Analysing/Interpreting any Interview Materials: Answers to TQs

OVERVIEW

Once you have both completed a version of the transcript together with side-column notes derived from post-interview debriefing and from notes and theoretical memos developed while doing the transcribing, you are in a position to begin the task of analysis and interpretation of all these interview materials.

I start by dealing with this task very formally at a high level of abstraction, using the CRQ-TQ-IQ model to indicate how the same model guides both the designing of the interview before it happens and the analysing that you do afterwards on the interview material obtained.

After that, I provide an example of how the general model of interview material interpretation presented in this section actually works out in a given interpretive practice. The interview material is that of biographic narratives; the mode of interpreting them is that of the biographic-interpretive method (BNIM).

GENERAL CRQ-TQ-IQ MODEL: IM # ATQ # ACRQ

Our approach to interview interpretation is a logical extension of the approach to interviews presented in Part I and on its implementation to interview design described in Part II. Consequently, the treatment here can be relatively brief.
The general model put forward in Part II was that of a top-down progression from your Research Purposes (RP) to the formulation of a Central Research Question (CRQ) to a number of derived Theory-Questions (TQs) that spelled out the CRQ, and then from each TQ to a number of Interview-Questions (IQs) and other Interventions (IIs) that you hope will produce the appropriate material for analysis.

\[ \text{RP} \rightarrow \text{CRQ} \rightarrow \text{TQs} \rightarrow \text{IQs/II}s \]

[p. 225 ↓ ] It is not surprising, therefore, that the corresponding method of analysing the materials eventually produced moves back upwards. You collect the interview material (IM) produced that you see as relevant to particular TQs, you analyse them to produce an answer to each TQ, and then finally you consider simultaneously all the answers to each TQ in order to produce a unified answer to the original CRQ.

Hence the following formula, where the interview material is called ‘IM’, the answer to a theory question is called ‘ATQ’, and the answer to the Central Research Question is called ‘ACRQ’.

\[ \text{IM} \rightarrow \text{ATQs} \rightarrow \text{ACRQ} \]

Figure 11.1 spells out the above formula for the purposes of working up your analysis and interpretation around the interview material. In the diagram, I have assumed that, in addition to the TQs with which you started off, as a result of the work of analysis a new theory question (TQZ) has emerged which will contribute towards your eventual response to the original CRQ. The diagram also assumes that knowledge and material from relevant research literature will also be contributing towards the answering of the TQs.

In addition, there is always a TQ0 which is about the interview processes as they occurred, because these govern the use of the material for answering all other TQs. Although some find this artificial, and argue correctly that much of the interview process becomes highlighted as you struggle with interpreting the interview material for your substantive TQ questions, I have already argued that interview processes (TQ0) must
always be studied in themselves quite explicitly, first, before you move to the actual substantive TQs of your study (see p. 12).

Illuminated by the discussions of process of how interview questioning and interviewer intervening can ‘go wrong’ and by anthropological-historical models such as the Briggs-Wengraf model put forward earlier in Part II you will consider, for each interview, how the interview-interaction processes worked and what are the implications of your TQ0 findings for answering the substantive TQs (TQs 1-Z) with which you are concerned. Obviously you may revise these ideas later, but it is important to start by considering them explicitly and writing down some provisional conclusions.

The work of interpreting the interview material (IM) and its relevance to any individual TQ and to the TQs as a whole depends, of course, upon the review of the interview processes and the application of your particular instrumentation-theory. Just as the instrumentation-theory was crucial in the designing of appropriate IQs for specified TQs, at the design stage, the same instrumentation/interpretation theory (whatever it is) is crucial for interpreting the significance of the interview material actually gathered (IM) as would-be evidence for answers to TQs.

As you can see, the CRQ at the top left of Figure 11.1 is answered by the A-CRQ at the bottom right. This goes by way of considering each TQ in the light of interview and any other material gathered, including a review of the interview processes relevant to that TQ and a review of relevant research material, and then the producing of an A-TQ for that TQ.

FIGURE 11.1 CRQ-ACRQ: Developing and then ‘Adding up’ Answers to each Theory-question
This is done methodically for each of the TQs, including new emergent TQs and sometimes dropping or modifying old ones for reasons that you explain and justify in the text. Having completed the ATQs, the answers to all the Theory-Questions, you then review and sum the argument as a whole, producing an answer to the CRQ (A-CRQ) as a whole.

It is important to bear in mind that the interview material relevant for the answering of a particular TQ will very often be found in a variety of places. Unlike a fully structured interview, a semi-structured depth-interview format will mean that much of the material for answering a particular TQ should be found around the IQs designed for that TQ but also that much may be found elsewhere.

Consequently, you will need to examine all parts of the interview material in order to ensure that interview material relevant for answering a particular TQ has not been overlooked. I recommend that you work through the transcript, identifying segments of relevant material for your first TQ and coding them in one of the [p. 227 ↓] side-columns for rapid retrieval (preferably by a qualitative data analysis software program
on a computer). Then work through the whole transcript, coding for the second TQ; and so on. Do not try to code for more than one TQ at a time: you will just do the job badly.

I cannot here discuss the general questions of coding and interpretation of qualitative data in general and of interview material in particular. Among many discussions of coding, a good introduction has recently been provided by Coffey and Atkinson (1997) and there is little point in duplicating their excellent work or those of others who have contributed to the discussion.

However, bear in mind that a code-label is simply a little retrieval-tag attached to one or more segments of text to enable you to think of them as related in some useful way, and that a ‘code-label’ is a very condensed form of a more expanded ‘theoretical memo’ or ‘gloss’. The sets of coding labels (which together make up at any time your ‘codebook classifications’) are your own constructions, designed for your different TQ and CRQ purposes. If a segment of text is a piece of luggage, a code-label is just a retrieval-tag attached to it. The same text segment can have a variety of different retrieval tags attached to it, and most qualitative researchers find themselves modifying and revising their ‘coding system’ as they work through their material; though they need to be used with caution, qualitative-data-processing packages make this process of creative revision feasible.

Be aware of the broadbrush/finebrush approach to coding: codes can be applied to make very fine discriminations (but then it may be impossible to see the wood for the trees) or to make very broad discriminations (in which case they may not enable you to distinguish anything but one or two clumps of trees in the wood). Fine codes — such as postcodes — nestle within broader codes — such as names of towns. The notion of nested structures is also important in semiotic analysis – see the Appendix and Martin (1997: 40–1) on narrative episodes ‘nested’ within a global narrative structure. Choose your brushes appropriately for the task in hand at the moment.

This principle of ‘summativity’ — of collecting all evidence from everywhere in answering each TQ — is perhaps suggested by Figure 11.2. The grandmother and the granddaughter have been asked different IQs so that, by putting their answers together, the researcher might get the material relevant for his or her A-TQs.
And a further point: *as you work through the transcript in relation to a particular TQ, always take time off to write theoretical memos or free-association notes for yourself.*

THE ‘JUDICIAL MODEL’

What mode of writing should you adopt? There are different models. One you should seriously consider is described as the ‘quasi-judicial method’ (Bromley, 1986) as summarized in Robson (1993: 375–6). It is not dissimilar to the recommendations of Agar (1986, 1996). These relate to each ATQ separately and to the elaboration of the ACRQ afterwards. Robson cites Bromley as suggesting 10 procedural steps while keeping in mind four questions. The simplest formulation for using and examining the evidence is:

**FIGURE 11.2 Two Sets of Informant-questions but One Set of Theory-question Answers when the Informants need Different Informant-questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory questions</th>
<th>Informant A e.g. ‘grandmother’</th>
<th>Informant B e.g. ‘grand-daughter’</th>
<th>Answers to each theory-question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Research Question</td>
<td>all contact with her answers to TQs</td>
<td>all contact with her answers to TQs</td>
<td>ATQ0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory-question 1</td>
<td>IQ1.A.1</td>
<td>IQ1.B.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IQ1.A.2</td>
<td>IQ1.B.2</td>
<td>ATQ1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IQ1.A.3</td>
<td>IQ1.B.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>plus relevant material from elsewhere</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory-question 2</td>
<td>IQ2.A.1</td>
<td>IQ2.B.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IQ2.A.2</td>
<td>IQ2.B.2</td>
<td>ATQ2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>plus relevant material from elsewhere</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory-question 3</td>
<td>etc</td>
<td>etc</td>
<td>ATQ3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The procedure is in general terms — though not in every particular — well-suited for your discussion of interview and other data. Each answer to each TQ should be expected to be a condensed mini-judicial review, as could the later summative overall answer to the CRQ.
My revised version derived from Bromley (1986: 26) by way of Robson (1993: 376) is as follows.

The four questions:

The ten procedural steps in the quasi-judicial method:¹

1 In the text below, where Robson has ‘explanations’, I have replaced this by the term ‘interpretations’.

Individual or group sessions struggling with the task of ‘interpreting the evidence’ in the light of ‘the questions’ can be apparently chaotic and emotional processes. The ease of such work should not be over-estimated. Normally, a considerable original disorder — in which chaos seems to be spreading — is followed later by a surprisingly swift development of a large measure of agreement. See Gelcer et al. (1990: 109–11).

If you are part of a research team, see if you can arrange panel discussions and interpretation. You may decide to start with preparation of draft answers (with evidence, dealing with counter-interpretations explicitly) to particular TQs by each individual, and then move to a group discussion of the draft answers. Alternatively, you might start with collective brainstorming and then move to separate preparation of theoretical memos on each TQ. You will soon find what suits your team best.

If you are working individually, see if you can at least find one other person to join you in a two-person team for at least one session. They do not have to be otherwise engaged in your or any research, though if they are trained in a different social research tradition, this helps; they just have to have had different experiences and a different life from your own.

[p. 230 ↓ ]
CONCLUSION

In order to be applicable to any materials from semi-structured depth interviews, this account of the process of analysing and interpreting any and all possible materials has had to be very brief and extremely abstract. I have argued that, having attempted to understand the interview processes involved (TQ0), you should then identify and where appropriate code-tag with a TQ-number label all material relevant to each of the Theory-Questions (TQs) derived from your Central Research Question (CRQ) and then, using something like the quasi-judicial method of Bromley, produce appropriate answers to each of those theory-questions. On the basis of those ATQs, you can then develop your answer to the Central Research Question (ACRQ).

I hope that you find that its design principles are useful when you apply it to your own research. In the next section I apply the general model to a particular set of interpretive procedures. The general (IM-ATQ-ACRQ) model is shown in operation with biographic-narrative interview material and with a specific genre of analysing such material known as the biographic-narrative-interpretive method (BNIM). Even if you are not interested in biographic-narrative interviews in themselves — because your own research is very different — you may find it useful to read the section in order to grasp what is involved in any actual application or case-practice of analysing interview materials to produce an answer to your TQs and CRQ.

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