Introduction to Interview Analysis and Presentation

Key issues from *Herbert and Irene Rubin, Qualitative Interviewing, 2005* with examples and modifications for the purpose of POLITIS

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1   Introduction

This paper summarizes some guidelines for qualitative data analysis and presentation. It has been assembled for the purpose of the project POLITIS, Building Europe with New Citizens? An inquiry into civic participation of foreign residents and naturalized citizens in 25 countries',[1] relying on the textbook of Herbert and Irene Rubin on qualitative interviewing.[2] We are aware that there are different approaches to qualitative data analysis, and that project participants may have learned data analysis with different books in different languages, following different schools of analysis and national and disciplinary research traditions. This is an effort to have *one joint reference point* in our highly international and interdisciplinary project. Even if somebody decides to follow a different path, the short outline will help us to communicate different approaches.

This introduction mainly consists of excerpts and summaries from the recommended book and concentrates on the statements relevant for the research approach within the POLITIS project. The numbers in brackets indicate the pages in this book. For better reading, excerpts are not marked by quotation marks. When we divert from the recommended methodological book, we indicate this by referring to POLITIS. In the terminology of Rubin and Rubin (9-11), POLITIS interviews are topical interviews. This type of interviews explores what, when, how, why, or with what consequences something happened – in our case the civic activation of the interviewee. The goal of topical interviews is to work out coherent explanations by piecing together what different persons have said. We have generally substituted examples from the book with examples which are important for POLITIS without indicating this specifically.

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[1] This project is funded by the European Commission, 6th research framework, Citizens and governance in the knowledge based society

[2] Herbert and Irene Rubin (1995,2005): Qualitative Interviewing. The art of hearing data. Thousands Oaks, Cal. a.o.: Sage. We here used the revised 2005 edition, while the first edition had been used for assembling the POLITIS interviewer introduction (http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/politis-europe/15622.html).

2   The process of analysis

Data analysis is the process of moving from raw interviews to evidence based interpretations that are the foundation for published reports. Analysis entails classifying, comparing, weighing, and combining original material to extract the meaning and implications, to reveal patterns, or to stitch together descriptions of events and processes into a coherent narrative. Researchers construct from their analysis informed, vivid, and nuanced reports that reflect what the interviewees have said and that answer the research question.

In a first phase, data is prepared for analysis. Interviews are transcribed and – in the case of POLITIS – also translated. Researchers read background literature and interviews to find, refine and elaborate concepts, themes and events. They code interviews to be able to retrieve what interviewees have said about the identified concepts, themes and events. In a second phase, researchers work with the coded data. They compare within interviews and between interviews and combine separate descriptions to formulate a coherent narrative. In doing so, they seek to answer their research question in ways that allow to draw broader theoretical conclusions (201).

Qualitative research designs are *iterative,* going back and forth between interview conduction and the different phases of interview analysis. Analysis begins early during the fieldwork. In many studies, researchers start with a first analysis of interviews before they conduct further interviews and adjust their questioning. Rubin and Rubin call this the *responsive interview model*. In POLITIS, this has hardly been possible, as each interviewer conducted only three interviews using the same set of main questions. However, in the analysis we usually do not start with the analysis of the full set of interviews, but with a theory-driven sample that is iteratively expanded as we learn from our first set of interviews, so that we apply the same iterative logic in the analysis.

Qualitative data analysis is *not about counting* or providing numeric summaries. Instead, the objective is to discover variation, portray shades of meaning, and examining complexity. The goals of the analysis are to reflect the complexity adequately in the data presentation. While the adequate presentation of complexity is emphasized by Rubin and Rubin (202), we also emphasize the *reduction of complexity* in the final analytical phase. It is a key task of social scientist to make out *core* features, *main* structures, *shared* values, *key* events, *central* relations and *important* factors and write about them in a clear, consistent and structured way, without denying that the world is full of variation beyond this.

Researchers in qualitative analysis use their memory and intuition when approaching the data, but memories may be flawed and intuitions misleading. Research involves careful *examination of transcriptions on the basis of systematic coding.*

The *data unit* in qualitative work is an exchange on a single subject. Blocks of information are examined together. Part of the analysis is in determining the appropriate data units, as they differ on what precisely is being analysed. Data units may have different length. For example, one data unit may be a long paragraph with the description of the process of taking up a first civic activity in the receiving country, from the first contact with a civic organisation to the first meeting within the organisation. Within this data unit, there may be several smaller data units, for example three sentences describing

the interviewee's motivation to take up the activity, and one sentence explaining the interviewee's concept of discrimination.

Data analysis always involves the *systematic combination of data units* – within interviews, across interviews and in comparison to other information (203).

3   Coding

Analysis proceeds in several stages that often overlap. The first stage is recognition, in which you find the concepts, themes, events, and topical markers in the interviews.

- A *concept* is a word or term that represents an idea important for the research problem, for example an explanation of the idea of civic participation or of immigrant integration.

- *Themes* are statements and explanations of what is going on, for example reasoning about motivations to become active or about the obstacles that make it difficult to take part in majority organisations.

- *Events* - in the case of POLITIS biographical events - are occurrences that have taken place, for example how the interviewee established the first contact with a receiving country organisation.

- *Topical markers* are not important in themselves but instead provide a hook that tie separate parts of a narrative together, for example the names of organisations or parties.

After you find, refine, elaborate, and integrate concepts and themes, you begin to code them, that is, figure out a brief label to designate each and then mark in the interview text where the label is found. Coding involves systematically labelling concepts, themes, events so that you can readily retrieve and examine all data units that refer to the same subject across your interviews. Coding for events and topical markers is easy: Every time an interviewee refers to a certain political party, the passage is marked. Concepts and themes may be more troublesome, because to code them you need a precise definition to be able to recognize when they are present, especially if they are not explicitly mentioned in the text.

The distinct label used for each concept, theme or event is termed a *code*. The overall relationship between the codes is called a *coding structure* or a code-book. Thought is required to match codes with the purpose of the study (207).

After physically coding the interviews by marking each data unit with the chosen labels, data is sorted by grouping all the data units with the same labels. Qualitative data analysis programmes such as MaxQda which is used in POLITIS provide functions which allow a quick and easy retrieval on screen or for print-outs. This collection of data units is examined for overall concepts, subtle differences in the use of a concept, variations in a theme, meanings of an event for different persons, and systematic similarities and differences between groups of interviewees on the same concept, theme, or event (208).

You cannot code for everything that is in your data, nor would you want to. Instead you look for those items that are most important for understanding your research question. As

you code according to these pre-existing categories, you remain alert to other ideas that you might have missed and as they appear and add them to your coding structure.

Using published literature to suggest concepts and themes by which to code is perfectly legimitate. In fact, doing so will help you later to relate your findings to what others have already written. However, coding on concepts and themes from published literature requires care. If you use the established theoretical lens as your sole source for coding categories, you might miss the original insights in your own data. In addition, categories might not fit perfectly for your data, so that you end up trying to fit your square pegs into round holes (209).

You can derive codes from your own data in different ways. The easiest ways are to

- To look for answers to specific questions asked by the interviewer
- To code for frequently mentioned themes.

Other codes need more thought and attention.

Coding is usually done in different steps, moving between coding and adjustments of the coding structure. In POLITIS, a first coding structure was developed jointly in several rounds with the core research team. It was structured to supply for material to answer different research questions, and to allow for a later choice of a subset of interviews for fine coding. Raw coding of all interviews has been done by one person, while different researchers were responsible for the fine coding for their own specific research questions within the broad topic of civic participation of first generation immigrants.

Codes can be developed during the analysis of the material. This involves for example:

- Looking at the tensions between what people say and what emotion they express,
- Comparing interviews and discovering systematic variations,
- Combining and integrating different codes into a new one,
- Using typologies that are developed during the project,
- Identifying specific figures of speech, slogans, or symbols,
- Paying close attention to stories and their morals in the interviews,
- Logical reasoning about interview contents.

Before the texts are marked with your coding-structure, you have to be sure that the codes have clear and consistent working definitions that can be used throughout the coding of all interviews or for the relevant sub-sample. This requires testing the coding structure with a sample that reflects the variation in your interviews (217).

Particularly good quotes can also be coded, for example with the code 'notable quote'. Such notable quotes are easy to recognise because they are well phrased, sum up hours of conversation, or provide the moral to a story. Some notable quotes seem to be a direct answer to your research question (205).

4   Analysing coded data

You systematically examine codes, sorting them into appropriate groups, comparing them, and look for patterns and connections. You combine what different interviewees have said about the same concepts to refine your understanding of what each concept means. You compare and weigh contrasting descriptions of events to work out your own interpretation (224).

Once you have worked out preliminary ideas from examining the sorted data units, you sort your quotes a second time according to different background characteristics to highlight them in a different way. Do naturalized citizens hold different views about participation opportunities than recently arrived residents? Do younger people find is easier to approach organisations than older people? Do women mention other obstacles to participation than men? Most often, your sorting will be based on obvious differences in background characteristics of the interviewees – gender, age, or citizenship. But you can sort in other ways, for example you may want to group interviews in terms of how a specific concept was used, irrespective of other characteristics (226). Qualitative data analysis programmes, such as MaxQda which is used in POLITIS, can facilitate in this process.

Weighing and combining help you to summarize different versions of the same event or separate explanations of the same concept or theme, allowing you to pull together a single description. For example, a term may be used in a casual way in one interview, be given a more formal description in another, be illustrated by examples in a third, and in a fourth interview, you may discover subtle distinctions that you have missed in the first ones. In the final stages of analysis, putting the coded pieces together helps to fully understand a concept (227).

The process involves integrating different parts of the findings by checking for accuracy and consistency and then modifying them if you conclude that initial interpretations were not quite correct. It involves checking whether the version you have integrated is complete and credible. If your interpretation sides more with one group than another, double-check to see that you have sufficient evidence to justify the assessment you have made.

While analysing your data, you should be aware that there are different types of statements. The following list is not comprehensive, but introduces some terms that are important for interview analysis.

Conversational repairs are statements clarifying and correcting earlier statements, usually reacting to question of the interviewer. They are part of interviews and ordinary conversation, but they are of major importance in qualitative interview analysis as they often explain important concepts more clearly.

In a *narrative*, the speakers put together what they believe actually occurred, recognising more or less that what they say might be incomplete because they only saw part of what happened or only remember a piece of what went on. The may also describe a real situation.

In contrast, a *story* is told to make a point or present a theme, either stated or implicit, irrespective of the accuracy of the details. In telling a story, events may be edited or

reordered, and exaggeration may be added for effect (109). Stories are usually told more than once, and they have a moral. If you discover a story, you should be alert as the interviewee usually wants to make a point which is important to him or her.

Putting a *front* means that someone is taking on a somewhat exaggerated role and sticking to it to create an intended image, for example waiters in a restaurant may put up a front of extreme courtesy, or an immigrant who is active in a political party of the receiving country may put up a front of strong assimilation to some receiving country norms (138). Such a front may show up in specific statements.

Accounts are self-justifying explanations, socially acceptable reasons why people have done something that would normally be considered wrong (139). For example, although labour migration is strictly limited in most EU countries, many immigrants managed to work illegally in these countries. Some of them give learners accounts, justifying their presence with reference to socially accepted forms of migration (learning languages, training computer skills).

5   Building towards theory

After analysing coded data, you are well equipped to start writing the descriptive part of your study. You can explain what concepts mean in a cultural group, or you can work out your own explanatory narrative of what happened in an event or - as in POLITIS - is typical about a process.

Next, you want to extend your reach and look for the broader implications of what you have learned. You do so by asking how your findings can modify, extend, or perhaps even create social, political, or behavioural theories. *Theories* are sets of statements that bring together concepts and themes to explain how things happen or why they took place in a certain way. A theory links concepts and themes into an *overarching explanation* that not only addresses the immediate research question but also creates a broader understanding about important societal issues.

Theories differ in scope. Some theories focus on the matter just examined such as why a certain organization behaved a certain way. In these *case-focused theories*, you offer an explanation for what you have learned in the interviews. You work towards a *middle-level theory* if you ask how far the principles and processes you have discovered in your research might extend. To extend your theory to a middle-level theory you might briefly examine other similar cases or think about what you have learned in the light of literature. *Grand theories* address a range of issues, with implications extending to many settings, perhaps many societies and across time. Most qualitative researchers work on middle level theories (230/31).

In the process of developing middle-level theories, you think about whether what you have learned from your original sample applies to other situations. You can do so with your sample if it included a sufficient range of cases that covered differences that are likely to affect the findings. If this is the case, you may feel comfortable to generalize your findings to similar settings that you have not studied. If this is not the case, you may look for other cases to extend your study. A third approach to generalizing is to examine

published literature to see if the theory holds in settings and circumstances described by other authors (239/240).

6   Presenting the results

By the end of the data analysis, you have worked out major themes, clarified the concepts, and put together an overarching description of your research findings. The last step in the project is to put this information into a report or paper that is inviting, accurate, thorough, convincing, and rich. When you start to write, you shift your focus from hearing what interviewees have to say to engaging the interest of your future readers, convincing them to accept your conclusions and possibly to act upon them.

As your think about your writing, ask yourself four questions:

- What is the core idea or set of ideas that you want to communicate?
- Who is the audience you are trying to reach in your writings?
- What outlets are available to disseminate your findings?
- What style and form of writing best communicates the central ideas in outlets that will reach the intended audience? (247/248)

6.1   Style and tone of scholarly writing

Here we only ask you to consider some points about scholarly writing for university working papers, journals and scientific books.

Scholarly writing builds on formal, written English, not informal spoken language. Formal English means the writing is strictly grammatical, correctly punctuated, and avoids slang, colloquial expressions, and puns, and emphasizes precision of meaning. In quoting your interviewees, you will use their colloquial expressions and slang because people talk this way, but not in the text. Formal English is precise and avoids vague or non-committal words and phrases, such as *I think*, *it seems,* or *more or less*. Watch out for exaggerations, which may convey imprecision in written work. If you use a word that has several meanings, define it in the text. Also be wary of language that carries connotations that you do not intend, for instance labelling someone a Nazi when you mean a bully, a thug, or a right-winger. The word Nazi comes with historical and cultural baggage, including supporting the extermination of millions of people in death camps, forced labour, and biological experiments on unwilling humans. If you do not mean those things, you should not use the word Nazi. More generally, you scrutinize your writing to eliminate inappropriate stereotypes (250). In connection with migration topics, there are a number of terms that carry emotional connotations, especially terms for groups of people, like racist, illegal, alien. Some people may feel offended or expect that you are evaluating your evidence in a one-sided way. If possible avoid such terms as they may distract people from the contents of your analysis. Even the term 'immigrant' can have negative connotations for some people – therefore it is worth to clarify in written reports what you mean by this term.

Scholarly writing conveys the story through the evidence, the collected quotations, the constructed narrative, and the comprehensiveness and consistency of the argument rather than telling the reader what to feel and how to think.

The overall tone of a written essay should display confidence in what you accomplished. Do not apologize for qualitative methodology by saying, "I used *only* three cases" or "I interviewed *only* 10 people." Instead, explain why you picked the cases you chose, what they exemplified or what experiences the 10 people you interviewed had that made them important for the study. If you want the reader to take the work seriously, you have to come across as competent and systematic in your methods. A humble, self-mocking, or apologetic tone undermines the competence you want to convey (253). We would additionally like to emphasize that qualitative research methods involve a lot of *empirical work*, so do not discredit these methods by calling only quantitative studies *empirical*, as we have repeatedly noticed even from qualitative researchers.

6.2   The use of quotations

Using extensive quotations from your interviews makes the interviewees real. However, you need to carefully work out how much you want to tell in the words of your interviewees and how much to summarize in your own words. An essay is likely to be too long if you use just quotations, and as many of the quoted passages need some explanation to be understood, a reader will not be able to follow the argument. If a quotation is hard to understand, substitute it with another example or summarize the point in your own words. You need to balance your explanation and conclusions with the illustrative quotations that make the findings real.

Quotations affect the tone of the writing by both their primary and their secondary messages. Primary messages reflect the literal content of what was said, but the word choice, grammar, and hesitations or humour in the quotation may evoke secondary meanings called *subtext* (252). Imagine that you have interviewed an immigrant not in her mother tongue, but in the language of the receiving country. The interviewee was perfectly able to make herself understood, and you had a long conversation about complicated matters concerning the local subsidy policy for schools. The interviewee states that she was only capable of mixing into local policies because she learned the language of the receiving country so well, and your impression from the interview confirms this self-assessment, but in her statement about her own language capacitiy she makes two major grammatical mistakes. You will convey an unintended subtext if you quote her self-assessment of her language capacity. Readers will think that she is overestimating her language capacity, and this may discredit some other assessment of hers.

Improving the grammar, completing the thought, or eliminating dialect can make the text more readable but might be misleading. Researchers differ in their willingness to modify a quote. It depends on the research question whether editing would mislead the reader – a linguist working on language acquisition needs much more precision than a sociologist trying to understand a process. The use of interview translations as in POLITIS is a rarely used feature in qualitative research, but we consider it adequate in investigating events, strategies and processes. We have no objections to change the exact wording of the interview translation to increase readability because the wording is influenced by

translation anyway, but of course the meaning of the quotation may not be changed. We follow the common practice of editing out repetition and comments that have nothing to do with the topic, putting in elision dots (...). We also insert missing words in brackets [] as things may have been intelligible in the conversation, but need a complementation in the quotation.

If you have a short quotation, less than two or three lines, you put quotation marks around it and include it in the text of the paragraph. Longer quotations are set off by indenting them in what publishers call extracts, which do not require quotation marks because the indentation tells the reader that it is an exact quotation.

6.3   Structuring scientific texts

A typical journal article contains the following four main sections:

- Introduction
- Methods
- Findings
- Conclusions and Implications

This does not mean that these headings have to appear in your writing, but that you have to answer the related questions in the indicated order.

- Why is your research question of interest? What is the state of the art concerning this research questions? Why do you think that you can contribute to a better answer?

- How did you proceed to answer your research question? What data and methods have you used?

- What are your research results? Which different parts of your findings contribute to answering your research question?

- What is the answer to your research question? What implication does your answer have for theory development, further empirical research and possibly also policy decisions?

In a journal article, the introduction, including literature review, runs only a few pages, whereas the body of the manuscript has room for at most a handful of closely related themes. In books, the introduction might spread over two or three chapters in which you describe the overall problem, present background on the topic, as well as a literature review; the methodological section will be covered in a separate chapter, and the core descriptive and analytical part will be divided up into a chapter for each theme introduced or each case researched, and while the concluding section covers one or two final chapters (258).

Title

To engage the reader, choose a title that is catchy and that accurately reflects the substance of your report. Authors often use titles with colons in the middle, with the catchy part first and then the explanation, or vice versa. We would like to add that it may also be useful to think of key terms that someone interested in your topic would search

for in the web. If you include them in your title, you have a higher chance that interested persons come across your article in their literature search.

Introductory section

The concluding section has to match the research problem stated in the opening section, so you write the introduction in ways that anticipate the rest of the essay. While it can be useful to draft the introduction in the beginning in order to guide your path, you have to revise or rewrite it carefully after you have written your essay, as you may have changed your original plans during the writing.

The extent of published writing in almost any area can be immense, so you need to be selective in what literature is referred to in the introductory section. Let three principles guide your choice: First, does the book or article provide background necessary for the reader to understand the research question. Second, do these publications summarize the main debates or themes that frame your research. Third, do these writings suggest the weaknesses, omissions, or methodological problems that you intend to fix with your current research.

Methods section

In articles, the methods section is normally quite brief but still has to include a number of points. You indicate the number and length of interviews, the type of interviews, the specific conditions of data gathering that may have influenced your results, and the sample selection – the reasons why you have chosen these interviewees, and what perspectives and experiences they represent. Include your approach to coding and analysis, and the ways in which you checked the evidence. Mention any notable ethical considerations relating to your research. For example, if your study has the potential of harming the interviewees, describe how you are protecting them, for example by referring to fictional names or by avoiding details that could make interviewees identifiable. Be brief about any personal reflection you include, but if you had strong biases or expectations when you began, you may want to mention how they affected the research (260). If readers could be concerned that your interviewees gave you distorted or self-serving answers, show how you designed ways of double-checking.

Main section: Results/ Findings

The findings section is the main section of your text, and it should cover relatively most room. Be direct in your writing. Write your core part in a clear and logical manner and provide sufficient evidence to make your point. If your argument has several parts that could go in any order, readers can get lost and wonder where you are going unless you remind them now and then. Headings also help in providing organisation to your essay, especially if the headings are taken directly from a logical and coherent line. Spare the reader the details how you initially reached your conclusions. Readers want to know what you have learned with convincing, concise evidence, they are not interested in the themes that you considered and rejected for lack of sufficient evidence.

Make sure that your argument appears thorough and credible. Thorough means you followed up different lines of inquiry, paid attention to possible contradictions or unexpected findings, and examined alternative views. Credible means that you presented

evidence for each major conclusion. Support your argument with the strongest evidence you have. First hand evidence is stronger than second hand evidence. You also increase the credibility if you explain why your partners have particular experience important for your topic. If you have promised confidentiality, you cannot identify the name, but still demonstrate what kind of experience underlies the answers. If you have checked multiple sources of evidence, include this additional information. Precision in style and tone also helps credibility. Make sure that all verifiable details are correct, that you have names spelled correctly, and that dates are accurate (265-267).

Concluding section

In the concluding section, you briefly repeat the purpose of the research, summarize what you have found, and then describe the implications of your findings for theory and policy action. You can discuss what you found in light of the literature, modifying, extending, or supporting and confirming what others have written. You can also address the limitations of your study, in which particular parts the study results might not hold, and what could be investigated in future research.

7   Getting Feedback

After you finish your initial revision of the manuscript, you need to get feedback by seeking comments from professional colleagues or potential readers. POLITIS researchers recommend finding two benevolent persons to read your essay before you present it to a wider public. One of them should be close to the research topic – for example your direct colleagues, fellow students or your supervisor, while the other person should have a sufficient insight into academic writing without being too close to the topic. This could be a colleague or fellow student working on different topics.

When possible, get your interviewees to review what you have written. The core researchers in POLITIS will not have the possibility to do this, but you may consider this, especially when you have used few interviews for your own paper and quoted the partners extensively. Ask you interviewees to comment on the substance to point out where they think you are correct and where they feel you have gone astray. Most of the time, interviewees will find you have represented their opinions accurately and will recognize their world in the description you created. If they find errors in the description of facts, you will be happy to correct them before a wider audience discovers them. If they disagree with your interpretations, give them a chance to discuss it and persuade you of their view. If you still disagree, keep what you wrote. The interpretations are yours, but you might want to add a footnote to indicate that some of your interviewees disagreed.

When receiving criticism, the natural instinct is to try to defend yourself, especially if you have put a lot of work into the draft and urgently want to finish it and move on to something new. However, it is better set the defensiveness aside, and repair the manuscript in accordance with the feedback. A friendly reviewer will be constructive and not tear your manuscript to pieces. Sometimes, reviewers' comments would introduce new ambiguities or require more data that you are unable to collect. In this case, you cannot incorporate it into your manuscripts, or you may accommodate it by making a footnote or acknowledging the need for more research in the concluding section.

If an editor finds a reviewer for your work, as opposed to someone you pick, you might end up with someone who ideologically disagrees with you or has a competing theory, or someone who does not have the competence for understanding your essay, in which case you might get comments that you cannot incorporate. In this case, we think that the feedback from your original reviewers will be a reassurance. Maybe you have just picked the wrong publisher or journal for your publication. If you receive a *revise and resubmit* from an appropriate journal, it makes sense to revamp the article and resubmit it. You carefully read all comments. When deciding about each comment, ask yourself if the reviewer understood what you were trying to say, and if not, how you can explain your logic more clearly. You should probably make all recommended stylistic changes, but you can reject some of the substantive ones if you feel they are unjustified.

8   Final remark

These are guidelines for interview analysis and presentations, mainly from one excellent, pragmatic book on methods – Rubin and Rubin, Qualitative Interviews, 2005 (see footnote1). There may be reasons to follow other schools of analysis, or deviate from the presented guidelines. Be aware that it is not only possible but indeed necessary to adjust general guidelines to suit best your specific topic and research question!