

# How to use guided interviews in spatial research

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Guided interviews are a frequently used and established survey method for collecting verbal data in the social sciences (Flick 2004: 117; Kleemann et al. 2013: 208). They aim to reconstruct subjective experiences, lifeworlds, motives for action, common theories, situational interpretations, attitudes, or social processes. However, interviewees can only recount knowledge they can retrieve from their discursive consciousness. In this context, Löw and Marguin (2022: 113) write about their experience with qualitative interviews regarding space:

“People are virtually incapable of giving information about spaces when asked to do so. [...] Whether we are managers or travelers, cultural entrepreneurs or hairdressers, spaces appear to inhabit an area of experience we know a great deal about in practical terms, but this knowledge is hardly accessible to the discursive consciousness of the layperson. This does not apply in the same measure to places that can be specifically named.”

The same applies to routines and practices for the same reason. Even impressions, atmospheres, and feelings are sometimes difficult to put into words (Kaspar 2012: 104). Therefore, guided interviews are only suited for studying spaces to a limited extent or have to be given special consideration in the operationalization stage. Ultimately, only respondents themselves can provide information on how they perceive, constitute, produce, or appropriate spaces or their intentions when using spaces and the manner in which they do so. Thus, guided interviews are also used in spatial research. For example, in the DFG project *Neighborhoods in the tourist trap?*, stakeholders and residents were interviewed to explore whether and how the perceived quality of living has changed as a result of touristic use, especially given the supply of *Airbnb* apartments (Müller et al. 2019). In contrast, Kaspar (2012) used guided interviews to study the perception and use of city parks and reconstructed how park visitors produce space. Chiu (2009), in turn, was able to identify skateboarding as a means of appropriating and experiencing space based on interview data.

## 1 Classification and detailed description of the method

There is a wide range of different survey methods, which are classified according to various characteristics in the literature on methods in the social sciences. Gläser and Laudel (2010: 39 et seq.), for example, distinguish between the methods based on their degree of *standardization* as (fully) standardized (or structured) interviews, semi-standardized (or semi-structured) interviews, and non-standardized (or unstructured) interviews. However, certain guidelines have to be taken into account for non-standardized interviews, which is why this type of interview is further differentiated according to its structuration:

- *Narrative interviews* are introduced by a complex question to which the interviewee is supposed to respond with a long narration (e.g., her or his life story) (see Weidenhaus/Norkus in this handbook). The interviewer is allowed to ask follow-up questions only toward the end of the interview for clarification purposes. The narrator is therefore given the opportunity to develop the story as much as possible and to explain the relevance.
- *Open interviews* are characterized by a set of predefined topics that are to be discussed.
- *Guided interviews*, by contrast, are more structured and are based on a guide. The guide contains topics and questions to be discussed in every interview. However, the sequence and wording of the questions are not mandatory. The respondent is allowed to answer freely.

It should be noted that special types of guided interviews have been developed. They include focused interviews (Merton/Kendall 1946), problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000), in-depth interviews (Bock 1992), and expert interviews (e.g., Gläser/Laudel 2010). These types vary with regard to multiple aspects (such as their theoretical foundation), they are each better suited for certain research questions, allow for different types of questions and stimuli, target specific social groups (e.g., experts, elites, children), or permit a certain number of narrators (individual interviews, couple and group interviews, or focus groups). Helfferich (2005: 24 et seq.), for example, provides a descriptive overview of the different types and what distinguishes them from one another. All forms of guided interviews take into account the principles of qualitative social research, especially openness, communication, processuality, and reflexivity (for more details, see Helfferich 2005: 22; Misoch 2015: 66 et seq.; Gläser/Laudel 2010: 29 et seq., 115 et seq.). This gives rise to the following requirements for guided interviews (Hopf 1978: 99 et seq.):

- *Scope*: The narrator must be given the opportunity to react in an unanticipated manner. This means the interview should not be based only on the theoretical or empirical insights and hypotheses that were developed beforehand, but rather it should encourage those found outside of this framework, for example, by allowing for different perspectives, relevancies, etc. and stimulating storytelling.

- *Specificity*: Any issues and questions raised should be addressed specifically. As a result, general findings or assessments have to be fleshed out in order to understand their meaning and their underlying experiences.
- *Depth*: The interview should be conducted so as to support the narrator in recounting the affective, cognitive, and valuable meanings that certain situations have for them and in describing their involvement.
- *Personal context*: The personal and social context of the narrator, which includes their interpretations and reactions, must be captured to the extent necessary. This personal context is required for the interpretation.

The data can be collected—that is to say, the guided interview can be conducted—face-to-face, over the phone, or online (see Salmons 2015). As a rule, guided interviews are conducted orally, although written variations (e.g., group chats) are also used.

## 2 Defining the field and carrying out the sampling

It is imperative for the study to focus on the research question throughout the entire research process. In the case of spatial research, this also entails defining which understanding of space is represented and whether the guided interview is suited for this in spite of the difficulties described. Therefore, it is necessary to define the field of research (what is to be studied?) within the context of this reflection and to select a sampling strategy (who is to be surveyed?). Underlying this is the objective to produce results that can be generalized despite low case numbers. This is only possible if these definitions and selection procedures do not take place at random (see Baur/Christmann in this handbook).

For example, the research field can be defined as a territory and then selected individuals can be surveyed, as was the case in the Kiez (neighborhood) project (Müller et al. 2019). The researchers based their neighborhood selection on the lowest level of the *life-world-based spaces* (lebensweltlich orientierte Räume, Senate Department for Urban Development and Housing in Berlin, n.d.), the so-called Planungsräume (planning areas). The criteria for selecting the neighborhoods included the share of traditional tourist accommodation establishments and the share of *Airbnb* apartments within these spaces. The selected neighborhoods featured contrasting forms of these criteria (minimum and maximum case comparison): One neighborhood featured a high share of hotels and hostels, while another had a high share of *Airbnb* apartments, one neighborhood was selected because all three types of accommodation were represented equally, and finally one neighborhood with a poor tourist infrastructure was chosen. Next, the researchers chose residents and stakeholders for the interviews. Kaspar (2012) used a similar method to define the field in her park study. However, her research objective related to a relational understanding of space (Löv 2016), according to which places can be localized but not everyone constitutes the same spaces at a given place. Therefore, she ensured a balanced gender ratio and aimed for a range of perspectives that was as diverse as possible. The interview partners were mostly recruited on site and *ad hoc* in the field. The sampling was guided by Kaspar's prior knowledge, hypotheses, categories, and their characteris-

tics, which she developed based on previously collected data. Thus, Kaspar sought out contrasting cases to facilitate the analysis (*grounded theory*).

To define the field and carry out the sampling, it is necessary to obtain information about the research field, be it by means of a literature review, informants, or your own investigations on site. Once the research field has been determined or at least roughly defined, a strategy is required for conducting interviews with the deliberately chosen individuals or the individuals to be selected.

### 3 Creating a guide

Using a guide serves several purposes, which include guidance of contents, ensuring comparability between the data, and providing security and relief for the interviewer (Misoch 2015: 66; Helfferich 2005: 159; Meyen et al. 2019: 85; Gläser/Laudel 2010: 142 et seqq.). The guide represents the results of the operationalized research question, as well as interesting thematic and theoretical aspects. It can be understood as a translation into the everyday understanding and everyday language of the people being surveyed, thus acting as a mediator between theory and empiricism (Meyen et al. 2019: 85). In general, it contains a list of questions and instructions for the interviewer. The guide can be regarded as a previously arranged and systematically applied template for organizing the interview process (Helfferich 2019: 670). Guides can vary considerably in terms of how they are designed, depending on the requirements for the selected interview method and the needs of the researchers: for instance, with regard to the formulation and layout.

According to Helfferich (2005: 160), guides should fulfill the following requirements: They must comply with the principles of qualitative research; they should not be overloaded with questions (pay attention to time management); they should be concise and easy to manage. In terms of the composition, they should allow for a “natural” flow in the storytelling and argumentation while avoiding bureaucratization (Hopf 1978: 101 et seqq.). Questions can be differentiated according to category (from open-ended, narrative-generating to inquiring), the variability of their wording in the interview situation (variable to exact wording), whether or not they are optional or mandatory, and the level of guidance (content-related guiding question/follow-up question) (Helfferich 2005: 160 et seq.).

There are only a few instruction manuals for creating guides. Meyen et al. (2019: 85 et seqq.) recommend three steps: *first*, define the topics based on the epistemic interest; *second*, operationalize the concepts, meaning formulate the main questions and sub-questions and prepare any fun or creative elements; *third*, determine the arrangement, which includes defining the sequence. Additionally, they suggest formulating the introduction as well (introduction of the project, informed consent, etc.). A collection of example guides can be found here, too. Helfferich proposes the CCSS principle (the German acronym is SPSS, i.e., a software for statistics) with the following steps: Collect (first formulate all possible questions regarding the subject of interest, putting aside any doubts), Check (aspects of prior knowledge, openness in terms of stimulating sto-

rytelling and providing room to develop the story freely, and wording of the questions)<sup>1</sup>, Sorting (chronologically, contentwise), and Subsume (questions from individual thematic blocks are sorted according to their structuration from open-ended to highly structured, after which the researcher decides which question is best suited to solicit a response for each thematic block) (Helfferich 2005: 161 et seqq.). Beforehand, it is important to determine the prior theoretical knowledge and implicit expectations. Afterward, it may be necessary to formulate transition texts and transfer the questions to the layout of the guide.

But how can you ask about space when people are hardly able to provide information about spaces on demand, as described by Löw and Marguin (2022)? Spatial researchers have developed very different strategies for this purpose. The list below is not exhaustive, but it is intended to illustrate various possibilities for dealing with this issue.

- *Ask about specific places that can be named and with which the respondents are familiar:* In her park study, Kaspar (2012) only surveyed people who spent time in the parks being studied and conducted the interviews on site. Specifically, she asked them questions such as “How was it the first/last time you were here?”, “If you were to describe this place to a friend who had never seen it, which words would you use to describe this place?”, or “If this park were to close temporarily, what would that change for you?” (own translation, for the published guide, see Kaspar 2012: 295 et seq.). Only in the analysis did the researcher address the different spatial constitutions.
- *Wait for times or situations in which spaces are present in the minds of the respondents:* These include, for example, changes in arrangements or rules of conduct in certain spaces, such as the prohibition of skateboards in public spaces (Chiu 2009) and construction processes in which new spaces are created (Fuller 2017), or when spaces are particularly relevant to the respondents themselves, such as when their personal safety is at risk in certain spaces (Gotham/Brumley 2002), or when the respondents are actively involved in certain spaces, such as the spatial pioneers described by Christmann (2013). Therefore, the concrete wording of the questions is less of a priority for this strategy. You can also access prior experiences and stocks of knowledge reflected in the questions.
- *Elicit spaces:* Introducing stimuli (e.g., prompts, newspaper articles, photos, videos, drawings, etc.; see Dobrusskin et al. in this handbook) can relax the situation, while at the same time enhancing the depth of information as they represent detailed or specific incentives to respond. Sometimes, creative and cognitive processes can be initiated, such as indications as to how respondents perceive or constitute a concrete space. Marguin et al. (2019) prompted their interview partners to draw their workplaces. The result was a variety of different illustrations that could be reduced to two types (topological and multi-scalar). These two types simultaneously represent different forms of relationality, thus providing information about spatial constitutions that would not be possible to articulate in words. Jones et al. (2008) went on a walk with the respondents and interviewed them in parallel. This allowed them to evoke *in situ* spatial perceptions or memories that were triggered by these places and spaces.

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1 For more information, see an overview of question rules by Helfferich (2005: 95).

- *Do not talk about the space:* Every interview contains information about spatial structures, even if they relate to a different object of investigation. For this reason, it can be helpful not to talk specifically about the space and instead to examine the resulting texts afterward in search of the space (Löw and Marguin 2022: 115 et seq.). Löw and Marguin (2022) present a section from a DFG project on prostitution as an example to show how this is constituted as “an ‘other’ space” (Löw and Marguin 2022: 116) by different rules of conduct.

Finally, keep in mind the requirements for guided interviews (scope, specificity, depth, personal context): The point *specificity* seems particularly significant. For instance, you can ask about specific experiences, processes, examples, descriptions, comparisons, contradictory situations, or places (contrasts).

Once the guide has been created, it should be tested. This can be done by specialist colleagues. They can verify whether the guide can be used to collect “the right” data and whether it corresponds to the research question. Alternatively, the guide can be tested in trial interviews with people from the target group. Focus is placed primarily on the clarity of the questions, potential ambiguities, missing aspects, sequence effects, and time management. After these pretests, the guide is revised and then it is ready for use in the field.

#### 4 Collecting data by means of guided interviews

Guided interviews should be conducted based on a natural conversational situation. In reality, however, only a few elements and rules can be adopted from everyday communication, but this does not include the norm of reciprocity or the taboo of interrogation (Hopf 1978: 107). As such, the interview situation is characterized by a strong asymmetry between the roles of the interviewer and the narrator. Furthermore, prior shared experiences and contextual information can be used in everyday communication, which is not generally the case in the interview situation. Both the interviewer and the respondent act strategically in line with the topic of interest (Helfferich 2005: 35 et seq.). The interview must be understood as a collective process and a collaborative construction. The participants interact with one another, and, depending on how the course of the interview is organized, this interaction influences the data that are generated. The first impression can be decisive in this regard. Thus, the space and the atmosphere in which the interview takes place also play a role in producing the data. The interviewer faces one special challenge:

“From the interviewer’s point of view, the qualitative interview process can be described as a process of continuous, spontaneous operationalization. [...] Situational, more general research questions must be translated into relevant interview questions, while, conversely, the information obtained from the interviewee must be constantly assessed and analyzed based on the theoretical significance—analyzed in the sense that the interviewer is under constant pressure to decide whether, where, and how he should use links to ask further questions.” (Hopf 1978: 111, own translation)

Accordingly, interviewees should be familiar with the objectives of the research project and its (spatial) theoretical assumptions in order to overcome this challenge. The requirements for guided interviews are particularly important at this stage as the unique interview situation cannot be repeated.

The guide should be applied flexibly in the interview situation when it comes to prioritizing sets of questions and rephrasing, omitting, or adding questions. Decisions as to whether, how, and at what time a question is asked can often only be made during the interview itself: for example, when the interviewee mentions a thematic block or answers a question without it being asked. The term *bureaucratization* refers to a rigid adherence to the interview guide. In this context, it is important to bear in mind the problem posed by guides that are too long, which foster questions to be ticked off bureaucratically due to the limited time and large number of questions (Hopf 1978: 101 et seqq.). The following mistakes are common when conducting an interview: tending to dominate the conversation (accumulation of suggestive questions, judgmental statements, or explanatory remarks, even if they are meant to help), difficulties listening, lack of patience, missing out on the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, always referring back to the guide (“we finished that section”), using the guide as a disciplinary tool (“we have to be more concise so that we can get through all the questions”), or ignoring unexpected but interesting aspects (Hopf 1978, 2019: 357 et seqq., own translation). An interviewer training session can be organized beforehand. The book by Helfferich (2005) provides exercises for different requirements and skills, which can be done in teams and then discussed.

## 5 Data preparation

An interview protocol should be created after every interview, containing a record of the interview situation (date, duration, place, atmosphere, particularities) and what was said after the dictation machine was turned off. This facilitates both the documentation and the interpretation process.

Typically, guided interviews are recorded. The recording is transcribed as soon as possible after the interview, meaning it is converted into writing to prepare the collected data for analysis. The selection of the transcription system (Dittmar 2009) depends on the research question and the analysis method. In the case of a content analysis, a simple transcription system is usually enough, such as the one described by Dresing and Pehl (2015: 27 et seqq.). According to this approach, the interview is transcribed verbatim, while maintaining the capitalization and punctuation. Dialects are translated into standard language, but slang is left unchanged. Stuttering and repeated words are ignored. This makes it possible to focus entirely on the content. Other analysis methods, on the other hand, require a more complex presentation of the conversation. For example, the *discourse and conversation-analytic transcription system* (GAT in German-speaking countries) is used to record an exact account of the conversation, including prosody, overlaps, pauses, etc. However, this can impact the legibility.

## 6 Analyzing guided interviews

Now that the data are available in written form, they can be analyzed using appropriate text-based analysis methods. When selecting the method, it is important to decide which is best suited. This decision essentially depends on the research question. Using analysis methods ensures a systematic and scientific approach. For example, guided interviews can be evaluated using a content analysis (Kuckartz/Rädiker 2023), hermeneutic methods (Kurt/Herbrik 2019), or grounded theory (Strübing 2019).

Chiu opted for a content analysis in his skateboard study (2009). First, he identified key topics based on the interview questions. Field notes, transcripts, and even secondary data were coded. A taxonomy was developed based on the coded data to compare the different types of skating (street skating and park skating). Three main dimensions were developed: social production of public space, social control imposed on skateboarders, and discursive construction of skateboarding. Kaspar (2012) followed the grounded theory approach throughout all stages of the research process, applying appropriate coding methods to the analysis (open, axial, and selective coding). In parallel, she wrote memos (Kaspar 2012: 113 et seqq.). The key elements of the analysis include asking questions and the constant comparison method. By means of a contrast analysis (hypothetical or empirical), it is possible to concentrate on specific details.

Especially for large sets of data, using QDA software such as *MAXQDA* (Kuckartz/Rädiker 2019) is recommended. When using elicitation techniques that generate visual data instead of text-based data, other analysis methods are required. QDA programs such as *MAXQDA* now also support the analysis of visual data.

## 7 The possibilities and potential of using guided interviews in spatial research

Guided interviews are used in spatial research to obtain information on how people perceive, appropriate, produce, constitute, and use spaces. The greatest methodological challenge is enabling the narrators to retrieve their knowledge about spaces, which is mostly practical, from their discursive consciousness. Spatial researchers employ specific strategies in different research stages for this purpose. For example, they may use contrasts to define their research fields and when sampling, but also when analyzing their data material. This is not evident to the respondents and thus does not impede them. Such strategies are also used when creating the guide and conducting the interview. For example, individuals are asked to talk about either specific places or the spaces that are relevant for them, or spaces are not mentioned at all. Finally, spaces can be elicited.

It is worth noting that guided interviews are frequently combined with other methods in spatial research. Interdisciplinary collaborative work on spatial research holds great potential for producing, using, and analyzing more visual data within the framework of interview studies: for example, by using elicitation techniques (Lów/Marguin 2022).

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