

Interpreting and Writing up Qualitative Research

Karen O'Reilly

What can qualitative research tell us? This one-day advanced course covers the transition from interpretive analysis to writing up qualitative findings, showing how key themes can be extrapolated to form the structure of a written piece and presented with confidence and style. It reviews different formats of presentation, for different audiences, and includes examples from both academic and applied research.

9.30 – 9.45	Welcome and Introduction
9.45 – 10.15	The challenges of qualitative reporting Why are you doing it and who is the audience?
10.15 – 11.00	From notes and codes to coherence and insights Developing typologies, personas, and interpretive explanations
11.00 – 11.15	Workshop 1 Organizing key themes and drawing out conclusions/implications
11.15 – 11.30	Break
11.30– 12.00	Workshop 1 contd. Organizing key themes and drawing out conclusions/implications
12.00 – 12.45	What should the overall structure be? The usual structural shape, from title to conclusions
12.45 – 13.00	A matter of style Classic style. Grammar, rhetoric and inaccessible writing
13.00 – 13.45	Lunch
13.45 – 14.15	Workshop 2 Dealing with Writer's Block
14.15 – 14.45	The challenges of qualitative reporting Generic quality benchmarks and the curse of knowledge
14.45 – 15.10	How to write in richness and diversity without resorting to numbers
15.10 – 15.20	Break
15.20 – 16.00	Workshop 3. Writing qualitatively without resorting to quantities
16.00 – 16.30	How to write in interpretivism and reflexivity Discussion, Feedback and close

References and Further Reading

- An Jacobs, Katrien Dreessen, Jo Pierson (2008) 'Thick' personas – Using ethnographic Methods for Persona Development as a Tool for Conveying the Social Science View in Technological Design, *Observatorio (OBS*) Journal*, 079-097
- Billig, M.(2013) *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.
- Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*. 4th edn. London: Sage
- Charmaz, K., 2014. *Constructing grounded theory : a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. 2E. London: Sage.
- Fetterman, D. (2010). *Ethnography: Step by Step*, London: Sage.
- Hayes, M. Gringolandia. *Lifestyle Migration under Late Capitalism*. Minnesota Press.
- Kvale, S. and Brinkmann, S. (2009) *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (or Brinkmann and Kvale , 3rd ed. 2014)
- Ladner, S. (2014). *Practical Ethnography*. London: Routledge
- May, T. and Perry, B. 2017. *Reflexivity: The Essential Guide*, London: Sage
- O'Reilly, K. (2000) *The British on the Costa del Sol*. London, Routledge
- O'Reilly. K. (2012) *International Migration and Social Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan
- Pinker, S. (2015) *The sense of style*. Penguin.
- Rivas, C. (2018) Writing a Research Report, in C. Seale (ed). *Researching Society and Culture*. 4th edn. London: Sage.
- Rubin, H.J., and Rubin, I. S., (2012) *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Sage.
- Stanley, L. Ed. (2013) *Documents of Life Revisited. Narrative and Biographical Methodology*, Ashgate
- Van Maanen J (1988) *Tales of the Field* Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Wertz, F.J., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L.M., Josselson, R., Anderson, A. and McSpadden, E. (2011). *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*, New York: The Guildford Press
- White, C., Woodfield, K., Ritchie, J. and Ormston, R. (2014) 'Writing Up Qualitative Research' in Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., McNaughton Nicholls, C., and Ormston, R., (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: Sage
- Wolcott, H.F. (2009) *Writing up qualitative research*, 3rd edition, Newbury Park: Sage

EXAMPLES

of quantitative and qualitative writing style (to be referred to during the course)

WRITING IN A MORE QUANTITATIVE STYLE

[Example of a first draft of a piece of descriptive writing, without any obvious theoretical perspective at this point]

3. 'Proper food'

Meanings and definitions

When discussing their shopping and cooking habits, women in this study referred to preparing a 'proper meal' or cooking 'proper food'.

Proper food is in the type of ingredients

Three quarters of the women interviewed thought that a proper meal was nutritionally balanced, containing a range of ingredients from all the main food groups. For example, Margaret, in her thirties and a mother of two young children, commented

You've got your meat, your carbohydrates, your vegetables, everything's there, then that's a proper meal. Like my five a day.

'Meat and two veg' was frequently referred to as a proper meal and five of the twelve women mentioned vegetables as an essential component.

The quality of the ingredients used was also a major consideration for about half of the sample, for whom quality meant fresh and, for two women, also organic or free range. Four of the twelve women were concerned that the ingredients came from a known and trusted source.

A proper meal to me .. is some meat or fish, bought from the butcher or the fishmonger, not the supermarket, some veg that I've washed and chopped myself. (Janet, in her forties, living with her partner and teenage children.)

One woman would even like to be able to grow and rear everything herself,

I think for me the idealistic sort of proper food would be to have your own smallholding where you can rear everything. That's the only way you would ever know exactly what has gone into the vegetables, or if you had your own animals for slaughter... that whole self-sufficient, you know, but in London that, well it isn't a reality for me. So, if I think about 'proper', that's what I think about, when you've been involved at ever single stage. (Sally, in her twenties and living with her partner.)

A few of the women thought that proper food was healthier because it was made with fresh ingredients rather than ready-prepared items, which might contain high levels of salt, fat, or additives of various kinds.

I go through phases that I want to eat properly, you, know, healthily and I feel that Aunt Bessie's cottage pie will have preservatives and things in and I'd rather go to the butcher's and buy the meat, and buy the potatoes from the greengrocer's. (Sharon, in her forties and living with her husband and two children.)

Proper food was also traditional food. Several women used the term 'traditional' in the sense of a particular cuisine, for example an English roast dinner, a few used the term to mean familiar: the kind of food their mothers cooked. One woman described her husband's view on traditional food as follows:

Well, you see, my husband was brought up with very plain cooking. He hates what he calls 'messed about' food. ... A proper meal for him is something that's very plain, he's a real traditional meat and two veg man.

Proper food is in the preparation

In addition to the kind of ingredients used, proper meals were defined in terms of the way they were prepared and the extent to which they were 'made from scratch'. Three quarters of the women thought that proper food had to be home-made, so that each ingredient used in the meal or dish must be fresh and raw, and the preparation and cooking of these ingredients must be carried out in the home, by the person serving the dish.

The meat was fresh and all the vegetables were fresh, and I did the whole lot, dirtied my oven ;cos it was lamb and that spits everywhere. Even did the mint sauce, and that wasn't out of a jar. (Stella, in her fifties, living with her husband)

By contrast, two women felt that a proper meal could include ready-made ingredients, as long as some personal effort had been expended by the cook. In some cases, it was a matter of putting your own print on a dish, for example by adding fresh ingredients to a bought pasta sauce, customising a pizza by adding extra toppings, or preparing fresh vegetables to go with other ready-prepared ingredients.

Well, I make it properly, you know, a real, proper, hearty meal, proper food. I usually buy a tin of vegetable soup, you know, the sort of orange vegetable soup, put a lamb stock cube in with some big chunky chops and just put loads and loads of vegetables on it and cook it for two or three hours. And then, right before it is cooked, put lots of very thin potatoes on the top with a bit of grated cheese, bit of parsley if I've got it. Barbara, in her forties, living with her partner and two children)

For one woman, proper food was a matter of assembling a number of ready-made ingredients, rather than buying a complete ready meal.

Yeah I like to make proper home-made sausage rolls. But it's not home-made pastry, you know, it's the fresh, off the fresh chilled counter, and I just roll that out. Like when I make my own chicken pies. I buy chicken and Campbell's chicken soup, pour that in, pour in sweet corn. But I'm making my own, aren't I? Rather than buying these frozen or Mark's and Spencer's, I make my own. That's what I call proper food, when you know what's gone into it. (Tanya, in her late thirties and living with two young children)

From this discussion, it is clear that, **for a few women**, ready-prepared food can be considered proper food or, at least, can play a role in a proper meal. We return to this theme in our discussion of convenience food in section 4, and in particular to evidence from research among food manufacturers and supermarket buyers, that the concept of 'self-assembly' is one that has shaped the development of many new products, in particular the rapidly expanding range of cook-chill dishes.

Proper food is eaten with others

Finally, the context in which a meal is eaten is also part of the definition of proper food. **For a few women** in the study, proper food was associated with sociability: a proper meal is one that is eaten with others, usually other family members, rather than something eaten alone or 'on the go',

My mother always made proper meals ... We all sat down together, had a meal together every evening but, now, I think people seem to eat separately, all rushing in and out and never sitting down together and talking. I think it's a real shame, actually.
(Janet)

[Perhaps refer here to recently published cross-cultural research on children and happiness, where one of the indicators used was whether or not children ate meals with their parent(s)]

For two women, special occasions, such as having people round for a meal, were also associated with proper food, not just because of the communal aspect, but because the occasion demanded that proper food be served. It was expected that you would produce a home-made meal.

Well, if you have someone round for a meal, you've got to make a bit of an effort, haven't you? I mean you've got to give them a proper dinner. You want them to think that you've made a bit of an effort, so I wouldn't cheat and serve something out of a jar or a packet and try to pass it off as my own. (Diana, in her fifties, living with her partner)

WRITING QUALITATIVELY

[Example of a first draft of a piece of descriptive writing, without any obvious theoretical perspective at this point]

3. 'Proper food'

Meanings and definitions

When discussing their shopping and cooking habits, women in this study referred to preparing a 'proper meal' or cooking 'proper food'. From their descriptions we discovered that proper food had a number of different connotations, including: the kind of ingredients used, the way the food was prepared, and the circumstances in which it was eaten.

Ingredients

One meaning attributed to proper food was nutritional balance, the idea that a meal should contain a range of ingredients from all the main food groups. For example, Margaret, in her thirties and a mother of two young children, commented

You've got your meat, your carbohydrates, your vegetables, everything's there, then that's a proper meal. Like my five a day.

Linked to this was the view that vegetables, in particular, were an essential component and, by adding a salad or cooked vegetables, you were 'turning it into a proper meal'.

However, the quality of the ingredients used was also a consideration: proper food meant fresh ingredients and, for some, this also meant organic, or free range. An added bonus was if the ingredients came from a known and trusted source.

A proper meal to me .. is some meat or fish, bought from the butcher or the fishmonger, not the supermarket, some veg that I've washed and chopped myself. (Janet, in her forties, living with her partner and teenage children.)

Sally, in her twenties and living with her partner, would like to be able to grow and rear everything herself,

I think for me the idealistic sort of proper food would be to have your own smallholding where you can rear everything. That's the only way you would ever know exactly what has gone into the vegetables, or if you had your own animals for slaughter... that whole self-sufficient, you know, but in London that, well it isn't a reality for me. So, if I think about 'proper', that's what I think about, when you've been involved at every single stage.

Proper food was also seen as healthy food because it was made with fresh ingredients rather than ready-prepared items, which might contain high levels of salt, fat, or additives of various kinds.

I go through phases that I want to eat properly, you, know, healthily and I feel that Aunt Bessie's cottage pie will have preservatives and things in and I'd rather go to the butcher's and buy the meat, and buy the potatoes from the greengrocer's. (Sharon, in her forties and living with her husband and two children.)

Finally, for some women, proper food was traditional food. This could be traditional in the sense of a particular cuisine, for example a roast dinner, or traditional in the sense of what people were used to from their childhood: the kind of food their mothers cooked, which they found homely and comforting. As Sharon explained,

Well, you see, my husband was brought up with very plain cooking. He hates what he calls 'messed about' food. ... A proper meal for him is something that's very plain, he's a real traditional meat and two veg man.

Preparation

In addition to the kind of ingredients used, proper meals were defined in terms of the way they were prepared and the extent to which they were 'made from

scratch'. Views on this as a defining characteristic of proper food varied among the women we interviewed, as Figure 3.1 shows.

Making from scratch	Adding your own touch	Self-assembly
Proper food must be made from fresh, raw ingredients	Proper food can include adding home-prepared ingredients, such as vegetables, to ready-prepared components	Proper food can include putting together ready-made ingredients as long as some personal effort is involved in the preparation of the dish / meal

Figure 3.1 Preparing proper food

For some, proper food has to be home-made, so that each ingredient used in the meal or dish must be fresh and raw, and the preparation and cooking of these ingredients must be carried out in the home, by the person serving the dish. Stella defined a proper meal as 'something you have made yourself, from scratch, not junk food'. She considered the roast dinner she served her husband the previous Sunday a case in point,

The meat was fresh and all the vegetables were fresh, and I did the whole lot, dirtied my oven ;cos it was lamb and that spits everywhere. Even did the mint sauce, and that wasn't out of a jar.

By contrast, other women felt that a proper meal could include ready-made ingredients, as long as some personal effort had been expended by the cook. In some cases, it was a matter of putting your own print on a dish, for example by adding fresh ingredients to a bought pasta sauce, customising a pizza by adding extra toppings, or preparing fresh vegetables to go with other ready-prepared ingredients. Barbara, a busy social worker who lived with her partner and two children, described her casserole as 'proper food'; even though her recipe involved tinned soup and a stock cube, the dish involved time and effort to prepare.

Well, I make it properly, you know, a real, proper, hearty meal, proper food. I usually buy a tin of vegetable soup, you know, the sort of orange vegetable soup, put a lamb stock cube in with some big chunky chops and just put loads and loads of vegetables on it and cook it for two or three hours. And then, right before it is cooked, put lots of very thin potatoes on the top with a bit of grated cheese, bit of parsley if I've got it.

In other cases, however, proper food was a matter of assembling a number of ready-made ingredients, rather than buying a complete ready meal. Tanya, in her late thirties and living with two young children, recounted how she liked to make 'proper food' when she had time.

Yeah I like to make proper home-made sausage rolls. But it's not home-made pastry, you know, it's the fresh, off the fresh chilled counter, and I just roll that out. Like when I make my own chicken pies. I buy chicken and Campbell's chicken soup, pour that in, pour in sweet corn. But I'm making my own, aren't I? Rather than buying these frozen or Mark's and Spencer's, I make my own. That's what I call proper food, when you know what's gone into it.

From this discussion, it is clear that, for some women, ready-prepared food can be considered proper food or, at least, can play a role in a proper meal. We return

to this theme in our discussion of convenience food in section 4, and in particular to evidence from research among food manufacturers and supermarket buyers, that the concept of 'self-assembly' is one that has shaped the development of many new products, in particular the rapidly expanding range of cook-chill dishes.

Social context

Finally, the context in which a meal is eaten is also part of the definition of proper food. Proper food is associated with sociability. A proper meal is one that is eaten with others, usually other family members, rather than something eaten alone or 'on the go',

My mother always made proper meals ... We all sat down together, had a meal together every evening but, now, I think people seem to eat separately, all rushing in and out and never sitting down together and talking. I think it's a real shame, actually.
(Janet)

[Perhaps refer here to recently published cross-cultural research on children and happiness, where one of the indicators used was whether or not children ate meals with their parent(s)]

Special occasions, such as having people round for a meal, were also associated with proper food, not just because of the communal aspect, but because the occasion demanded that proper food be served. It was expected that you would produce a home-made meal. As Diana, in her fifties, living with her partner, explained,

Well, if you have someone round for a meal, you've got to make a bit of an effort, haven't you? I mean you've got to give them a proper dinner. You want them to think that you've made a bit of an effort, so I wouldn't cheat and serve something out of a jar or a packet and try to pass it off as my own.

Incentives and barriers

In practice, however, ideals and expectations about proper food were not always easy or possible to uphold. Women were keen to provide proper food because they believed it was a better quality, healthier, and more nutritious option, or because it gave them a sense of achievement to make food from scratch, or because they felt it was part of their nurturing role as a wife and mother and they wanted to avoid feeling guilty about 'cheating' and using ready-prepared foods.

However, the women also described a range of problems they faced that could make it difficult for them to prepare proper food. These included: lack of time and energy, the fact that it was 'not worth' it for just themselves, or for themselves and their partner, there was a risk of wasting food as children would not always eat home-made food, and, in some cases, the women did not know how to make certain dishes, or their efforts had ended in failure.

[Describe each of these incentives and barriers in some detail, as for the section on meanings]

[Possible examples and quotes for

Time

Sharon described her dilemma when she was late back from an all-day shopping trip, but had promised her daughter she would make a roast dinner

Actually, I felt guilty about my roast dinner last night. I said to my daughter and her boyfriend, I said, 'Well look, make sure you're in, I'm cooking a roast tonight, I'm cooking a roast dinner and make sure you're in.' Well my roast dinner, now this doesn't often happen, 'cos I usually always have fresh meat, I'm quite a stickler, but Iceland had this bit of pork, stuffed pork, frozen, on special offer, so I'd got that out of the freezer. And that came in a tin thing so that's bunged in the oven. All I had to do was brush that with a bit of olive oil, wrap it in foil so it doesn't splash the oven. Then it was Aunt Bessie's roast potatoes. It was – oh I did make something, Paxo's stuffing, I had to mix that with water and make my stuffing balls. Then it was frozen carrots and frozen French bean things, gorgeous. They're in a lovely pack now, I can't remember whose – Findus, green beans. They were frozen. So two lots of frozen veg. Gravy granules and then Iceland's Yorkshire pudding on the top. When I sat down they said, 'Oh mum this looks really good,' you know, and Laura [daughter] sat and said to her boyfriend, Paul, who's Australian, 'Oh my mum makes a wicked roast dinner.'

Knowledge / skills

TO BE CONTINUED

I normally buy Aunt Bessie's roast potatoes because mine never turn out right. I do feel guilty, because I should make my own, especially when I'm making a proper meal, you know, with a nice roast and lots of veg.]