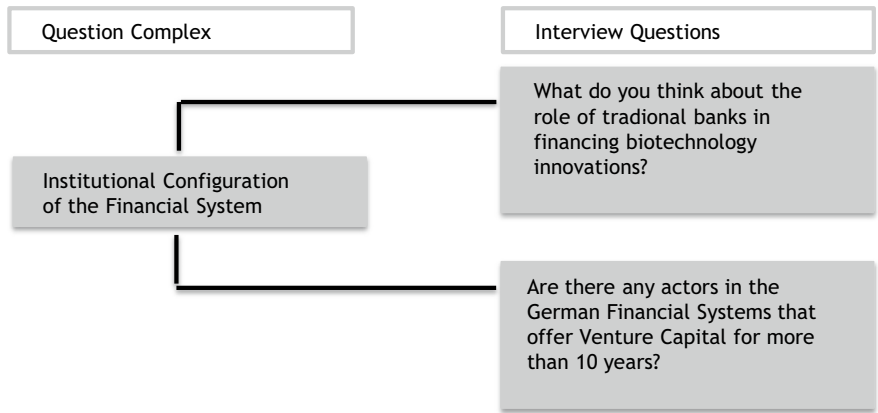


Fig. 3.4 From question complexes to interview questions (Source: own elaboration)

observation of our research problem. In this respect, this question complex could be operationalized in the last step as in Fig. 3.4.

However, we must assume that it is not always possible for every scientific question to directly derive dimensions of analysis and question complexes just from the theoretical and empirical literature. It is likely that we know much more about institutional structures and actors than about how structures and actors interact in the process of political action and political change. From the perspective of the previously differentiated types of knowledge, we can therefore conclude that we tend to have a lack of operational knowledge, while our contextual knowledge is considerable. But what does this mean for a scientific question that primarily aims at this operational knowledge and wants to reconstruct the actual course of a political process?

In our study on the performance of the Franco-German government coordination, this exact problem existed. It was less about working out the context of this coordination process, but rather about finding out which factors have decided whether and why this coordination process was successful in working on a specific problem case or not. This naturally has consequences for the research design and especially for the operationalization of our research questions. The previously presented dimensions of analysis had to be transformed into complex questions in a way that actually ensures that the processual nature of the coordination was considered and not, or less, the framework conditions under which the coordination took place.

This can be explained using the concept of national interests and preferences. Basically, one must assume that it is important to know to what extent the interests and preferences of the German and French side diverged in the specific case of negotiating the multiannual financial framework of the European Union. And of course, this was also addressed in the context of the expert interviews. For the central question of the project, however, it was much more important to reveal in which way homogeneous or heterogeneous interest situations have gained importance in the process of coordination. So, it had to be asked which potential conflicts of interest existed in the national contexts and how they especially affected the respective governments of Germany and France in the coordination.

We can illustrate this using the example of the concrete operationalization of the analysis dimension "national preferences." We had noted that we define question complexes for dimensions of analysis to determine how the observation of a dimension considered relevant should actually take place. Only on this basis should the interview questions be formulated, the answering of which should ensure that we can evaluate in which way different national interests have affected the coordination process. That there were such differences in national preferences was to be assumed from the outset and also sufficiently confirmed by various sources. Figure 3.5 shows how this operationalization has been carried out. Accordingly, the actual query of the homogeneity/heterogeneity of national interests was only one of four instructions for observing the importance of national preferences.

With the determination of interview questions from the previously defined question complexes, we are now at the transition from the conceptual to the instrumental operationalization. Here, it is about making our own research context not only "suitable for every use" so that it can be understood by practitioners. In addition, it is considering for the formulation of the guide with which exact formulation of a question we can best achieve the desired goal. Different types of questions help us which can be used with different objectives in the expert interview (cf. Kvale 1996, p. 133 ff.; Stigler and Felbinger 2005).

Introductory questions serve to give the conversation partner an easy start into the interview situation through the possibility of a longer statement. The biggest advantage of such an entry is that the researcher, on the one hand, already at the beginning of the interview gets an idea of how the conversation partner has understood the topic of the expert interview. This also indicates at this early stage which necessity in the further course of the interview for an active control of the

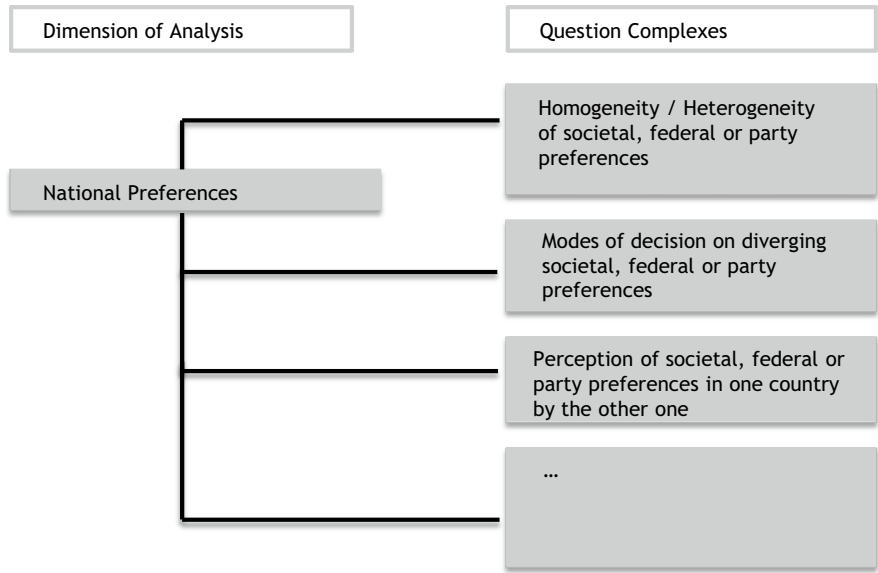


Fig. 3.5 Operationalization of the analysis dimension “national preferences” (Source: own elaboration)

conversation exists. If the expert already reveals through his initial statement that he addresses aspects relevant to the research problem, this control of the interview by the researcher is usually significantly facilitated. In this case, it is possible to connect with subsequent questions to statements that the expert has already made. On the other hand, the possibility of a longer initial statement generally promotes the conversation atmosphere. When an expert agrees to an interview appointment, we can assume that there is an intrinsic motivation for it. This would certainly not be promoted if we were to deny our conversation partners the opportunity to express themselves comprehensively. There may be many reasons for such intrinsic motivation. It could be a basic interest in research, because the expert possibly has an academic background in political science. The expert could also be so absorbed and excited by his professional field that he likes to talk about the associated professional challenges and achievements. It may also be that he simply feels flattered by the designation as an expert in the context of a research project. Whatever the reason may be in the end, it is especially important that such intrinsic motivation of the expert is an important prerequisite for the success of expert interviews. A question-answer game in “staccato style” would certainly not be supportive to this motivation, especially if the interview develops into an interrogation rather than a professional conversation.

Structuring questions introduce different topic areas (question complexes) of an expert interview. They primarily serve the interviewee to be able to understand the structure and course of the interview. Such structuring questions are also suitable to (politely) interrupt longer digressions of the interviewee beyond the actual research

interest. Structuring questions are also an important element for controlling the interview situation. They can in most cases ensure that the expert can be "reined in" again if he is working too intensively on a topic that is either not in the center of the research interest or has already been sufficiently answered. They also help the researcher in the concrete interview situation to always keep an overview of the (temporal) progress of the conversation. In this context, it can be helpful to think in advance about which part of the time should be spent on the different question complexes.

Direct questions should be used for all those issues and aspects that are indispensable for the research project. They should be formulated briefly and concisely and motivate the respondent as much as possible to actually provide the desired information. There is no universally valid answer to the question of when to operate with direct questions. On the one hand, it is important to obtain the desired information for all question complexes of the interview, which is why it would make sense to ask such direct questions at the end of each complex. On the other hand, direct questions, especially if they do not fit the expert's previous answer, can significantly disrupt the course of the conversation, so in this case, it would be advisable to ask such questions at the end of the interview. In practice, however, it often turns out that the flexible use of direct questions is most promising. They are used appropriately when the expert provides a template for them with his previous statement. However, this requires the researcher to have an overview of all aspects that he wanted to address with such questions.

Indirect questions, on the other hand, allow the respondent to take a position on assessments or positions of other involved actors in the political process. Answering such questions helps the interviewer to illuminate the context of his research subject more broadly. Experience has shown that such indirect questions can also be well-positioned as follow-up questions to previous answers from the expert. One must assume that an expert does not necessarily want to provide information about attitudes, interests, or behaviors of third parties. But if those questions are placed as follow-up questions, the expert may feel the need to answer the question in order to correctly frame the answers given previously. In this respect, they are less questions about motives and actions of uninvolved parties, but rather a request for further hints for understanding the activities or perceptions of the respondent himself.

Specifying questions are always useful when the respondent draws attention to facts that were previously unknown or only partially familiar to the researcher. The difficulty of such questions lies in the fact that they cannot be planned in advance. The interviewer must therefore decide spontaneously whether a follow-up question, aimed at obtaining information that was not originally foreseeable, is in the interest of the investigation or not. However, the specific interview situation does not always allow such spontaneous reactions. Therefore, it has proven helpful to agree at the end of each interview with the expert that one may contact him again for follow-up questions by phone or email. The advantage of such a solution is that the researcher can reconsider the actual relevance of specifying information. The big disadvantage of this approach, however, is that the researcher can no longer benefit from the

Table 3.1 Different types of questions in the expert interview

	Research on Franco-German Coordination (Kaiser und Brehon 2013)
Introductory questions	Public discussion often laments on the stuttering of the Franco-German engine in European politics. What is your assessment on that from an inside perspective?
Structuring questions	May I follow up on your last statement? To what extent were the specific interests of the German Länder in regional funding discussed with the French partners?
Direct questions	Can you assess what impact the current plans for the next European budget would have on the position of the net payers?
Indirect questions	What expectations have other EU member states regarding a Franco-German initiative for the current negotiations?
Specifying questions	You have mentioned the presidential elections in France next month. What impact could they have on the bilateral coordination process?
Interpretive questions	Do you think that the next European budget will meet the reform requirements in the European Union?

special dynamics of the interview situation and the expert may not provide the corresponding information afterward (or at least not in the same way).

Interpretive questions finally provide information about the respondent’s values and interpretation patterns and help to classify the data obtained from the interview. Such questions can also be used to obtain an expert’s assessment of a future development of a phenomenon. Corresponding information from the expert can be helpful in extensive research projects that extend over several years, because the investigation in these cases will usually only be completed at a much later date. Interpretive questions should also be asked spontaneously in the specific interview situation when the expert tends to answer very factually and distantly and thus avoids revealing his own relevance structures and evaluations.

Table 3.1 gives examples for each of these different types of questions in the expert interview. For this, we refer back to our study on Franco-German government coordination in European politics. The examples refer to an interview with a ministry official in Germany who was personally involved in this coordination. The aim of the survey was to determine what role the bilateral coordination played in the negotiations of the member state governments over the multiannual financial framework 2014–2020 of the European Union.

3.2 The Pretest of the Questionnaire

A test of the questionnaire in advance of the “real” interviews seems indispensable especially when the researcher is venturing into a new field of research. The aim of the pretest is primarily to give the survey instrument a “reality check.” In the development of the guideline, it often happens that individual questions have been formulated in such a way that the interviewee does not understand them or at least it is not achieved that the intended information can be generated with this question. This can

be due, among other things, to the fact that the formulation of the question is still too abstract and too oriented toward the analysis concept. But it is also quite possible that it is not apparent to the expert why this specific question is being asked in the context of the topic of the interview. In addition, the pretest also allows the interview situation to be practiced in general and to optimize the instrument on this basis. Overall, the following functions of the pretest can be assumed.

Functions of the pretest according to Schnell et al. (2011) (selection):

- Checking the understanding of the questions by the respondent.
- Checking the respondent's interest and attention to the questions.
- Checking the continuity of the interview process.
- Checking the effect of structuring the survey instrument.
- Checking the duration of the interview.

When planning a pretest, the question always arises with which person such a test should be conducted. Overall, it is reasonable to suggest that a conversation partner who would potentially also belong to the group of interviewees should be chosen for this pretest. Only under that condition it can realistically be assumed that the pretest produces meaningful results. One can choose an expert who you assume would be dispensable as a source of information for the specific interest in knowledge, perhaps because other experts could already be won who are expected to have the same or even more valuable information. However, there is nothing that speaks against using information from a pretest interview for the later analysis, especially when this information was transmitted on complex issues that did not have to be changed as a result of the pretest.

In accordance with the main five functions of the pretest, the guideline is subsequently optimized depending on the results of this preliminary investigation. Necessary changes can be the shortening or restructuring of the survey instrument, but also the reformulation, addition, or omission of questions that proved unsuitable in the pretest.

3.3 The Selection and Contacting of Interview Partners

The “acquisition” of experts is naturally a central practical hurdle for the analysis. This step is important because it has a significant influence on the quality of data collection through expert interviews. Therefore, we must deal separately with the conceptual requirements for the selection of experts and the practical issues related with expert acquisition.

If we first start with the conceptual requirements, we must recall what was said at the beginning about the distinction between qualitative and quantitative surveys. Here we found that qualitative expert interviews do not aim to produce results that are generalizable beyond the case studied but serve to understand the case on the basis of a systematic analysis. This distinction also has a direct influence on the procedure for acquiring experts. Since we are not striving for generalization, there

is also no requirement to establish a representative sample or even all relevant experts. Rather, for qualitative interviews, the conversation partners are selected purely on the basis of functional considerations. The selection of experts is therefore an essential aspect of the research design and as such requires justification.

Justification in this context means that the researcher's own considerations, which led to the selection of experts, not only have to be mentioned in the study but it must also be stated in what way and with what problems and difficulties the actual respondents were won. These requirements must be met because otherwise the approach is not recognizable to third parties and thus the quality criterion of intersubjective comprehensibility cannot be maintained. An adequate justification is generally made if the selection of the experts was made by answering the following three questions.

Criteria for the selection of experts (cf. Gläser and Laudel 2006, p. 113):

1. Which expert has the relevant information?
2. Which of these experts is most likely to provide accurate information?
3. Which of these experts is most likely ready and available to provide this information?

Answering these questions requires a considerable amount of knowledge about the subject on the part of the researcher. It must therefore already be known which actors in a political process, in an actor constellation, or in an institutional configuration are relevant at all. Only in a next step it can be determined who among these potential experts actually has precise information about the phenomenon under investigation due to their position and assumed functional knowledge. If these aspects are sufficiently clarified, the final question becomes relevant, whether or not these experts might be available for an interview.

However, this catalogue of questions should be treated with a certain degree of caution, as it could easily give the impression—especially with regard to the third question—that the selection of experts is somewhat arbitrary. Of course, this is not the case.

In practice, we are actually much more often faced with the problem that even answering the first two questions leads to a quite manageable number of truly relevant experts. If those experts are not willing or not available to be interviewed, the alternative is not to interpret the term of the expert less strictly. Rather, in this case, it would be necessary to fundamentally reconsider the practicability of the methodological approach using expert interviews.

This leads us to the question of why the field of experts is limited from the outset. Since political science rarely deals with individual actors, but primarily with collective and corporate actors, members of political or societal organizations are usually considered as experts. Such organizations are characterized by a division of labor and usually a hierarchical structure, so that even in larger organizations, only a very limited number of members are specialized and responsible for a certain area of activity of this organization. Therefore, it is not sufficient to deal only with the level of the organization and to pay less attention to the identification of the actual expert

within this organization. Rather, it is necessary to identify that member of an organization who actually has the desired expert knowledge. If these are formal organizations, organization plans of the respective organization are a useful tool. If we are dealing with collective actors without a formal organizational structure, a similar approach does not exist, so that relevant contact persons must be identified by direct contacts in the organization.

How the identification of experts within formal organizational structures is possible can be illustrated using the example of the study on Franco-German government coordination. This study focused on the cooperation of both governments in connection with the negotiations on the multiannual financial framework of the European Union 2014–2020. Therefore, the first question to be clarified was which parts of the federal government are responsible for this in a narrow and broader sense. It turned out that the Foreign Affairs Ministry is in charge of the multiannual EU financial program, while the annual budgets of the European Union are under the responsibility of the Federal Ministry of Finance. In addition, it had to be taken into account that the political agreement on the multiannual financial framework has to be reached by the heads of state and government in the European Council, so that a possible responsibility of the Federal Chancellery also had to be considered. In the next step, the internal distribution of responsibility within the responsible ministries was analyzed. Two departments were identified in the Foreign Affairs Ministry, whose responsibilities explicitly relate to the multiannual financial framework, or the Franco-German government coordination. In the Federal Ministry of Finance, there was another department for budget and finances of the EU, while in the European department of the Federal Chancellery there were departments for the economic and financial policy of the EU, but also for the coordination of European policy within the federal government.

Thus, with only a few steps, the number and location of the relevant experts within the organizational structure of the federal government could be determined. In terms of the aforementioned questions, this would fulfill the essential conditions for justifying the selection of experts. However, one could argue that a selection based solely on positive attribution of presumed expertise is not sufficient. For this reason, there is much to be said for also asking whether there might not be other relevant contacts beyond these already identified experts, who may not have formal responsibility for government coordination but who could at least be attributed relevant technical competence in sub-issues. In the present case, this would have affected the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, for example, since a large part of the European budget funds are spent in the area of responsibility of this ministry. However, it turned out that the Federal Ministry of Agriculture had not been involved.

In our second example study, which was primarily about identifying those institutional factors that could explain the performance in the establishment of modern biotechnology industries, the situation was completely different. Due to this much more complex question, it was to be expected that a much larger number of experts would need to be interviewed in order to gain an overview of the different institutional factors. It cannot be denied that due to the conceptual embedding of the

research question, there were already some indications at least of the relevant sub-systems of the national innovation systems, which suggested interviewing experts from the financial sector, the education and research sector, the administration, and other innovation policy actors. However, it was not apparent from the outset that there is the sector-specific peculiarity of cluster effects in the biotechnology industry, i.e., a highly concentrated settlement of companies, research institutions, and various service providers. These clusters are coordinated in most cases by public-private network agencies, which is why a high degree of expertise is found in these organizations. This example does not need to be further elaborated here. It is only intended to make clear that depending on the research question, it may be necessary to have extensive knowledge about the field of study before the relevant experts for qualitative interviews can be identified.

This brings us to the practical hurdles of selecting and contacting experts. Generally, the selection and contacting should be made as early as possible to ensure that the interviews can actually be realized within the time plan of the research project. Furthermore, it should be pointed out again that the principle of openness of qualitative research can explicitly justify the planning of additional interview partners, especially when references to such persons are given in already conducted interviews.

For contacting experts, many researchers will intuitively prefer the communication medium of e-mail. And indeed, this path is quite suitable under the condition of a tight schedule, but not without risks. The greatest risk is primarily that the e-mail request is simply overlooked or ignored by the recipient, and therefore the question of alternative contact options arises for the researcher. At least at this point, however, the supposed time advantage through the use of electronic communication media would already be lost.

Against this background, serious consideration should be given to trust “the good old letter” when planning interviews. A formal letter is not only much less often ignored, but it also opens up the possibility of already announcing that one will call after a period of 1 week to discuss the possibility and possibly the scheduling of the interview personally. In addition, it is easier in written form to persuade the potential expert to read the accompanying initial information. These should definitely be attached—completely independent of the medium used—because they are an important basis for the expert’s decision whether he is available for an interview or not. Unlike e-mail, the expert is not forced to respond immediately to the request. This can prove to be an invaluable advantage, especially in situations where there is no immediate willingness. And it opens a window of “persuasion” during a personal phone conversation.

Due to the obligation to provide background information about the research project, a first contact by telephone is usually not appropriate. An exception exists when the contact with an expert is based on a recommendation from another conversation partner, because in this case one can refer to the latter and the background information can be provided later. The background information that should be provided to an expert includes the following.

Necessary background information about the research project when requesting an interview:

- A brief description of the research topic.
- A justification for why the contact person is considered an expert.
- Information about the organizational background (student research project, third-party-funded project, etc.)
- Information about the intended use of collected research data (student thesis, scientific publication, Internet blog, etc.)
- Information about the technical implementation of the interview (tape recording yes/no) and the probable time effort.
- Information about the period in which the expert interview is to be conducted.
- Information about the possibility of treating data generated in interviews confidentially.

3.4 Conducting Expert Interviews

An expert interview is a very special communicative situation, which is characterized by a number of peculiarities. It has a clear objective. As researchers, we want to generate information from an interview, which we already assume that it cannot be obtained or only partially obtained from other sources. This means that there is hardly any alternative to the success of the interview. Because of this, it is up to the researcher to maintain control over the course of the interview without disturbing the communication process.

Trinczek correctly points out in his practical report on interviewing managers that interview situations are by no means static, but changes in the situation can occur during the course of the survey which may also be desirable from the researcher's point of view (2005, p. 214). Thus, one can generally distinguish the opening sequence of an expert interview from a later phase. In the first phase of an interview, an expert will usually be prepared for an actual sequence of question and answer. The researcher has arranged this interview in order to obtain information, and it would be unreasonable to assume that the expert expects something different from this appointment. Experience teaches that this early phase of an interview is of enormous importance for the whole conversation, but not necessarily the one in which the most important information is generated. It is especially important to note that the expert forms his opinion about the competence of the researcher (and certainly also regarding the personal sympathy toward the researcher) during this opening phase. If the expert gets a rather negative impression of both, it will be difficult to enter the second phase of an expert interview, which ideally will take the form of an unforced professional conversation.

At this level, the communication situation is now much more characterized by a "discursive-argumentative" interview guidance (Trinczek 2005, p. 218). It is therefore important that the researcher is ready to move beyond the pure question style, which still determined the first phase of the conversation, into a mode of argumentation and discussion. The achievement of the second phase is important for two

reasons. Firstly, if the “discursive” level is reached, the expert is more likely to reveal his own relevance structures. And secondly, only in such a phase one can expect that the expert detaches himself from formal lines of communication of his organization and thereby provides the information that is actually relevant for the research project. Ideally, this second phase of the interview takes up much more time than the opening phase. The researcher should allow and support this through his conversation guidance. To steer an expert interview, therefore, does not mean to constantly document to the expert that the course of the interview according to the guideline is the measure of all things. Rather, the researcher must show flexibility in the concrete interview situation to switch between the different thematic complexes of the guideline.

In expert interviews, different “interaction effects” (Vogel 1995, p. 78 ff.) can arise, which can have very different effects on the success in terms of quality of data collected.

Interaction effects in expert interviews (cf. Vogel 1995, p. 78 ff.):

- The *iceberg effect*: a communication situation characterized by mistrust and disinterest, in which an expert obviously withholds available information.
- The *paternalism effect*: a communication situation dominated by the expert, in which an expert intends to tell the researcher which information is important to him.
- The *feedback effect*: a situation in which an expert reverses the question-answer game and confronts the researcher with questions whose answers interest him.
- The *catharsis effect*: a communication situation in which an expert stages himself and primarily satisfies his need for self-presentation.

Such effects can also occur temporarily in expert interviews and therefore do not necessarily mean that the entire interview will not bring the expected success. To some extent, the researcher can at least minimize the risk of such effects occurring.

The “iceberg effect” is often the immediate consequence of a “misbehavior” of the researcher, who had left the expert in the dark about central backgrounds of the interview (which generates mistrust), or it could also be a reaction of the expert to the researcher’s lack of preparation on the topic. So if the researcher obviously does not reach the “level” of the co-expert, one can hardly expect an expert to willingly disclose all desired information.

The “paternalism effect” can become an almost insoluble problem, especially in student research projects, as it is usually based on status differences that the expert uses as an opportunity to benevolently convey his view of things to the (young) researcher. As a “protection mechanism” against such an effect, one option is to conduct interviews not at the highest hierarchical level in an organization. Apart from the fact that there are also other reasons for such an approach, the risk of the paternalism effect is greatest with older and experienced personalities in leadership positions.

In the case of the “feedback effect,” strategic skills are required on the part of the researcher. On the one hand, one will not be able to suppress the expert’s need for

information with regard to the overall conversation atmosphere, while on the other hand, the reversal of roles naturally questions the purpose of the interview. In the end, the only thing that helps is to politely point out that one will be happy to discuss all the expert's questions in detail after the completion of the interview.

The "catharsis effect" is of greatest importance because it only has a negative effect on the success of the interview under certain circumstances. Certainly, it is not pleasant for the researcher if an expert uses the appointment as an opportunity to talk about all the problems and frustrations that his professional activity brings with it. Ultimately, however, this is also exactly the situation in which an expert is most likely to deviate from the official line of his organization. In this respect, this is the moment reached where a qualitative expert interview can develop its greatest potential. The researcher should therefore not prevent such an effect without necessity, even if for a moment the impression arises that the interview could fail. In any case, one can assume that this effect only occurs in a situation where an expert accepts the researcher as a "co-expert" and the interview has already taken the form of an open discussion among "professionals."

Since the concrete interview situation is usually highly unique and dynamic, it is difficult to give general advice for this step of data collection. It can be assumed with certainty that experience from many self-conducted expert interviews increases the likelihood of success of later ones. This certainty is admittedly of little use for student interviews, as this is often their first step into the field of qualitative research. Therefore, the most important advice seems to be the one that Meuser and Nagel have formulated in their discussion of expert interviews: The key to the success of the expert interview, in our experience, is a flexible, unbureaucratic handling of the guideline in the sense of a complex of topics and not in the sense of a standardized procedure (2005, p. 269).

In addition, there are two other aspects that require closer examination.

The first aspect concerns the question of whether expert interviews must necessarily be documented by tape recording. The answer to this can only be, in my opinion, that the renunciation of such a recording must be very well-justified. Of course, in political research, situations can exist where an expert interview due to the tape recording does not yield the desired result, especially when it comes to the reconstruction of highly informal negotiation and decision-making processes or if the topic is currently being controversially discussed. The renunciation of such a recording has a number of implications.

Firstly, it requires the interviewer to take as extensive notes as possible during the conversation, which can significantly affect the concentration on the interview, especially for inexperienced researchers. Secondly, it is necessary to create a comprehensive memory protocol immediately after the interview, which does not have a comparable level of security as the data collection by recording. Even the most extensive memory protocol does not allow to prove information given by the expert. This leads, thirdly, to the fact that it is no longer possible to quote renunciation from expert interviews, or to use information from interviews without checking their plausibility through a "second source."

Therefore, one should always assume that a tape recording is the norm when conducting expert interviews. To deviate from this means to be aware in advance of the limitations associated with this renunciation and whether these are justified at all, given the importance of the interviews for the analysis. However, the author of this volume confesses at this point, in full knowledge of the limitations of such a procedure, to a certain inclination to conduct expert interviews without tape recording, if the research question suggests this. This conviction has developed over the years and probably also as a result of numerous recorded interviews. It is primarily justified by the fact that the situation of the open professional discussion described above is much easier to establish without such a recording. A tape recording always inhibits the expert's deviation from the official line of the house. Therefore, it is ultimately also inconsistent to take a middle path, which first provides for a recording of the conversation but at the same time is open to temporarily suspending the recording when the expert wants to share information confidentially. This alternative is therefore not very consistent, because the "evidence" is missing for the essential parts of the interview.

The decision for or against a tape recording is associated with conceptual consequences for the analysis, which the researcher should already face when determining the research design. If expert interviews are expected to produce information that cannot be generated by other sources, the recording of the interviews is not only sensible but indispensable. If expert interviews are primarily used to condense the other empirical material and it is in the interest of the analysis to understand the case under investigation primarily in terms of the relevance structures and evaluations of actually involved actors, one should very carefully consider whether a tape recording of the interviews is not counterproductive. Therefore, the higher the degree of factual information expected from expert interviews, the more reasons there are for tape recording.

The second aspect to be discussed here concerns the assurance of anonymity, or confidentiality toward the expert. In this respect, a surprisingly liberal handling of such assurances is often noticed in interview-based studies, which is methodologically extremely problematic. This has two reasons.

Firstly, due to the "closeness of the expert field" described above, one must strongly doubt what level of confidentiality the non-identification of the expert's name actually represents. At least for most studies in political science, it is likely that very plausible assumptions could be made about the interviewee if the selection criteria developed in Sect. 3.3 were applied, because it is not the case that in the event of anonymization, all references to the experts could be omitted. This is because, secondly, from the perspective of the intersubjective comprehensibility of the study, it must be clear that at least the name of the organization and the respective field of activity are mentioned, because otherwise it is not possible for third parties to assess the value of the data generated from interviews.

3.5 The Documentation of the Interview Situation

Immediately after the interview, it is advisable to make a documentation of the same, which summarizes important information about the interviewed expert, the course of the interview, and about organizational aspects of the interview. This documentation is not for securing the data, so it is not to be confused with the transcription or the memory protocol, which we will discuss in the next chapter. Rather, the protocol should provide indications about the conversation atmosphere, reactions of the conversation partner, the extent to which questions were answered, and also about further information received in the conversation, which could be of importance for the research process. This protocol can play an important role in later phases, especially in the interpretation of the data obtained, because it allows for a later assessment of the quality of the respective interview even after longer periods of time.

The documentation does not have to be very detailed and can rely on categories that have already been presented. Thus, the conversation situation can be described using the abovementioned interaction effects. Furthermore, it can be described whether the interview predominantly took place in a question-answer mode or developed more as an open expert discussion. Additional information may relate to complex topics of the interview, which were either perceived as particularly fruitful or unproductive.

This protocol can also be used to note information that could become relevant for further research. These could refer to aspects that will require further research or recommendations for potential additional interview partners, to whom the expert can provide access. Finally, this protocol serves to note important organizational data, such as location, time and duration of the interview, relevant biographical data about the expert, and the confirmation of whether confidentiality was assured, whether the expert was informed about his rights in relation to the ethical norms applicable to the interview, and whether it was agreed to contact the expert again in later stages of the research process. Figure 3.6 shows an example of such a protocol form.

Protocol of the expert interview _____ (Number/Code)

Place: _____
Time: _____
Duration: _____

Name and Occupation/Position of the Expert: _____
Age: _____

Contact Details: _____

Biographical Information: _____

Atmosphere of the conversation: _____
Characteristics of the interview situation: _____

Special aspects in terms of individual thematic complexes: _____

Important aspects that need further inquiry: _____

Confidentiality/Anonymization: _____
Information given on ethical aspects: Yes/No
Availability for later contact: Yes/ No

Fig. 3.6 Example of a protocol form for expert interviews (Source: own elaboration)

The Analytical Phase: Securing Interview Data and Theory-Guided Analysis

4

With the completion of the expert interviews, the research plan enters the phase of analysis. This process often requires considerable time resources. It is especially true when tape recordings were made which need to be transcribed, i.e., converted into text form. If recordings were omitted, data have to be secured in a form of a memory protocol.

However, there is a key difference between these two ways of securing results. While memory protocols can only make a meaningful contribution to analysis if they are written immediately after the respective interview, there is no need for this close chronological sequence in the recorded interview. However, too long intervals between the survey and transcription should be avoided as much as possible. At the very least, however, the control of proper recording must be carried out immediately, as only then—in the event of technical problems—does the alternative of the memory protocol still exist.

For the analysis of data from expert interviews, a number of suggestions for different procedures (cf. Mayring 1999; Meuser and Nagel 2005; Gläser and Laudes 2006; summarizing: Mayer 2009) are made in the literature. These procedures can generally be subsumed under the term *qualitative content analysis*, although there are so many variants in this area that it is not possible to speak of only one method of content analysis. Rather, different scientific disciplines are characterized by a specific interest in the analysis of texts, images, films, or other data material. For the field of political science, however, it can be assumed that the hermeneutic (Soeffner 1979; Hitzler and Honer 1997), the discourse-analytical (Keller et al. 2010), and—in the field of expert interviews—the thematic content analysis dominate.

We will therefore deal with this latter type, because it is best suited for our core goal of identifying and processing the information generated in the interviews and therefore also requires a lesser degree of complexity than alternative content-analytical procedures.

In this regard, reference is often made to the content-analytical approach developed by Philipp Mayring (2000), which, however, in its entire complexity, has hardly been applied in any political science analysis in which expert interviews have played a role. This in no way speaks against this model. However, we pursue such a specific goal with the analysis of expert interviews that the toolkit developed by Mayring appears too demanding, especially because of the communication-oriented foundation of the procedure.

This does not mean that the essential steps of this approach are not relevant for our purpose. These steps are described here as “summary,” “explication,” and “structuring” and represent three distinct analytical features of the approach. The aim of the summary is to reduce the text material to the analytically relevant content. The explication is based on the reverse logic. Here, supplementary or explanatory information is to ensure the understanding of the respective passage. Only with the structuring does the actual analysis of the text material begin, where the previously selected passages are now assigned to various categories, which can either arise from the material itself (inductive) or have already been developed on the basis of the theoretical framework of the research project (deductive).

In the following we go through the central work steps of data analysis: after the interviews have been converted into text form, we carry out an initial “coding” of the material, whereby it is not yet a matter of analyzing the meaning of individual interview statements, but merely of determining whether this statement could be relevant to answering our research question or not. We then identify the core statements of the material, essentially on the basis of deductive categories that we have already used in the development of the guide. If these core statements are not completely comprehensible or understandable on their own, this problem can often be solved by expanding the database. Only then are we able to compare core statements from different interviews, relate them to our theoretical context, and finally interpret them.

Qualitative content analysis claims to be open, systematic, and theory-driven. This means that the same criteria apply to them that we have already discussed at the beginning for the operational phase. We ensure the openness of the analysis primarily through the possibility of analyzing the transcribed interviews on the basis of categories that are developed on the text itself. So here it is important to “let the text speak for itself.” We always choose this approach when statements by the expert cannot be unequivocally assigned to one of our deductive categories. In this context, systematic means that the analysis is carried out according to explicit rules that ensure that its results are intersubjectively comprehensible. Of course, this also means that these steps of content analysis must be discussed at an appropriate point in project’s final publication, as they are not comprehensible from the presentation of the results of the analysis. The claim of the theory-led approach refers to the fact that the individual steps of the analysis are connected to our conceptual preliminary considerations and that the results of the analysis must finally be related to this theoretical context.

The individual steps of the content analysis are therefore based first of all on the categories that we have already developed in the process of operationalizing the

research question. Of course, this also means that every content analysis has the same context-specific characteristics as the expert survey itself. In this respect, there are no generally accepted categories for the content analysis of political science expert interviews, but there are distinct steps whose expediency is widely recognized.

4.1 Securing the Results: Transcription or Memory Protocol

With this first step of the analytical phase, regardless of the chosen form of securing data, a text is created from the expert interview that forms the basis for the subsequent analysis. However, this already largely exhausts the similarities between the two methods of securing results, because only on the basis of a transcription of the recorded expert interview can we carry out a completely rule-guided content analysis. In the case of the memory protocol, we are already dealing with a significant reduction in the material of the results, for which we can only claim to a very limited extent that it has been systematically extracted from the overall material. After all, only those data appear in the memory protocol that the researcher was able to write down in the course of the interview, or those that could be written down immediately after the interview. Accordingly, memory protocols instead of the recording of expert interviews can only be recommended for researchers with field experience. This is because the noting down of important text passages or information in the course of the interview requires that the researcher has internalized the categorical scheme in such a way that he can actually use the notes to capture those core statements that we will only identify in the process of content analysis with some effort and at a much later point in time on the basis of a rule-based procedure for analyzing the entire coded material.

Even though the memory protocol is primarily used for securing data and in this respect is clearly inferior to the transcription of recorded interviews, one advantage of this approach should not be underestimated. Kvale rightly points out that in this memory-based fixation of interview results due to the short time interval to the interview, impressions are also processed that cannot be documented at all in a tape recording, or at least not in the same way. This mainly concerns visual impressions, perceptions of social interaction, and the atmosphere of conversation (Kvale 1996, p. 161 f.). Above all, it may well happen that an expert provides access to supplementary written or visual material during the interview to illustrate his or her positions, but this cannot be given “outside the office.” Of course, such information is not found in the tape recording later, so that even if the decision is made in favor of the recorded interview, “active listening” and thus the writing of extensive notes by the researcher during the interview are required.

With regard to transcription, it should be kept in mind that due to the time required for this, there is often a tendency to transcribe only those passages of conversation that are considered important. This is of course understandable and certainly justified if an expert interview has not achieved the desired results. In other cases, however, such a shortening without clear reduction rules is not without problems. In any case, it should only be carried out by people who have taken part in the

expert interview themselves. Here, too, it seems imperative that notes are taken during the conversation about less central passages that should not be taken into account in the later course of an uncomplete transcription. The problem with such a transcription lies primarily in the fact that with that decision the material that has not been taken into account is lost.

An alternative to selective transcription that is worth considering is therefore to at least paraphrase parts of the text that are not considered immediately relevant on a first review. This ensures that we do not lose this material for later analysis. This aspect must be seen against the background that we are still working at this stage on the individual interview and therefore cannot yet fully understand whether the statements that were initially considered to be of little relevance will not regain significance in the light of the merging of information from several interviews. By a paraphrase we mean a textual summary of a statement by the expert in our own words, whereby the original information, interpretations, and opinions are still included. In particular, those elements of the statements that are only embellishing or are obviously redundant are eliminated. However, parts of the text for which such an approach is chosen should be paraphrased chronologically, otherwise the context of the expert’s statement may no longer be recognizable. Figure 4.1 compares transcription and paraphrasing with an interview statement. It turns out that the length of the text can be significantly reduced without losing essential information.

In principle, there are also no clear procedural rules for the transcription of expert interviews. However, it can be assumed that for political science expert interviews,

	I:	<i>In your view, what is the importance of traditional commercial banks in the financing of young biotechnology companies?</i>		
001 002 003 004 005 006 007 008 009 010 011 012 013 014 015 016 017 018 019 020 021 022 023	B:	Basically, it must be said that our banks in particular were not very interested in financing such companies. There were several reasons for this. On the one hand, the company founders had nothing to show for it apart from good ideas, which no one at the bank understood. Most founders could not provide the collateral that you usually have to have for loans. Another aspect is that the biotech entrepreneurs of the first hour were scientists who mostly lacked any business know-how. This then made bank executives particularly nervous.	001 002 003 004 005 006 007 008 009 010	In the expert's opinion, German banks were not very interested in financing biotechnology companies because they lacked an understanding of this industry and the founders lacked both assets to secure loans and business know-how.

Fig. 4.1 Transcription and paraphrasing compared (Source: own elaboration)

an orthographically edited version with references to phases in which the interviewee hesitated or in which he emphasized particular agreement or rejection is usually completely sufficient.

In addition, there are at least some basic rules that should be taken into account during this step. In particular, it is essential to mark those passages of the interview that are acoustically incomprehensible in the tape recording, for whatever reason. This is important in the later analysis, so that it can be seen that there was a longer statement by the expert with regard to a certain piece of information, which is no longer available to us for the analysis. Furthermore, when transcribing, it is essential to ensure that passages for which confidentiality has been agreed with the expert are not included in the transcription or at least marked as confidential information. If this step is omitted, there is a great risk that the corresponding information will no longer be recognized as confidential in the further analysis process.

Basic rules for the transcription of expert interviews:

- Transcriptions always involve questions and answers, clearly distinguished by codes such as I: (interviewer) and B: (respondent) and possibly further emphasized by italicizing the question or answer.
- Answer passages that are not clearly understandable or could only be transcribed incompletely for other reasons must be clearly marked (“unintelligible”).
- Information that allows conclusions about the person being interviewed will be anonymized in the case of confidentiality agreements; information leading to conclusions about third parties should generally be anonymized unless such data must necessarily be available for understanding the statements.
- When transcribing using word processing programs, generous page margins should be formatted to allow for the subsequent insertion of comments and notes.
- All lines of the transcription should be numbered so that individual passages can be easily found and clearly documented.

4.2 The Coding of the Text Material

With the completion of transcription, paraphrases, or a memory protocol, all expert interviews are available to us in text form. Depending on the chosen form of securing and depending on the duration and number of interviews conducted, this can initially be quite a comprehensive collection of material. It can be assumed that the complete transcription of a 2-h interview will certainly fill 25–30 DIN-A4 pages. Even with a complete paraphrase, about ten pages per interview will still be compiled. And even a detailed memory protocol of such a long interview will have a volume of 3–5 pages. Regardless of the form of security ultimately chosen, there are at least two reasons to reduce this volume.

In this next step, we want to get an overview of what information the expert interviews have provided. For this, it is necessary to develop an instrument that allows us to eliminate the parts of the interview that obviously do not contribute to answering our question. The reduction of the text volume is only a welcome side

effect here, as our primary concern is an evaluation of the material's content quality. This review of the material also gives us the chance to check to what extent our previous analytical categories, which we have developed in the process of operationalizing the research question, are already sufficient to systematically assign the interview statements. In this process, it will often be found that existing categories are usually not sufficient. The answer to this is not to consider all respective information as irrelevant. Rather, the principle of openness of qualitative content analysis requires that we develop new categories directly from the material found in these cases.

We refer to this approach at this point as "coding," well aware that this term carries the risk of being interpreted differently than intended here. In qualitative social research, coding is generally understood to mean attributing a specific manifestation to an explanatory variable (present/not present/partially present, etc.). Such an approach will also occupy us later. At this point, we are only coding with the aim of marking all passages of an interview considered relevant with hints that already have a theoretical quality. We therefore do not mark the text passages as important or unimportant but "index" the text material using conceptual categories.

This approach essentially has the same background that Meuser and Nagel refer to in their content-analytical model as condensation using headings (2005, p. 85). The difference, however, is that these authors generate their headings directly from the text and do not yet establish any reference to conceptual categories at this point. Such an approach has advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is certainly that headings close to the text meet the principle of openness of the analysis even more compared to using categorical codes. However, the disadvantage is that these headings must be standardized when comparing several interview transcripts or paraphrases in order to be able to actually assign passages on the same topic. This is hardly possible without at least an implicit conceptual background. Another disadvantage is the risk that interviewees may process social science terminologies or concepts in their statements. Adopting these as headings can be problematic because the use of such terminologies by the expert does not have to correspond to our or the actual (current) scientific discussion (Meuser and Nagel 2005, p. 87). Therefore, in the case of pure text-based structuring, the disadvantages seem to outweigh the advantages.

While Meuser and Nagel reject a connection to theoretical concepts for the work step of condensation or summarization, this is explicitly required in the content-analytical model by Gläser and Laudel (2006, p. 198). They assume that the theoretical considerations of the research project are taken into account throughout the entire analysis process precisely through the use of conceptual categories. This plausible argument coincides with the intention of categorical coding as proposed here. Gläser and Laudel also explicitly provide that the category system can be supplemented in the course of this process, and thus an acceptable compromise between openness and theory-guided analysis is established.

Before the coding of the material can actually take place, some methodological considerations must be made. We need to determine which material should be evaluated at all, how to determine the unit of analysis that should be coded, and which

categories that we had developed in the phase of preparing the guideline are best suited for this coding. With regard to the determination of the material, one will intuitively assume that of course all transcripts should be included in the evaluation. Ideally, this should also be the case. However, not all interviews may have been transcribed because they could be classified as unsuccessful from the outset. Other interviews may have been secured only partially in the form of a transcript, partially by paraphrasing, while others, for whatever reason, are only available in the form of a memory protocol. The great advantage of the coding proposed here is primarily that this procedure can be applied to all forms of securing. The memory protocol can also be indexed according to this procedure, although the researcher must always be aware that in this case he is no longer on the level of the expert's perception of reality, because the memory protocol already represents an interpretative summary of the interview by the researcher.

With the determination of the analysis unit, we define the scope of a passage of an interview for which we want to carry out a coding each time. These could be individual sentences, paragraphs, or sections of the text. Basically, it can be said that individual sentences usually contain too little information to be meaningfully coded, while the coding for entire sections becomes too vague. Therefore, there is much reason to suggest coding at the level of paragraphs, taking care during transcription that either each answer represents a paragraph or—for longer answers—a paragraph separation is always made when the expert noticeably introduced a new thought.

Finally, we need to determine which conceptual categories, that we have previously developed, are suitable for categorical encoding. During the description of the process of operationalizing research questions into interview questions, we took two intermediate steps by first defining dimensions of analysis and subsequently question complexes. Assuming that the expert interview could be relatively well-controlled along the interview guide, we must assume that the analysis dimensions for coding are still too abstractly formulated and do not yet sufficiently describe the respective unit of investigation to be coded. However, the situation is different with our question complexes. These too were derived from the relevant research literature or at least through conceptual considerations and thus meet the requirement for a theory-guided approach. In contrast to the analysis dimensions, they are sufficiently specified so that they allow a meaningful coding. However, they do not yet contain any possible manifestations of the explanatory factors, so that we do not make any premature interpretation during the coding process. Figure 4.2 shows, based on our example of the financing problems of young biotechnology companies, how such categorical coding can be done.

These categories now serve us for coding. In our example, three of the previously developed categories could clearly be related to statements from the expert. In two other cases, however, this was not possible. Regarding the missing business knowledge of the company founders, no corresponding observation dimension had been considered in the conceptual preliminary work of the study, because the research concept initially focused primarily on the design of the institutional environment of the companies and therefore dealt less with “internal” conditions. The reference to the failure of the German venture capital company could not be clearly assigned to

	I:	<i>In your view, what is the significance of traditional commercial banks in the financing of young biotechnology companies?</i>	
001 002 003 004 005 006 007 008 009 010	B:	Basically, it must be said that our banks in particular were not very interested in financing such companies. There were several reasons for this. On the one hand, the company founders had nothing to show for it apart from good ideas, which no one at the bank understood. Most founders could not provide the collateral that you usually have to have for loans.	Institutional Configuration of the Financial System
011 012 013 014 015 016 017 018 019 020 021 022 023		Another aspect is that the biotech entrepreneurs of the first hour were scientists who mostly lacked any business know-how. This then made bank executives particularly nervous.	Lack of business knowledge of the company's founders
	I:	<i>Which sources of financing dominate in Germany today in the early phase of the founding of biotechnology companies?</i>	
024 025 026 027 028 029	B:	There is no clear answer to this question. A not inconsiderable number of companies start with state subsidies alone. Significantly fewer young companies already have access to venture capital.	Mode of financing innovations
030 031 032 033 034 035		This is also due to the fact that most of the venture capital comes from foreign investors and is therefore not sufficiently available. In Germany, people are still very cautious about this.	Availability of venture capital
036 037 038 039 040 041		The fiasco of the German Venture Financing Company in the 1980s may still have an effect today.	Fiasco of the German Venture Financing Company

Fig. 4.2 The categorical coding of interview texts (Source: own elaboration)

the institutional configuration of the financial system in this first run, because this company no longer existed at the time of the study and was therefore no longer part of the current constellation of actors in the German financial system. In both cases, therefore, text-close categories have been formed, the theoretical relevance of which must be evaluated at a later stage of the analysis.

Key preliminary decisions for categorical coding:

- *Determination of the scope of the material to be analyzed:* which interviews should be converted into text form using which method of securing?
- *Determination of the unit of analysis:* at which level should coding be done? In principle, individual sentences, paragraphs, or sections are possible. Often the choice of a paragraph that contains a complete statement from the expert is the appropriate choice.
- *Determination of the categories by which coding should be done:* particular attention should be paid to ensuring that the categories are formulated in a sufficiently concrete way but should not yet contain a definition of characteristics.

4.3 The Merging of Interviews and the Identification of Key Statements

The texts coded in this way now allow for three further sub-steps of the content analysis to be undertaken.

Firstly, on the basis of the categorical coding, we can see at which points within the transcription of an interview there are statements by the expert that belong thematically together. We can summarize them under the categories mentioned, so that with this step the chronology of the original interview is abandoned. In this process, however, we keep the original line numbers with which the statements were marked in the transcription. In this way, in the event of later uncertainties about the context in which the expert statements were made, the chronological presentation can be reverted to at any time.

Once this task has been successfully completed, it can be decided which of the statements are still relevant for further analysis. If they merely represent duplications of already existing representations of facts, the redundant statements can be deleted. In this respect, this step also leads to a further reduction in the material without losing important content of the expert interview. Categories that we have only developed on the text in the previous step are still retained in this phase and are not combined (unless we have assigned them several times). Using our category “institutional configuration of the financial system” as an example, Fig. 4.3 shows the progress made so far. Thus, within this interview, two additional text passages were identified that had been coded in the first review using the mentioned category. One of them was evaluated as redundant and deleted. Although it represents a particularly pointed assessment of the deficits of the German financial system in the early financing phase of young biotechnology companies, it does not provide any additional informational value. The statement thus plays no further role in the course of the analysis. However, if it turns out at this stage that only a small amount of content from various interviews can be summarized under the chosen categories, the categories need to be revised. Because the merging of information from the total number of conducted interviews is a central progress in analysis, without which we cannot enter the next phase. One reason why the selected categories do not fulfill their function at this point could be mainly due to the fact that they already contain

Category:		Institutional Configuration of the Financial System			Interview: D-F-02	
001	B:	You are of course addressing a	145	B:	It is certainly of interest to you that very specific forms of financing for the biotechnology industry have developed in many countries. In the U.S, of course, venture capital financing clearly dominates. And in this context, it is remarkable that German banks are also heavily involved in the American market.	
002		very sore point. Basically, it has to	146			
003		be said that our banks in	147			
004		particular were not very	148			
005		interested in financing such	149			
006		companies. There were several	150			
007		reasons for this. For one thing, the	151			
008		company founders had nothing to	152			
009		show apart from good ideas that	153			
010		nobody at the bank understood.	154			
011		Most of the founders were unable	155			
012		to provide the collateral that is				
013		usually required for loans.				
093		Of course, it is madness to ask				
094		biotech researchers who want to				
095		set up a company for collateral for				
096		a start-up loan.				

Fig. 4.3 The merging of thematically similar text passages within an interview (Source: own elaboration)

too specific observation instructions that were not relevant for every expert from his subjective perception and were therefore not addressed in the interview. As a result, the categories would have to be formulated in a more abstract way.

Each of our interviews is now categorically structured and condensed (meaning, redundant statements, as well as statements without recognizable relevant information content are shortened) at this point. On this basis, we can now, secondly, merge the information from all interviews, category by category.

With this step, it now becomes apparent for the first time to the researcher to what extent and from which perception perspective individual topics were addressed by several experts. At this point, we also get a first systematic impression of whether and to what extent the information and assessments of the experts coincide or contradict. The example presented in Fig. 4.4 describes a quite typical phenomenon in the analysis of expert interviews. Although the statements we found in the two interviews do not fundamentally contradict each other, they do offer different assessments of the actor constellation in the German financial system, which will become important in the further course of analysis and interpretation.

On the basis of this categorical summary of all expert interviews, it is, thirdly, possible to identify their core statements and thus prepare the results for later theory-guided analysis and interpretation.

With this step, we consequently detach ourselves from the original data of the interviews, which we had secured by transcription or otherwise. In the case of paraphrased interviews, this work step is obviously less laborious, because we had already freed the data material from existing embellishments and redundancies in an earlier phase. This is of course even more true for securing by a memory protocol, as in this case we had immediately after the interview documented those statements as the core statements. This differentiation also points out once again what

Category: Institutional Configuration of the Financial System					
Interview: D-F-002			Interview: D-F-001		
001	B:	You are of course addressing a	084	B:	It is certainly true
002		very sore point.	085		that our major banks have so far
003		Basically, it has to be said	086		not yet discovered this business
004		that our banks in particular	087		segment. But this is only half the
005		had little interest	088		truth. The situation on the ground
006		in financing such companies.	089		is sometimes quite different.
007		There were several reasons for this.	090		The city savings bank XXX, for
008		Firstly, the company founders had	091		example, has already provided
009		nothing to show apart from good	092		venture capital at the beginning
010		ideas that nobody at the bank	093		of the 1990s and used it very
011		understood. Assets, which are	094		successfully in financing start-ups.
012		usually required for loans most	095		And there are now more and
013		founders could not provide.	096		more VC providers on the German
			097		Market.

Fig. 4.4 The categorical consolidation of the interviews (Source: own elaboration)

Category: Institutional Configuration of the Financial System	
Low interest on the part of banks in corporate financing in the biotechnology industry due to a lack of understanding of the characteristics of the sector and a lack of collateral among company founders.	Interview: D-F-002, Lines 001-015
While large commercial banks have so far hardly participated in corporate financing in the biotechnology sector, regional venture capital financing exists at the local level with public savings banks, while international VC investors are increasingly present on the German market	Interview: D-F-001, Lines 084-099

Fig. 4.5 The identification of core statements (Source: own elaboration)

differences exist in terms of systematic procedure between transcription and memory protocols with regard to the identification of core statements. Ultimately, only transcription can ensure that the core statements relevant for analysis are extracted from a complete backup of the original material on the basis of clearly defined rules. Even the processing of shortened transcriptions, of paraphrases, and especially of a memory protocol is associated with interpretive decisions of the researcher, which can only be understood intersubjectively to a very limited extent for third parties. It is important—again only in the case of transcription and paraphrasing—that the reference to the original interview data is also maintained in this work step, so that the determination of core statements can be checked at any time against the original material. We continue to identify these core statements at the level of the observation categories that we used in the first run of coding (see Fig. 4.5).

4.4 Expansion of the Database

At this point, we have essentially condensed and structured our material to the extent that we could carry out the theory-guided analysis and interpretation. However, during the course of the previous content analysis, it was noticed that not all interview statements could be assigned to those deductive categories that we had developed in the phase of data collection preparation. When such a phenomenon occurs, it is always an important indication that we are still missing data for the interpretation of the empirical results of our investigation. Therefore, the task at this point is first to expand our database.

This step of analysis is not strictly part of the content analysis itself, but a crucial aspect of optimizing expert interviews. In the expansion of the database, information is supplemented that could not yet be fully determined on the basis of the interviews. This can be done, for example, by a telephone inquiry with the interview partner, but also by using alternative methodological approaches. The expansion of the database usually takes place with the aim of obtaining a plausibility check for an interview statement through a “second source.”

This step is not provided for in many other content analysis methods. This is primarily because such studies only carry out content analyses and therefore only need to process the original material for which such content analyses are intended. In qualitative political research, however, as we have already discussed in the first chapter, there are many good reasons for a methodologically pluralistic approach. In this respect, we have the opportunity here to add to the knowledge gained from expert interviews by researching other sources and thus also to compensate for a fundamental limitation in data collection through expert interviews, which consists in the fact that such interviews often provide relevant, but not always complete, information.

In this respect, the expansion of the database carried out here differs fundamentally from the work step of “explication” as proposed in Mayring’s content analysis model. There, data is supplemented only to ensure understanding of the content statement, while we are concerned with clarifying the phenomenon addressed in the interview. At this point, we therefore do not primarily want to increase the expressiveness of the data material obtained through interviews, but we want to clarify whether the phenomenon mentioned there, but not fully characterized, is of further importance for our analysis or not.

We can illustrate this using the example of the interview statement about the “fiasco of the venture capital company” (cf. Figure 4.2).

This hint from one of the expert interviews could not be assigned to any of our previous categories in the first run of coding, especially because a statement was made about the effects of the failure of this company, but no further data on the context were provided in the interview itself. For this reason, we had chosen a “close to text” coding, which instructs us to clarify by expanding the database and to find out how we can proceed with this information in the theory-guided analysis and interpretation. Since this information originates from an expert interview, we can also directly relate the data to be collected additionally to this statement. We proceed in two steps. Firstly, we convert (analogous to the representation in Fig. 4.5)

the interview statement into a core statement, as we must assume at this point that it could be significant for further analysis.

In the present case, the necessary expansion of the database could be realized through a literature search (Fig. 4.6). In a journal for banking, an article was found that provided detailed information about the context of the founding, business

Category: Fiasco of the venture capital company		
Negative effects of the failure of the German Venture Capital Company in the 1980s	Interview: D-F-002, Lines 038-041	The Venture Capital Company (WFG) was founded in June 1975 as a joint initiative of the Federal Government and 29 German commercial banks with an initial share capital of just under EUR 5 million, which was increased to about EUR 25 million in the following years. The company's goal was to secure financing for young technology companies that had no prospect of access to traditional forms of financing. However, this early form of a public-private partnership failed primarily due to the lack of a stock market segment that also specialized in high-tech companies as an exit option for venture capital providers. Under these conditions, the WFG succeeded only to a very limited extent in bringing venture capital-financed companies to the stock exchange. In total, the company recorded only two such IPOs between 1975 and 1984, although it had more than 20 companies in its portfolio on an annual average. In 1984, the German government withdrew from the WFG, while the banks involved decided not to make any further investments. For the Federal Government, the involvement in the WFG was extremely loss-making, as it had provided a guarantee for the company's deficits amounting to EUR 14.8 million of the total of just under EUR 19.8 million (Büschgen 1985: 224)

Fig. 4.6 Expanding the database (Source: own elaboration)

activity, and causes of the failure of this company (Büschgen 1985). The article presented a series of facts that will allow us in the further course to assign the original interview information to one of our deductively developed categories. Important aspects in this context are that the venture capital company was a cooperation between the German federal government and a larger number of domestic commercial banks, i.e., in today's reading, an early attempt to establish a public-private partnership. Furthermore, we learn that a major reason for the failure of the project was the lack of a stock market specialized in high-tech companies in Germany, which—as experiences from other countries show—is of fundamental importance for generating returns from venture capital investments (and profits) for investors.

So in this case, we have not only been able to clarify what the venture capital company was all about. More importantly, we have found an explanation for why the expert rates this phenomenon as a disaster that still has negative effects on the current situation.

The aim of expanding the database is primarily to derive maximum benefit from a methodologically pluralistic research design. Even though this is not a technique of content analysis, it becomes clear that we can significantly improve its quality with this step, because we have not only neutralized the weaknesses and sources of error of individual research methods, as initially mentioned, but also increased the scientific yield through their combination. Given the substantial state investments in the provision of venture capital for the German biotechnology industry in the 1990s, the failure of the venture capital company offers at least one explanatory approach as to why public innovation policy “on the second attempt” chose different instruments. We will return to this in the next chapter.

The Interpretational Phase: Making (Scientifically Relevant) Sense of Expert Interviews

5

5.1 Theory-Guided Analysis and Interpretation

Basically, in this final phase of the analysis, the core statements of the expert interviews and the supplementary data obtained from other methodological approaches are analyzed and interpreted in the light of the theoretical references of the research project. We are therefore dealing with two steps at this point, which have different objectives.

The theory-guided analysis initially aims to further develop our previous analysis categories in relation to theory. In the process of developing the interview guide, we had first determined what we want to observe (analysis dimensions). Then it was decided how we want to observe (complexes of questions). Furthermore, we adopted these determinations as analytical categories for coding our interviews. The last step of the analysis must now be to relate our observations to relevant political science concepts. This means specifically that we must attempt, based on the information from the expert interviews, to translate what we have observed into disciplinary terms and concepts. In doing so, we meet the second requirement of a theory-guided analysis, which presupposes not only the operationalization of the research question under theoretical premises but especially the reconnection of the results to these theoretical contexts.

We can illustrate this once again using the example of our analysis category “institutional configuration of the financial system.” Here we had already (see Fig. 4.5) formulated core statements that we assigned to this category. Furthermore, we had defined the category “fiasco of the venture financing company” by expanding our database to the extent that we could determine that behind it referred to an institutional solution for a typical resource problem for young technology companies. In this respect this observation can also be assigned to the first-mentioned category of analysis.

For the later interpretation, however, we must improve the significance and the theoretical quality of the category. It is therefore necessary to clarify by which

specific characteristics, reflected in political science concepts, an institutional configuration of the financial system can be further determined. And above all, it needs to be clarified by what means it becomes recognizable, whether an institutional configuration of a subsystem of the national innovation system has promoting or inhibiting effects on the generation of innovations. Since the aim of the study concerned both the description of such institutional conditions as well as in the identification of causal relationships between innovation performance and the setup of the institutional environment, the further development of the category must contain both descriptive and explanatory elements.

As a result, we can assign the three core statements, which we have considered exemplarily in this context, to several different subcategories, each of which has now gained in theoretical quality by reference to relevant political science concepts (see Fig. 5.1). Thus, with one core statement, we have received evidence that bank-centered financial systems indeed provide or at least have provided dysfunctional conditions in relation to innovation financing in the biotechnology sector. While

Category: Institutional Configuration of the Financial System			
Core Statement	Interview	Data base expansion	Sub-Category
Low interest of Banks in corporate financing in biotechnology industry due to lack of understanding of the characteristics of the sector and lack of securities of company founders.	Interview: D-F-002. Lines 001–015	-	Implications of a Bank-Centered Financial System
While large commercial banks have so far hardly participated in corporate development in the biotechnology sector, regional venture capital financing exists at the local level at public savings banks, while international VC investors are increasingly present on the German market.	Interview: D-F-001. Lines 084–099	-	Functional and aceutenant differentiation of the financial system → Hybridization
Negative effects of the failure of the German Venture Capital Company in the 80s.	Interview: D-F-002. Lines 038–041	The Venture Capital Company (WFG) was founded in June 1975 as a popular initiative of the Federal Government...	Institutional inefficiency, "political heritage", "policy learning", coordination problems of public-private cooperation

Fig. 5.1 The further development of the analysis categories (Source: own elaboration)

loans as a form of financing for company founders in this area are usually not an alternative, the commercial banks in Germany did not make a significant contribution to the provision of venture capital. Another interview information, however, also indicated that the financial system was already in a process of functional and actor-related differentiation, because banks have at least at a local level, where they could establish close contacts with founders, started venture capital initiatives and thus developed alternatives to traditional credit-based corporate financing. In addition, a completely new group of actors appeared in this subsystem with foreign VC investors. All this suggests that the German financial system is increasingly developing into a hybrid system, which has by no means lost its fundamental bank-centered character but has been supplemented by new forms of financing and new market actors that usually dominate in capital market-based financial systems.

The reference to the failure of the venture capital company, which we researched further in retrospect, can be interpreted in three ways. Firstly, it was a remarkable example of institutional inefficiency, resulting from a half-hearted reform of the financing conditions in the German financial market. The establishment of this company created an offer of risk capital, but not the institutional conditions under which investors are willing to make such investments. In the terminology of the concept of “policy learning,” this could be seen as an incomplete transfer of a supposedly more functional institutional solution (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000).

Secondly, this failure of that company can be related to the institutional solution established by German innovation policy in the 1990s to promote venture capital investments. It is noticeable that this renewed attempt to provide state incentives for investments in technology companies was structured in a considerably different way.

Through a newly founded technology investment company (tbg), between 1989 and 2002, three programs were initiated, through which more than 370 million € were made available, which private venture capital providers could use to refinance their investments. Such investments were made in about 170 German biotechnology companies. The technology investment program (BTU) launched in 1995 was particularly important for the establishment of a private venture capital industry. The essential feature of this program was the so-called co-investor model established by it. The tbg provided an investment of up to 50% as a silent participation, if a private “lead investor” participated with at least the same amount. While the private lead investor managed the tbg’s deposit in the first years after the company’s foundation, the tbg in return granted a 50 percent default risk in case the company failed. With this structure, the technology investment program was primarily of interest to private venture capital financiers, who accounted for more than 50% of all investors in the BTU. The remaining investors were 20% investment companies of banks and savings banks, 14% other private investors, and to a very small extent specialized funds or companies. It is therefore obvious that the federal government had chosen a model that explicitly no longer aimed at the majority participation of traditional actors in the German financial system.

Such a strategy can be linked from a political science perspective with the concepts of “political path dependence” or “institutional path dependence,” which assume that new institutional decisions are always to a considerable extent

determined by previous decisions. Although incremental change is possible to some extent, the decisions of the past usually do not allow for a fundamental change (Pierson 2000; Ostheim and Schmidt 2007). In this respect, the incentives were restructured in such a way that primarily new actors in the German financial system made use of them, but the basic state risk assumption for the program was not changed. And this is especially because of the conditions of the German financial system (especially with regard to the tax treatment of venture capital returns) under which most private venture capital investors considered the risk without state security as too high.

And thirdly, this example underlines the importance of fundamental coordination problems that have been identified by political science research in various forms of cooperation between public and private actors. These include in particular questions of controllability of arrangements with shared responsibility, the question of sustainable relief of public budgets, as well as questions of transparency and control of such forms of cooperation (cf. Strünck and Heinze 2005).

For the question to what extent a theory-guided analysis and interpretation of expert interviews is possible, the original objective of the survey plays a very decisive role. We initially differentiated between the three different types of knowledge and established a relationship between these types of knowledge and the interest in knowledge of the analysis. So far, we have seen that for the study of efficiency of innovation policies the relevant institutional structures played a significant role for which the collection of context knowledge was important. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of the core statements from the conducted interviews could be related to predominantly institutionalist theories of political science. These “overlaps” are not so easily to be expected when the research project aims more strongly at the collection of operational knowledge.

This was now certainly the case in the study on the Franco-German government coordination, especially with regard to the analytical dimension of “actor interactions.” In this dimension, it was to be examined which aspects of interpersonal exchange between the responsible actors on the German and French side have effects on the coordination performance. In this respect, it was much less about institutional aspects than about the question of intensity, especially in terms of relevance of the relationships between the actors involved. Since in the specific case of the medium-term financial planning of the European Union the Blaesheim process had no significance at the level of national governments, the question directly focused on the intensity of regular interaction at the ministerial levels. The study could show that the focus on operational knowledge indeed led to significant results (Fig. 5.2).

We are dealing here with question complexes for which there is only a limited offer of theoretical concepts in political science. This is easily understandable because our question complexes mostly concern interactions between individual actors, or individual members of corporate actors, with which the discipline only deals in marginal areas. Nevertheless, important information about the internal cooperation mechanisms of the bilateral coordination could be gained from the expert interviews.

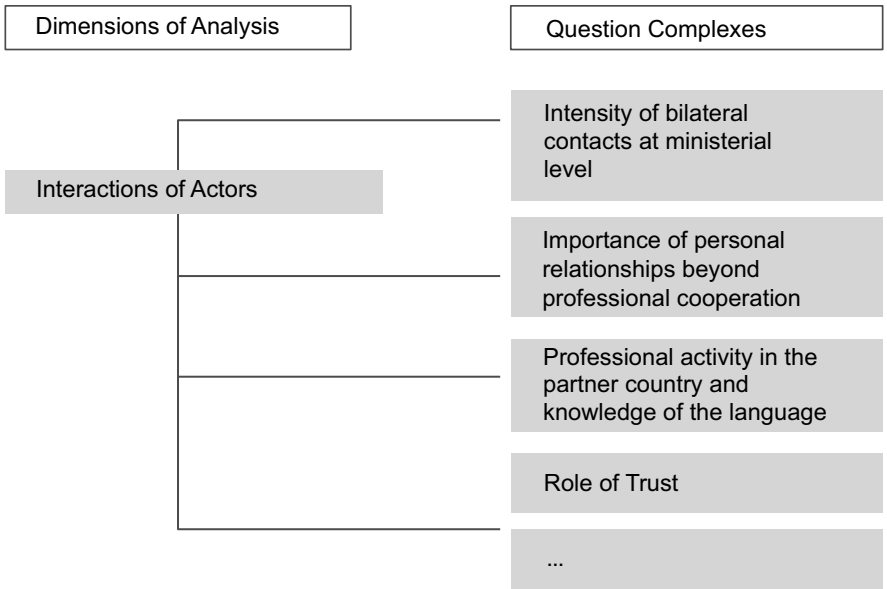


Fig. 5.2 Operationalization of the analysis dimension “actor interactions” (Source: own elaboration)

For example, it became evident that there was no quantitative difference in the intensity of bilateral coordination (in terms of contact frequency) among the responsible actors at the ministerial level compared to the contact frequency in interministerial coordination within the respective national bureaucracy. All respondents had good to very good knowledge of the language of the respective partner country; the majority of respondents had worked for several years in the “mirror ministry” of the partner country as part of a civil servant exchange. For this reason, many of the respondents also had personal contacts with actors from the other administration beyond their professional activities.

These insights have certainly not been satisfactorily theoretically reflected in political science so far, but they can nevertheless be of considerable importance for the interpretation of coordination performance in bilateral Franco-German relations, because they provide an explanation for why, even in times of growing tensions between the political leaderships of the two countries, bilateral political coordination has not come to a standstill. In a certain way, it routinely produces joint strategy drafts, which can be drawn upon at any time by the political leaderships when a joint initiative at the European level becomes necessary despite various differences of opinion and bilateral conflicts.

It seems obvious that qualitative expert interviews, depending on the type of scientific question of the research project—and therefore also depending on the type of knowledge that is particularly addressed in the interview—have different potential for theoretical generalization. Nevertheless, this theory-guided analysis is a crucial step toward the interpretation of the results.

This interpretation is therefore the second and final step, with the boundaries between theory-guided analysis and interpretation being fluid, so that they can be conceptually separated, but they merge into each other in research practice. Basically, one can say that the interpretation of expert interviews does not provide universally valid indications. The perspectives developed here naturally depend primarily on the research question. However, if this interpretation is based on the basic steps of content analysis described above, it is ensured in any case that it meets the quality criteria of the qualitative expert interviews.

If the study is further based on a method-pluralistic research design, we do not make an isolated interpretation of the expert interviews at this point. Rather, all data from the different methodological approaches are combined and interpreted with regard to the research question. Only on this basis we bring out the respective strengths of the individual approaches, “neutralize” their weaknesses, and exclude possible sources of error in the empirical analysis as far as possible.

So far, we have seen that the planning, implementation, and analysis of expert interviews are a quite complex and demanding method of field research which consists of a series of steps, each of which has considerable potential for problems. Therefore, in conclusion, the basic phases of expert interviews in political science will be reflected upon once again, and an attempt will be made to outline at least some solutions for such problems. From our own research practice, but also from the knowledge of numerous studies that have used expert interviews, five main problem areas can be identified, which extend over all these phases of planning and conducting expert interviews. The greatest risks for a failure of an expert interview lie already in the planning phase and concern steps that take place before the researcher even comes into personal contact with his potential interview partners. These problem areas are the most serious ones, because they can hardly be corrected in the course of the analysis.

5.2 The Insufficient Justification for Conducting Expert Interviews

At first, a quite common problem is the insufficient justification for why expert interviews should be conducted at all within the framework of a qualitative analysis. We had initially discussed some development trends that provide very basic indications as to why this methodological approach is gaining importance in the analysis of politics. However, this is different from the obligation to justify. It is therefore by no means the case that certain political science issues automatically require an expert survey. A necessity for this can always only arise exclusively from the researcher’s own research question.

In this context, there are certainly sensible steps that can be helpful in deciding for or against an expert inquiry. Working through the respective state of research is a basic prerequisite. What does the available research literature already say about the problem that I want to address in my analysis? Where are there possibly research gaps that I can at least partially close with my own analysis? And what was the

methodology approached in scientific studies that have been conducted in my field of study?

These are all questions that brings one closer to the assessment of the necessity of an expert interview. Research gaps could, for example, exist precisely because for a further investigation of the phenomenon, the source and data material beyond the expert interview was not sufficient. Existing empirical studies that have dealt with similar issues and have relied on expert interviews can be a strong indication that they are also useful for one's own investigation, if not even indispensable.

Once the question of the necessity of expert interviews has been answered positively, it is also necessary to consider (and justify) what importance these interviews should have for the research project. This aspect also touches very much on the plausibility of the research design. Thus, expert interviews can be the main methods of data collection, but they can also have a more complementary and supportive function. In the first case, it must be explained why primarily such interviews should be relied upon; in the second case, it must be specified for which aspects of the research question expert interviews are considered useful. For both justifications, it is essential to consider what information the experts in question might have and why this information cannot to be collected by alternative methods.

Once this aspect is clarified, we need a critical discussion about the implications of the previously discussed methodological risks of expert interviews for the research project. It is often easily argued that expert interviews are central to one's own investigation. But of course, this also means that the success of the entire project depends on factors that the researcher cannot fully control. Therefore, it should certainly be detailed what consequences the partial or complete failure of these interviews would have for individual aspects of the project.

Important steps for justifying expert interviews:

- *Knowing the state of research:* identifying "research gaps," or cases that have not been referred to in relevant scientific research so far.
- *Review of the methodological approach in research works on similar problems:* here, important hints and justifications for the use of expert interviews could be found.
- *Critical discussion of the potentials and risks of expert interviews:* this is a central part of the presentation of the research design. A critical discussion always includes the evaluation of alternative methodological approaches.

5.3 The Lack of Reflection on the Type of Knowledge that Is to be Gained through Expert Interviews

A reflection on the type of knowledge that is primarily to be collected by interviewing experts is an important prerequisite for adhering to the quality criteria for such expert interviews. Therefore, it is surprising that this aspect is rarely found in the justification of expert interviews. It is often unreflectively assumed that the potential expert will already have the knowledge that is needed for the research project.

A discussion of the different types of knowledge is, therefore, essential. This applies first and foremost with regard to the quality criterion of intersubjective comprehensibility. Without a reflection on different types of knowledge, it is hardly possible to assess for third parties whether the relevant experts were interviewed at all. Furthermore, there are implications regarding the theory-guided approach to the interview, because it can be assumed that in political science we have a much broader offer of theories on context and institutional frameworks of politics than on the inner logic of political processes. In terms of the criterion of openness, studies that aim at operational knowledge need to make appropriate preparations in the planning of the data collection instrument, because experts will only be willing to reveal this operational knowledge under certain conditions.

Furthermore, it must be considered that this differentiation into different types of knowledge is a conceptual assistance for the researcher in the planning and execution of expert interviews, but the expert himself will be not aware of it. Therefore, a researcher's decision in favor of a specific type of knowledge also has implications for the requirement of keeping control of interview situations. It can be assumed that an expert will find it easier to convey contextual knowledge, while operational knowledge may have to be elicited. In this respect, the different types of questions that we discussed in the third chapter are important because they are particularly suitable in different ways for asking about operational or contextual knowledge.

An additional problem exists with regard to interpretive knowledge. While it is certainly possible to actively ask for this type of knowledge, it is also conveyed to varying degrees in all other answers given by the expert. It is therefore the task of the subsequent analysis to identify stocks of interpretive knowledge in the expert's statements, provided they are relevant to the answering of the question at all.

These different types of knowledge also influence the way in which the research results are presented later. It is quite common that statements from expert interviews are quoted at length in the final work. And in many cases, this is done obviously without any reflection on the gain in knowledge that this entails for the reader. In this respect, it can be assumed that when collecting contextual knowledge there is much less reason to quote verbatim from interviews than it is the case with operational knowledge. With contextual knowledge, interview data can be treated similarly to information that has been collected from documents or other sources. The situation is different when generating operational knowledge. Here, verbatim quotes can be quite appropriate to a greater extent for classifying the expert and interpreting his information and interpretations, especially because there is often no alternative access to such information.

It should also be considered that typical risks associated with conducting expert interviews are not equally relevant for all types of knowledge. It can be assumed that an expert's inclination to answer in the sense of social desirability is much higher for operational and interpretive knowledge than for contextual knowledge. This is the case because contextual knowledge can be much more easily verified based on alternative sources.

Recommendations for reflection on different types of knowledge:

- *Justification of different types of knowledge needed for the research:* it should be made clear in particular what reasons speak for focusing on a certain type of knowledge.
- *Explanation of the methodological consequences of focusing on a type of knowledge:* this concerns both the design of the survey instrument and the necessary discussion about special risks of expert interviews focusing on a specific type of knowledge.
- *Reflection on the appropriate way of presenting results from expert interviews:* as a rule, when generating contextual knowledge, there is much less need to quote verbatim from expert interviews.
- *Conducting a pretest:* this should not only check whether the interview questions are actually understood by the expert but also whether he gives appropriate answers to questions aimed at a certain type of knowledge.

For the concrete interview planning, the necessary reflection on the different types of knowledge is generally sufficient if the methodological approach is justified in terms of a particular type of knowledge on which the interviews are targeted at.

5.4 The Selection of the “Wrong” Interview Partners and the Failure to Acquire the “Right” Interview Partners

When planning expert interviews, there is often a certain tendency to contact those people in relevant organizations who are located at the highest possible hierarchical level. This is apparently associated with the expectation that these personalities could inform about the respective subject of investigation with particular authority and authenticity.

However, this assumption can prove to be wrong in retrospect, because often the willingness and ability to provide relevant information for the research process are overestimated for representatives of higher hierarchical levels. Quite apart from the fact that such a preference often faces a low probability of success, one must also consider that ministers, state secretaries, or board members of companies are often far less involved in concrete negotiation that takes place before decision-making. Therefore, very often interviewing experts from middle hierarchical levels produces much better results, also because this group of people usually has much longer experience within the organization and can therefore provide important information about continuities and changes in relation to the problem area to be researched.

Another problem is the often insufficient research regarding suitable interview partners. We have already problematized that even in large organizations, usually no more than one or two contact persons can be identified who were actually confronted with the respective research subject in practice. This also means that—should there be no consent from these persons to an expert interview—the search

for other members of the organization is of little sense. In addition, the number of actors involved in a policy process is often underestimated. This is of course also due to the fact that not every political science research work can reconstruct political processes over their entire temporal course or consider the emergence and development of an institutional configuration since its existence. Often, however, research periods are chosen too short, and even drastic developments of the recent past are no longer taken into account.

A negative effect on the quality of an expert inquiry will certainly also be that the researcher has not defined his sample in a comprehensible way with regard to his own research question. For example, if the research question targets a specific societal or political conflict, then it is little plausible if expert interviews are only conducted with representatives of one conflict party. This is not so much about considering all involved actors, but at least about the inclusion of all relevant conflict positions.

One can counteract an ultimately low-yield selection of experts in advance by seeking personal conversation with potential experts during the planning phase. The decision about the type of initial contact is often significant. We have already described the advantages of various communication channels in this regard. In this context, one of the advantages of direct conversation (preferably, as described, initiated by a previous letter) is that one can already explore backgrounds about the actual "expert status" of the conversation partner and often receive hints to other relevant personalities. Moreover, access to these is usually facilitated by the previous contact.

If all experts, of whom we are relatively sure that they are the suitable conversation partners, have been identified, the next problematic hurdle is to actually win them over for the interview. If we do not want to risk the failure of the entire expert inquiry at this point, only persistence and flexibility will help. After all, one must assume that the researcher, compared to the expert, has to invest significantly higher financial and time resources to actually realize the interviews. Even if the expert is aware of this, it usually does not change the fact that desired conversation partners have various strategies to fend off the researcher's request. For example, the expert's hint that he "can't say anything about this topic" is popular, but usually unfounded. Also, the argument that the organization has decided not to do such interviews due to the current workload is not necessarily true.

In this situation, the only thing that helps is to explain to the expert in detail the central role the interview plays for the analysis. In this regard, we have already argued that the attribution of an expert role is indeed tied to certain characteristics, but ultimately it is made by the researcher himself based on the respective research question. Therefore, one should not shy away from defending one's own decision to the selected expert. Also, the offer to send further information can occasionally help. For this it is useful to think about how the expert's interest in an interview could be increased. The main question would be what information could he draw from this interview that could be useful to him in his professional context. Of course, a potential expert can only assess this if he has knowledge about the goals, methods, and scope of the research project (Brandl and Klinger 2006). In some cases, the

access problem also presents itself in such a way that initially employees, assistants, or secretaries have to be “overcome” to get in contact with the expert himself. This does not necessarily have to be a disadvantage if it is possible to convince these “gatekeepers” of the necessity of the interview. At least one can trust this group of people to have significantly more influence on the expert’s schedule than the researcher has.

Above all, flexibility is a key criterion for the successful acquisition of expert interviews. These can be conducted at airports and in train station lounges if necessary, even though these are certainly not the optimal conditions. Flexibility should therefore already be ensured in advance of contacting experts, so that as many alternatives as possible can be offered in personal contact.

Tips for overcoming access problems in expert acquisition:

- *Thorough research of potential interview partners:* central aspects here can be the position, the biographical background, and the duration of the expert’s stay within the organization.
- *Personal contact in advance of the appointment scheduling:* usually this makes it easier to convince the expert of the importance of the interview.
- *Persistence and self-confident appearance:* the selection of the expert was made by the researcher based on conceptual and methodological considerations. This should be made clear to the expert.
- *Flexibility:* the qualitative expert interview is a resource-intensive undertaking. Here, one should not jeopardize success by too strict guidelines regarding optimal place and time.

5.5 The Suboptimal Yield from Expert Interviews

Even if all previously described problem areas have been addressed, there is still a risk that an expert interview yields a suboptimal return, for at least three reasons: firstly, because the researcher has underestimated the total effort of such interviews in the phase of planning and consequently cannot adhere to all necessary steps or all established rules of the procedure; secondly, because the interview situation has developed unexpectedly and the researcher was no longer able to control the interview appropriately; and thirdly, because the results of the expert interviews were not evaluated and interpreted in a theory-guided manner. Therefore, at this point, we are primarily interested in planning and implementation problems.

The entire process of planning, conducting, and evaluating expert interviews consists, as we have seen, of so many individual steps that it cannot be fully anticipated in advance where adherence to the research plan could be at risk. This presupposes that the researcher has actually undertaken such planning. This is strongly recommended at this point. A solid planning of an expert survey will generously allocate the respective timeframes for coping with the different tasks, especially since not all steps—even in the phase of interview planning—can actually be tackled in parallel. Figure 5.3 shows such an ideal-type process, with the core message

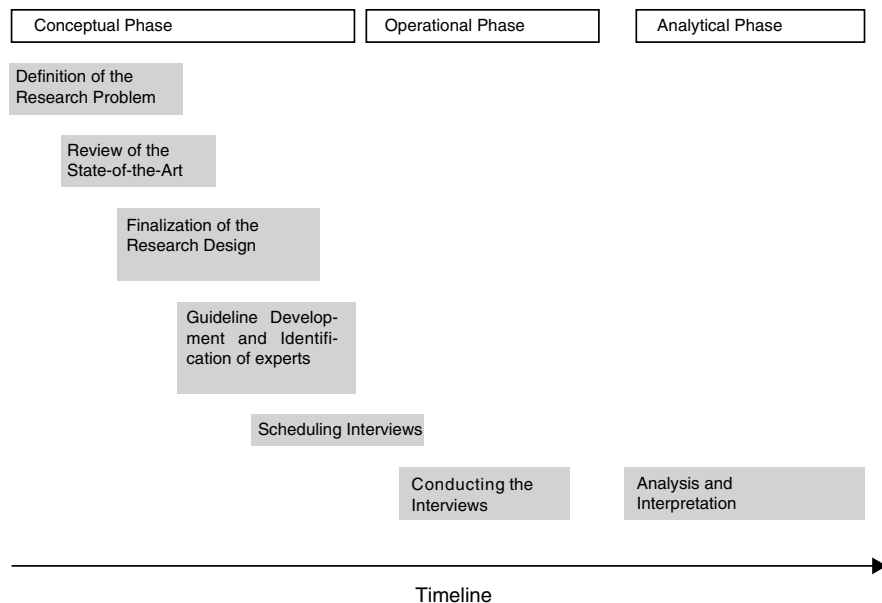


Fig. 5.3 Ideal-type process of an expert inquiry (Source: own elaboration)

being that especially in the planning phase several processes can run in parallel, but each of these is dependent on the successful completion of all previous steps. Therefore, the planning phase is particularly critical due to the different activities occurring in a very compact form, while in the further course mainly an arrangement of additional interview dates could “disturb” the overall time plan.

While in the planning phase the complexity of the requirements poses the biggest problem, it is the amount of time resources to be reserved for the operational and analysis phases. Basically, one can assume that the interviews should be conducted in a tight time window, because otherwise the problem arises again and again, to prepare anew for the inquiry. However, this presupposes that one starts the research and contacting of experts as early as possible in the planning phase. The duration of the analysis phase is often underestimated. We have already pointed out the problem of the necessary time resources for transcription and content analysis. But what should not be underestimated is the time effort that can arise if a larger extension of the database becomes necessary.

No general statements can be made about the duration of the respective phases. This, like so much in expert interviews, is highly context-specific. In particular, of course, it depends on how many experts are to be interviewed. Therefore, this aspect should be carefully considered when planning the interviews. Quite often it is the case that interviewing additional experts beyond a core group does not yield much additional informational value. However, as we had previously mentioned that—depending on the research question—a certain sample might seem obvious.

Aspects of planning expert interviews:

- *Creation of a detailed project plan:* it covers all phases of the expert inquiry and defines sufficiently generously measured periods for coping with the respective work steps.
- *Planning of interview dates in a relatively narrow time window:* this requires the timely start of scheduling but helps in conducting the interviews, as a compact scheduling facilitates the preparation for individual interviews.
- *Appropriate number of experts to be interviewed:* against the background of the time resources needed for securing and analyzing interview data, the number of interviews should be in line with requirements defined by the research question, and therefore no more experts are interviewed than necessary.

In the concrete interview situation, the basic danger is that the interviewer “loses control of the conversation” and therefore does not produce the desired results. Here, in addition to experience in conducting such interviews, only precise knowledge of the interview guide helps. This allows, under certain circumstances, even in critical phases of the conversation to regain control and thus at least ensure the “partial success” of the interview. To a certain extent, this control can be practiced in advance. For example, one can ask oneself how an expert might answer the respective questions and how one would react to this situation. But above all, one should not intervene prematurely in the interview situation if one has the feeling that the interview is taking an unfavorable course. At least one should concede to the conversation partner that he also needs a certain amount of time to get used to the interview situation. In this respect, the best form of control is one that is not perceived by the expert as an unjustified intervention in his presentation.

Often, however, the control of the interview situation is not so much affected by the expert as rather by the “overload” of the interviewer. This can have several reasons.

First of all, it certainly requires a certain amount of practice to be able to provide the required control performance in the concrete interview situation and at the same time to capture the information of the expert so precisely that central aspects can be secured as notes, because while answering the question, one must also maintain attention to decide, with which next own question one wants to proceed. In this context, conversation pauses are associated with a certain risk. They can motivate the expert to further justify his last statement. But they can also lead to a significant impairment of the conversation atmosphere.

In this context, some textbooks suggest conducting interviews with two researchers. This seemingly obvious suggestion (if it is at all possible in reality) requires a brief critical examination. Fundamentally, it is of course correct that such a procedure leads to a relief of the “main interviewer,” who can now fully concentrate on controlling the course of the conversation, while the second researcher remains in a passive role, takes the necessary notes, and possibly monitors the technical setup of the tape recording. The problem, however, is that an expert will surely react differently to the confrontation with two interviewers than if it were a one-on-one conversation. If the nature of the investigation requires that the level of “unforced

professional conversation” is reached, in which our expert should primarily communicate implicit knowledge, there are many arguments against conducting an interview with two researchers. Alternatively, it could be conceivable that the second researcher takes on a more active role and not only takes notes but actively observes the scene and intervenes with his own questions. However, this naturally presupposes that both researchers are equally familiar with the conceptual and empirical peculiarities of the research project. In addition, in this situation, it would still need to be clarified in advance which of the two researchers is responsible for controlling the interview. It is also clear that in such an active role, the second researcher involved can no longer fully concentrate on documenting central information from the conversation partner. Ultimately, there are many reasons to conduct such expert interviews alone (cf. Gläser and Laudel 2006, p. 149 ff.).

If the researcher wants to avoid the risk of unintentional conversation pauses as a sole interviewer, it is helpful to have some phrases prepared in advance that you can use to pass the ball back to the expert, giving yourself the time you need to regain control of the conversation. It is always possible, for example, to ask the conversation partner if he could “elaborate on this aspect again” or if he could “give an example for this.”

In this context, it is an even greater challenge to conduct expert interviews abroad or in international organizations, because in these cases the interview usually cannot be conducted in one’s own native language. Under such conditions, one will often be so focused on optimizing the course of the interview that it is no longer possible to simultaneously record central statements. Therefore, depending on language competence, there are many reasons to conduct such interviews with tape recording in order to reduce the requirements for documenting the interview situation to a minimum. In such cases, it can also be helpful to work with more detailed guidelines in which short explanations for individual question complexes are noted in the respective language. This makes it easier in the concrete interview situation to explain the background of a question to the expert without getting into trouble due to a lack of vocabulary.

Tips for the interview situation:

- *Intensive personal preparation:* this refers to a thorough knowledge of your own guidelines and possibly the preparation of explanatory passages in a foreign language if the interviews are conducted abroad.
- *Critical evaluation of the possibility of conducting the interviews in pairs:* when weighing the pros and cons, you should only decide on such a procedure in well-founded cases.
- *Flexibility:* on-site, the researcher can hardly influence the conditions under which the interview takes place.

A special situation that can also arise on-site is that your interview partner unexpectedly brings one or two colleagues who, in his opinion, are even more familiar with individual aspects of the topic. This can prove to be quite problematic for the specific interview situation. On the one hand, it is much more difficult for the

researcher to control an interview with two or more participants than in a one-on-one situation. However, the greater danger is that the respective conversation partners talk to each other more intensively during the course of the interview than answering the actual questions. To get the most out of such a situation, the interviewer must spontaneously decide, based on the respective responsibilities of the participants within the organizations, which of his own questions can best be answered by which of the experts. Apart from that, such “internal” discussions between the experts can also be associated with quite interesting insights for the researcher.

5.6 The Lack of a Theory-Guided Analysis and the Overvaluation of Interview Data

A final problem area to be addressed exists in relation to the analysis and interpretation of data from expert interviews. The core of the problem is quickly described in that it primarily consists of some expert inquiries incorporating the data obtained from interviews almost unfiltered into the presentation of their research results. In such a case, the own analysis consists only in distinguishing the supposedly important from the unimportant statements. Such an approach cannot be justified by the fact that the transcriptions of the conducted interviews are often listed in the appendix of such works and the reader could thus inform himself about the context in which the statements considered important were actually made.

Against this background, it must be emphasized once again that the theory-guided form of expert interviews is a central quality criterion. This reference to theory in particular provides the conceptual link between the justification of interviews, the determination of its essential parameters, and the later analysis. In short, one could sum it up: we are not interested in what the expert thinks about a politically relevant phenomenon. We are interested in what the data, which only becomes available through expert interviews, means for our theoretical or empirical problem.

What must therefore be demanded is not the unreflected reproduction of interview sentences, but their rule-guided content-analytical processing, on a basis on which we can decide to what extent an interview statement is relevant for the research question. Qualitative expert interviews are subject to an “interpretive paradigm” that requires the researcher to critically engage with the question of the relevance of and the expected gain in knowledge from interview data.

The importance of content-analytical processing lies primarily in the fact that we have a clear rule scheme that allows us to identify the parts of an interview that can be assigned such relevance for the question, while we also have *ex ante* formulated theoretical categories that help us in confronting the data found again with theoretical concepts of our discipline. In order to meet the criterion of openness of qualitative research, it is necessary to allow for the supplementation of the existing category system in the course of content analysis (cf. Schmidt 1997; Gläser and Laudel 1999). The rules of the respective content-analytical procedure also determine according to which principles we relate statements from several interviews to each

other. This is how it can be determined in which context different experts have mentioned the same or similar facts or in which respect statements of experts were in disagreement.

The theory-guided approach extends throughout our entire project and does not only concern the expert interview. An initial “confrontation” takes place in the course of the theoretical embedding of our research question. At this point, the decision as to which methods we will use to analyze our research problem has usually not yet been made. In the further course, the connection with our expert interviews becomes more and more concrete. When developing the guideline, we formulate the interview questions on the basis of dimensions of analysis that theoretically capture our research problem. These dimensions later on form the basis for category formation for content analysis. And finally, in the course of interpreting our entire empirical material, we again refer the results of the expert interview to theoretical concepts that have already played an important role in the phase of concretizing the research question.

Elements of the theory-guided analysis:

- *The theoretical embedding of the research question:* here we clarify which theoretical assumptions from the existing political science literature guide our analysis.
- *The determination of dimensions of analysis for the guideline:* here we explain which observations we want to make in the course of the analysis about our research problem.
- *The development of analysis categories for content analysis:* here we determine according to which conceptual criteria we decide on which data from expert interviews are relevant for answering our research question.
- *The confrontation of our research results with relevant political science concepts:* here we discuss our research results in the light of the originally made theoretical assumptions and can possibly contribute to the further development of theories.

There are a number of informative and knowledgeable textbooks on the planning and implementation of qualitative expert interviews on the market that put an emphasis especially on practical aspects of this method of data collection.

Alvesson, Mats 2023: Interpreting Interviews, Second Edition, London: Sage (160 pages)

This book takes a critical look at the established theoretical and conceptual foundations of qualitative interviewing and offers an alternative approach based on the concept of reflexive pragmatism, which contains some interesting considerations. In this way, the presentation succeeds above all in sensitizing the reader to the necessity of reflecting on the epistemological foundations of their own interviews. Alvesson also provides a good justification for supplementing interviews with other sources.

Brinkmann, Svend, 2022: Qualitative Interviewing. Conversational Knowledge Through Research Interviews, Second Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press (192 pages)

This work focuses on the theoretical foundations of qualitative interviews. However, it does not focus on interview types that are important in political science. In the second edition, the presentation has been expanded to include information on the practical implementation of interviews.

Flick, Uwe, 2021: Doing Interview Research, London: Sage (448 pages)

This book provides a very comprehensive overview of the various aspects of qualitative interviews. Expert interviews are dealt with in a special chapter. As it was written during the coronavirus pandemic, the author provides numerous tips on conducting interviews using online tools. Online supplements are offered for this book, giving the reader access, for example, to annotated guides.

Kvale, Steinar, 2007: Doing Interviews, London: Sage (157 pages)

This is one of the classic textbooks on qualitative interviewing. In compact form, it contains a readable discussion especially of the analysis and interpretational phase of data obtained from interviews.

Morgan Brett, Bethany and Katy Wheeler, 2022: How to Do Qualitative Interviewing, London: Sage (202 pages)

This contribution discusses quite comprehensively the epistemological aspects of qualitative interviewing in social sciences. It further on focuses on various practical aspects of doing interviews. The authors focus in particular on the special challenges of the interview situation. However, less attention is paid to the aspect of analyzing and interpreting interview data.

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