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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wengrzik, J., Silber, H., Bosnjak, M., Zabal, A., & Martin, S. (2017). *A General Interviewer Training Curriculum for Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (GIT-CAPI) (Version 1.0)*. (GESIS Survey Guidelines). Mannheim: GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften. [https://doi.org/10.15465/gesis-sg\\_en\\_022](https://doi.org/10.15465/gesis-sg_en_022)

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# A General Interviewer Training Curriculum for Computer- Assisted Personal Interviews (GIT-CAPI)

***First edition (2017)***

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## Abstract

Interviewer training is essential to ensure high-quality data in interviewer-administered surveys. Basically, interviewer training can be divided into *general* interviewer training which provides interviewers with fundamental knowledge about their role in the data collection process as well as succinct practical advice and *project-specific* interviewer training which provides additional project-specific qualifications. This survey guideline consists of two parts (I) the introductory and explanatory text and (II) the General Interviewer Training for Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (GIT-CAPI) Curriculum. The GIT-CAPI aims at offering guidance on how to design, structure, and implement general interview training for Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI). It includes seven training modules addressing the following topics: (1) procedural view on surveys, (2) quality perspective on surveys, (3) gaining respondents' cooperation, (4) survey administration and survey instruments, (5) interviewing techniques and fieldwork, (6) professional standards and ethics, data protection and privacy, and (7) a technical tutorial. The GIT-CAPI is written primarily for survey research institutes and large survey projects, but they are also aimed at individual researchers and university research projects to provide them with information on relevant basic interviewer qualifications and allow them to incorporate some modules of the GIT-CAPI into their own interviewer training program. This GIT-CAPI will be revised regularly.<sup>1</sup>

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of all those who participated in the roundtable discussions: This curriculum was decisively shaped by numerous experts from the field, namely (listed in alphabetic order): Jonas Beste, Institute for Employment Research (IAB); Doris Blechinger, State Statistical Office NRW; Michael Blohm, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Manuela Blumenberg, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Franziska Fellenberg, Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories (LIfBi); Corinna Güllner, forsa Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statistische Analysen mbH; Karin Habenicht, State Statistical Office NRW; Verena Halbherr, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Doris Hess, infas; Alfred Hullmann, State Statistical Office NRW; Bernadette Huyer-May, pairfam – The German Family Panel; Birgit Jesske, infas; Achim Koch, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Elisabeth Liebau, DIW; Frederic Malter, Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE); Natalja Menold, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Ines Schaurer, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Annette Scherpenzeel, Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE); Claudia Schmiedeberg, pairfam – The German Family Panel; Ulrich Schneekloth, Kantar Public; Silke Schneider, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Jette Schröder, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Günter Steinacker, Kantar Public; Angelika Stiegler, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Bella Struminskaya, Utrecht University; Anja Tausch, SRH Mobile University; Jutta von Maurice, Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories (LIfBi); Alexandra Wachenfeld-Schell, forsa

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<sup>1</sup> Please find the latest version of the GESIS Survey Guideline here: <http://www.gesis.org/en/gesis-survey-guidelines/home/>

Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung und statistische Analysen mbH; Martina Wasmer, GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences; Claudia Wenzig, Institute for Employment Research (IAB).

### **Citation**

Wengrzik, J., Silber, H., Bosnjak, M., Zabal, A., & Martin, S. (2016). A General Interviewer Training Curriculum for Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (GIT-CAPI; Version 1, 2017). *GESIS Survey Guidelines*. Mannheim, Germany: GESIS – Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences. doi: 10.15465/gesis-sg\_en\_022

# 1. Background

According to ADM (2016), in 2015 about 60% of all surveys in Germany were administered by interviewers (i.e., telephone and face-to-face surveys). In many cases, findings from those surveys serve as a basis for political and economic decision making. This emphasizes the necessity for basing fieldwork procedures and survey operations on best practices in survey methodology to minimize survey errors from different sources at every stage of the data collection process. The role of the interviewer in this process is of utmost importance. Previous research shows that there is a strong link between interviewers' skills, training, and data quality (Billiet & Loosveldt, 1988; Hottinger, 2009; Dahlhamer, Cynamon, Gentleman, Piani, & Weiler, 2010; Mohorko & Hlebec, 2015; Olson & Peytchev, 2007). Thus, the quality of the data and, by that, the derivation of empirically-based results for political and economic decision making relies greatly on the training and competence of interviewers. For example, previous research shows that untrained interviewers produce data of lower quality – as measured by data quality indicators such as unit nonresponse, social desirability bias, and probing behavior (see Billiet & Loosveldt, 1988; Dahlhamer, Cynamon, Gentleman, Piani, & Weiler, 2010; Durand, Gagnon, Doucet, & Lacourse, 2006; Fowler, 1991) – and have more difficulties in gaining respondents' cooperation (Cantor, Allen, Schneider, Hagerty-Heller, & Yuan, 2004; Groves & McGonagle, 2001; Guest, 1954; Mayer & O'Brien, 2001; O'Brien, Mayer, Groves, & O'Neill, 2002; Schnell, 2004).

Deficiencies in interviewers' qualifications and skills can result in interviewer effects, i.e. variations in the responses to survey questions that can be traced back to the interviewer (Tucker, 1983). An interviewer effect occurs if respondents who are interviewed by the same interviewer tend to have more similar responses than would be expected (Kreuter, 2008). A possible example could be the tendency of respondents interviewed by one particular interviewer to indicate higher incomes. There are various potential sources for interviewer effects (Kreuter, 2008). First, the presence of an interviewer can activate social norms; as a result, respondents may underreport socially undesired behavior (Bosnjak, 2017). Second, both observable interviewer characteristics such as an interviewer's age or gender as well as the interviewer's verbal or nonverbal behavior could affect the response process. Third, systematic errors in survey administration (e.g., incorrect question reading) and different abilities in recruiting respondent cooperation can also provoke interviewer effects (West, Kreuter & Jaenichen, 2013; West & Olson, 2010). In sum, interviewer behavior can have a direct effect on nonresponse and measurement error and thus contribute significantly to the total survey error (Barbosa, 2015; Blom & Korbmacher, 2011; de Leeuw, Hox, Snijders, & De Heer, 1998; Durrant & D'Arrigo, 2014; Groves, 2005; Reinecke & Schmidt, 1993; West & Blom, 2016; West et al., 2013). Besides interviewer effects, a second data quality problem caused by interviewers are survey errors due to interview falsification (Blasius & Friedrichs, 2012; Menold & Kemper, 2014; Murphy et al., 2016).

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the technical standards and fieldwork specifications of many large-scale survey projects such as PIAAC, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (OECD, 2014), or the ESS, the European Social Survey (Loosveldt et al., 2014), require that the data collection be carried out by comprehensively trained interviewers, i.e. it is mandatory for interviewers working on these

surveys to attend specialized training sessions prior to fieldwork<sup>2</sup>. In some countries, such as in the United States, recommendations for conducting survey interviews have been published e.g., University of Michigan's cross-cultural survey guidelines (Survey Research Center, 2016) and the AAPOR survey standards (AAPOR, 2015). Germany, however, does not have a standardized interviewer training program yet.

The present GESIS Survey Guideline is a first attempt to close this gap by providing a detailed and hands-on curriculum of what general interviewer training in Germany should encompass when preparing interviewers for the administration of Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI). It consists of two parts (I) the introductory and explanatory text and (II) the General Interviewer Training for Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (GIT-CAPI) Curriculum itself.

As a part of the development process for the GIT-CAPI, the proposed curriculum was discussed with several research institutes, national large-scale survey projects, and survey organizations in several round table discussions. The authors would like to sincerely thank all participants.<sup>3</sup>

The GIT-CAPI will be revised regularly in the future and the authors welcome any suggestions or recommendations.

## **2. Aim and Scope of the General Interviewer Training Curriculum for CAPI**

The present GIT-CAPI aims at proposing a curriculum for standardized and professional interviewer training tailored to the German research landscape. The target groups of the GIT-CAPI are both survey organizations as well as survey projects in Germany. In addition, the GIT-CAPI can also be valuable for University research projects and provide them with information on relevant basic interviewer qualifications and allow them to incorporate some modules of the GIT-CAPI into their own interviewer training program. While the GESIS Survey Guideline about interviewer training and qualification by Stiegler & Biedinger (2015) gives a first impression and overview of interviewer training, the present GIT-CAPI constitutes a hands-on approach in form of a standardized curriculum.

## **3. How to use the General Interviewer Training Curriculum for CAPI?**

The GIT-CAPI has a modular structure and consists of seven basic learning modules (see figure 1): (1) procedural view on surveys, (2) quality perspective on surveys, (3) gaining respondents' cooperation, (4) survey administration and survey instruments, (5) interviewing techniques and fieldwork, (6) professional standards and ethics, data protection and privacy, and (7) technical tutorial. Additional optional modules may cover more specific interviewing skills (e.g., interviewing specific groups of respondents or how to contact hard-to-reach persons).

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<sup>2</sup> Schröder et al. (2016) illustrate how interviewer training can be included as a substantial requirement in calls for tender.

<sup>3</sup> See acknowledgments.

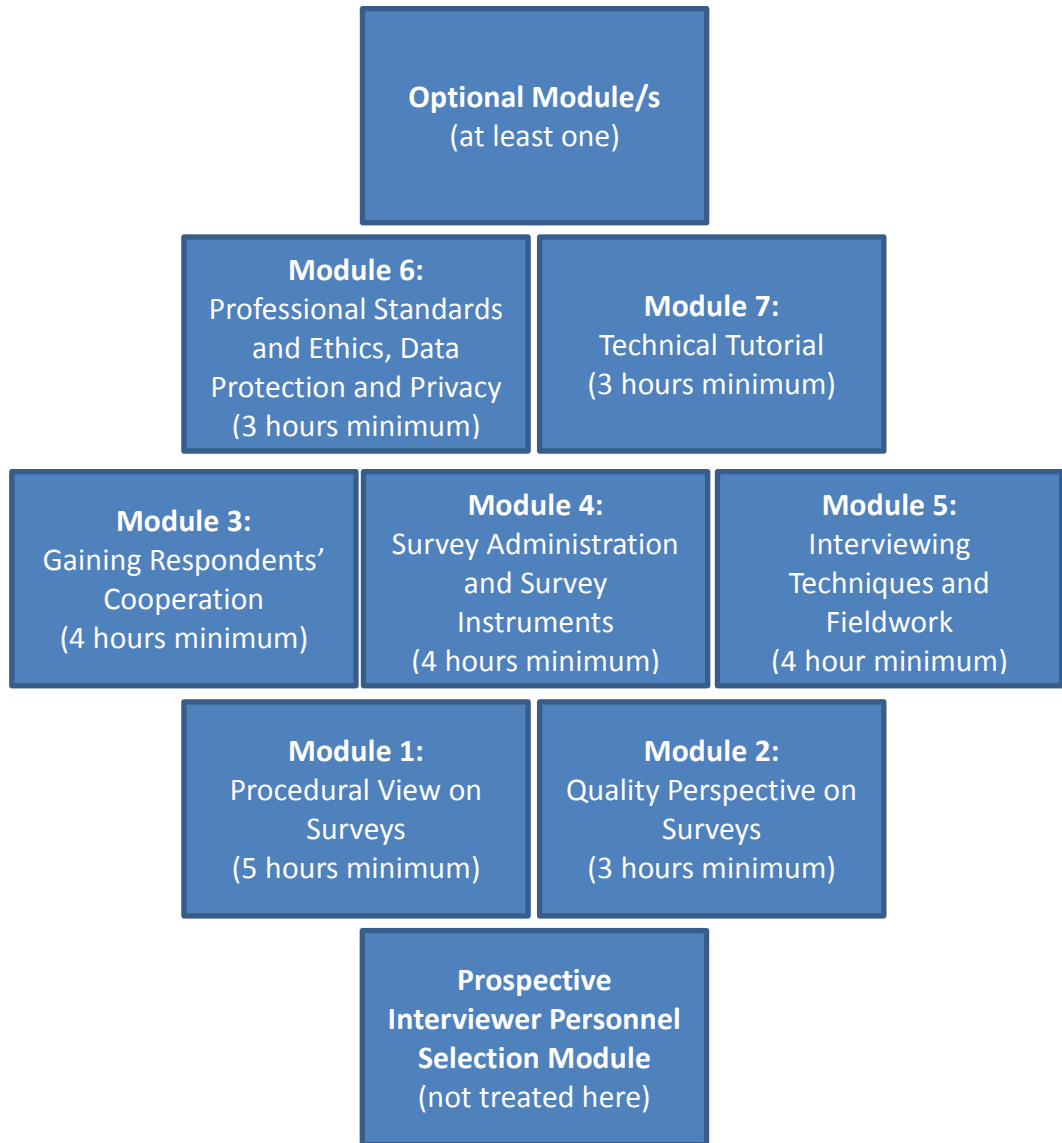


Figure 1. GIT- CATI building block structure

Figure 1 illustrates the building block structure of the GIT-CAPI modular training approach and consists of five levels. The most basic training modules are located at the bottom and the more advanced elements at the top of this consecutive structure.

The GIT-CAPI summarizes the objectives for each training module and gives an overview of the topics covered. The module overview provides recommendations for training methods and time requirements, and includes a list of recommended readings. It also specifies prerequisites for each module: This includes both requirements for participation as well as the specifications for trainers.

In the following, we will provide a short description of each interviewer learning module:

(1) Procedural View on Surveys

This module is designed to introduce a procedural view on surveys, including the purpose of surveys and the role of interviewers. It also explains the specific tasks of an interviewer in the scientific process in general, and within the respective survey organization specifically.

(2) Quality Perspective on Surveys

This module is designed to give insights into what constitutes a high-quality survey, and how interviewers can contribute to data quality. Moreover, the quality management system of the survey organization will be presented, e.g. how interviewer performance and interview quality is operationalized and traced.

(3) Gaining Respondents' Cooperation

This module helps prospective interviewers to get acquainted with strategies for obtaining respondents' cooperation and to understand the reasons for participation and refusals in surveys. Refusal avoidance techniques and the application of appropriate refusal codes are an integral part of this module. It also discusses how the interviewer can cope with prototypical negative reactions by potential respondents.

(4) Survey Administration and Survey Instruments

This module introduces prospective interviewers to the core element of their work, namely administering interviews according to general and study-specific protocols. The difference between standardized and unstandardized survey instruments is explained. The focus is on how to administer standardized questionnaires. In addition, the module provides an overview of the basic building blocks of a questionnaire and different types of question and response formats. General rules and ways to ask questions and to record responses are addressed.

(5) Interviewing Techniques and Fieldwork

This module addresses key interviewing skills. It focusses on the interviewer-respondent interaction and key aspects of communication during the interview.

(6) Professional Standards and Ethics, Data Protection and Privacy

This module covers professional standards, ethical guidelines, legal principles of data protection and privacy, and how they apply to interviewing activities and tasks.

(7) Technical Tutorial

This module familiarizes interviewers with the CAPI technology/software.

In addition to these seven basic modules, optional modules addressing survey-specific topics are recommendable. The module structure is consecutive, and the modules can be conducted as a full package, or as a single module approach. Depending on the interviewer's experience, different variations are recommended:

*(1) New and untrained interviewer*

A new and inexperienced interviewer (without any previous training) should be trained in all modules of the GIT. It is advisable to follow the proposed module order (see Figure 1) as it is designed to facilitate the learning process. The modules can be taught as a single block or modules can be carried out individually, so that interviewers attend certain training modules while continuing with their fieldwork in between.



### *(II) Former interviewer with working break*

For interviewers who have interrupted their work as an interviewer and return after a longer break (i.e. have previous but not current experience), some modules may be redundant. These interviewers are likely to still be familiar with the information provided by the module procedural view on surveys (module 1) as well as the module on survey administration and survey instruments (module 4). Therefore, for such interviewers we recommend refresher sessions to point out and fill gaps in the interviewers' knowledge or skills. Appropriate modules could be survey data quality (module 2), gaining respondents' cooperation (module 3), ethics and privacy issues (module 6), and the technical tutorial (module 7).

### *(III) Experienced interviewer*

Research shows that in many cases data quality and interviewer experience have no linear relationship, i.e. increasing interviewer experience leads to better data quality, but only until a certain point. Once a certain amount of experience has been reached, data quality may decrease (Olson & Bilgen, 2011). In order to ensure data quality, we recommend that experienced interviewers attend the module on data quality (module 2) as well as the module on interviewing techniques and fieldwork (module 5) at regular intervals.

However, for some modules it could be advisable to mix up less and more advanced interviewers to let the more advanced learners explain the learning content to less advanced learners (Cohen & Lotan, 2014).

The time frame for this modular approach is flexible; the selected modules can either be carried out as one block or spread out over several weeks. The training methods are flexible; some modules allow online training while for others training on-site is mandatory.

In this first part of the GIT-CAPI survey guideline, we have summarized the approach and underlying rationale for a general interviewer training program in Germany. The different modules of the GIT-CAPI are specified in more detail in the second part of this survey guideline.

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