



Introduction to a Practical Guide on Conducting Qualitative Research in Parliaments

Abstract The first chapter introduces the focus and goals of the volume, by explaining its hands-on approach to research and outlining its qualitative interpretive methodological nature. The aim is to provide concrete tips on how to overcome fieldwork obstacles as well as serve as invaluable background or context material for anyone who aims to research the European Parliament, with useful pointers for anyone who wants to work on political institutions and do qualitative interviews. Attention is drawn to the utility of the volume for researchers who examine highly divisive subjects like equality policies or the ways of dealing with radical-right actors in qualitative research when holding opposing views. Instead of merely analysing research results, the book is an honest account of how they were obtained.

Keywords EUGenDem project · Hands-on guide · Political institutions · Gendered perspectives · Intersectional perspectives

INTRODUCTION

How is a large-scale qualitative dataset, comprised of interview, ethnographic and document data, gathered from parliaments? In what ways are raw data managed in terms of storing and coding? What methods are employed to interpret and make sense of coded data? More significantly, how are qualitative data that have been collectively gathered and coded, transformed into findings for single and co-authored articles?

This volume addresses these questions in the form of a concise and hands-on guide about doing qualitative research in parliaments, exploring practical achievements and drawbacks that are relevant to academics and students alike. We account for the step-by-step process of qualitative research in parliaments, offering a reflexive and analytical perspective that moves beyond a textbook or theory-only format. As a companion piece to qualitative research in parliaments, we also ‘accompany’ and support researchers in the field who may feel they are struggling or have become lost. Woven throughout the individual chapters, the book provides meaningful insights into the methodological and normative concerns our research process faced. To this end, we include many examples and illustrative boxes presenting our research diaries, post-interview notes and coding examples to illustrate the distinct processes and stages in our research and to demonstrate how our thinking developed leading to the final research output.

This approach has enabled us to provide a more transparent perspective on the research process through the views of insiders, as two distinctive stages of data gathering (Chapters 3 and 4) and data analysis (Chapters 5 and 6) unfold to form a coherent whole. In doing so, the insights account for different positionalities, epistemological commitments and research interests, thus providing useful hints for anyone who wants to study and research formal political institutions like parliaments, using qualitative methods. Throughout the volume, the experiences we describe, provide invaluable ideas for strategies and practices that researchers can adopt to overcome the typical obstacles that qualitative researchers might face. For instance, we detail in Chapter 4 the strategies we employed for recruiting interview participants and for preparing to conduct an interview; and in Chapter 5, we provide a number of core points for successful collaborative coding.

In lieu of analysing and outlining research findings specifically, we focus on how those outputs were obtained. To this end, the European Parliament (EP) provided the setting and context between 2018 and 2022, for gathering a large and significant volume of interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes and documents. Empirically, the volume stands as an important background read for anyone aiming to study the European Parliament regardless of the methodology. We provide multiple insights on the specificities of the European Parliament including its monthly calendar, the opportunities and obstacles provided by the Strasbourg sessions and the challenges of the multilingual and multi-language settings. The book also provides extensive insights into studying political institutions like parliaments in general. In this sense, the book makes general observations on the functioning of parliamentary work and presents advice based on experiences, practices and strategies for any researcher wanting to apply qualitative methods and tools to the study of parliaments.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND FINDINGS

This volume provides an account of a major scientific research project conducted on the political groups of the European Parliament, the insights from which will have wider and more general applications in academia. The EUGenDem project on *‘Gender, party politics and democracy in Europe: a study of the European Parliament’s party groups’* was a European Research Council Consolidator Grant funded scientific project that provided a systematic analysis of the gendered policies and practices of the political groups in the European Parliament. Whilst most research on the political groups has been quantitative, EUGenDem research led to over 70 scientific publications based on qualitative methods and methodologies. We have written about the positionality and reflexivity of our research team elsewhere (Gaweda et al., 2022; Kantola et al., 2023) suffice it to say our approach was normatively feminist and epistemologically constructivist, giving it a distinct piquancy from most of the extant research in the field.

Our motivation for this volume was derived from the keen interest of colleagues, anonymous reviewers as well as the members of our project scientific board, to disclose and elaborate on conducting impactful qualitative research (Ahrens et al., 2022; Kantola et al., 2023), and to detail

our processes of data gathering and data analysis. Following the ideals of open, accessible and transparent research, we want to ensure that key qualitative research strategies are available to, and reusable by, other researchers. In addition, there is a necessity to both invigorate and disturb extant academic debates on the use and relevance of qualitative research methods in Political Science from a multidisciplinary perspective. Of notable importance in this respect, is the particularity of our collective approach to conducting qualitative research. In the book, we explain in greater detail the extent to which this constituted a significant advantage, and how we resolved, or managed, the additional complexities it brought about.

The retrospective and reflexive look at our research field itself also yields insights. Reflecting on the qualitative nature of the research project, we examine the ways in which divisive questions were often asked, political controversies were researched and how we confronted and dealt with equality practices, issues of gender equality, racism and radical-right populists. Box 1.1 (below) highlights some examples from our interview and ethnographic fieldwork that best describe such moments. Such highly divisive subjects, like the study of equality policies and the role of radical-right populist parties in parliament, fall within the scope of our guide. Qualitative research from a gendered perspective demonstrates how actors are positioned in multiple contexts and within variant identities, which demands that an intersectional lens must be considered more systematically, and in-depth, at the beginning of a project.

We did not shy away from interviewing right-wing actors and concomitantly did not focus only on ‘feminist critical friends’ (Chappell, 2020; Chappell & Mackay, 2021). Instead, we emphasised the importance of approaching interviews with right-wing actors with a critical and reflexive mindset, whilst being mindful of the potential for power imbalances to arise. Right-wing participants often used gendered language or stereotypes that were dismissive or undermining of our normative stances and arguments; they also sometimes questioned the legitimacy of our qualifications or expertise. For instance, Kantola et al. (2023) illustrated how one participant explicitly asked the interviewer: ‘I think it’s just one of these throwaway terms that’s been invented by (...), in the same way that racism is a made-up term. Do you know what racism means? You’re a doctor so obviously you should know, right?’ (EFDD MEP M 290119_4). In another example, a male MEP from the radical-right and a member of the Eurosceptic group of the European Conservatives and Reformists

(ECR) discussed the family in a public seminar. Claiming to be a cook, he showed images of meatballs and asserted that vegan meatballs, e.g. those made with courgette and parsley, ‘were not real meatballs’ just like non-traditional family models, e.g. rainbow families, were not real families and so should not use the same term (ECR Seminar on Traditional Family 040220_FN).

In many cases, qualitative interviews and the ethnographic shadowing of participants exposed us to situations that were problematic, tense or unpleasant. This book is also a way of describing how we dealt with, processed and managed such situations.

Box 1.1 Quotations from the team research diary after coding radical-right MEP interviews and post-interview notes with right-wing actors

- ‘First answer clearly sets the tone! It’s very upsetting to read. ‘me, myself and I’. I feel so sorry for X having to ask him equality questions!!!! Well done for asking questions on gender equality!’ (EUGenDem Research Diary 23 April 2020)
- ‘Interesting stories about PG formation, fascinating how he keeps on saying Le Pen and AfD are not racist or antisemitic, how the people in Golden Dawn are nice’. (EUGenDem research diary, 10 Feb 2020)
- ‘I felt the hierarchy, even though he was very polite. He bowed a bit as he shook my hand in the beginning and at the end. (...) I felt very awkward asking our ‘gendered’ questions—I physically felt irritation and displeasure ‘radiating’ off the participant when I asked about it, I also heard a small scoff from the

- assistant on the side’. (Post-interview note 5 Mar 2020)
- ‘The MEP made a friendly impression on me although some of the things he talked about were really cringy for me (e.g. he is passionate about hunting). (...) I was surprised that he talked openly about the past of the Fratelli d’Italia as a direct descendant of the fascist party. But I guess, this is ‘common knowledge’ so no use denying it. (...) It’s always disconcerting for me when right-wing people aren’t nasty interpersonally to me as an interviewer (...). When a right-wing person is nice to me, I have cognitive dissonance’. (Post-interview note 12 May 2021)
- ‘Interview was on skype. It was easier to set up than what I expected from the initial reaction to my first contact email. The participant replied that he can ‘talk about foreign affairs, etc.(...) but that he doesn’t understand the topics of gender’ (Post-interview note 13 May 2021)
- ‘I respected the MEP for having her own feminism, even if it was something that I fundamentally didn’t agree with. I felt that it was a very legitimate complaint that she had felt looked down upon for being a stay-at-home mum’. (Post-interview note 11 Mar 2020)

By reflecting on a specific research process of data gathering and data analysis, we provide a complex picture of the role and methods of qualitative research in exploring informal institutions and studying the informality of political norms. Through qualitative research, we openly debate whether our findings call into question some of the traditional assumptions that underpin the ‘mainstream’ research. Our contribution lies in the inclusion of interviews and ethnographic data in our research process from a normatively feminist perspective. Therefore, we have added a distinctively ‘gendered’ look relative to the extant methodological literature, as well as anecdotes and diary entries that helped us reflect on the whole process.

QUALITATIVE AND FEMINIST RESEARCH IN PARLIAMENTS

Qualitative research is time and resource consuming. This is certainly reflected throughout the chapters in this book, where we illustrate how some of the burdens of such research can be eased by reviewing the necessary preparatory steps. These include, for example, gaining familiarity with the parliament and recruiting participants, and structuring the different stages of data analysis, such as coding or the interpretation of results. In key respects, the book takes a practical approach to the theoretical and methodological insights explored in the extant literature, which generally fall into three categories: (1) extensive handbooks on qualitative research, (2) wide-ranging handbook-style volumes on feminist research; (3) individual chapters in larger volumes or peer-reviewed journal publications dedicated only to aspects of parliamentary studies or gendered research.

Research publications and compilations on parliamentary studies, like Benoît and Rozenberg's (2020) *Handbook of Parliamentary Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Legislatures* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) *Sage Handbook of qualitative research* or Leavy's (2020, Second Edition) *Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, explore the research process by focusing on methodological considerations and their implications. The former provides an interdisciplinary output on parliamentarism from history, law and political economy to sociology and anthropology, whilst the latter two are mammoth volumes on state-of-the-art theory and operationalisation of qualitative inquiry from a methodological standpoint.

Notable volumes in the second category, to which our research owes intellectual gratitude, include Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True's *Doing Feminist Research in Political and Social Science* (Red Globe Press, 2020) and Maureen McHugh's *Feminist Qualitative Research: Working toward Transforming Science and Social Justice* (2020). The former has a strong feminist theory and International Relations focus. It describes how a feminist research ethic can enrich the research process from start to finish, by simultaneously being a guide for feminist research ethics. The authors link the core elements of feminist research ethics with being attentive to the power of the social and political context, epistemology, boundaries and relationships, as well as situating the researcher with nonlinear research processes. Similarly, the latter offers an extensive overview of feminist research, naming validity and voice as particular challenges in the

conduct of feminist qualitative research. She predicts the future of feminist research to be within multidisciplinary collaborations that contribute to the adoption of new perspectives and methods that ignore boundaries set by traditional disciplines that have served to restrict how research is conducted. Other works of significance include Tungohan and Catungal (2022) who address the most contemporary developments in virtual qualitative research in the context of the pandemic, and Bennett (2021), who echoes McHugh on the future of feminist qualitative research in considering what open science means for research methodologies that have historically been a home for transgressive and radical questioning.

Whilst building on this methodological richness, we nonetheless find a major lacuna: namely, the absence of a practical and accessible approach to the research process in the field and what follows it. Our volume is a succinct and hands-on monograph-guide to qualitative research in parliaments with an attendant reflexive attitude that transparently explores the successes and drawbacks of a research process in the European Parliament. As a team effort, the volume offers a coherent, yet multifaceted perspective on the research processes outlined in other publications. Furthermore, it has the advantage of accounting for major changes in research circumstances that arose due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

This book has seven chapters and is structured around the two main vectors of qualitative research: data gathering and data analysis. We respond to the demand for greater critical methodological transparency by offering unique insights with detailed discussions of the strategies, decisions and tools we employed. Moreover, we reflect on the practicalities and technicalities applied in the collection, management, analysis and interpretation of a comprehensive dataset, consisting of various types of qualitative data: 140 interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes and document data gathered for the study of political groups over five years by six researchers. We explain the pros and cons of undertaking collaborative qualitative work by detailing the different stages of collective data gathering, team data coding and the interpretation of the results for individual and co-authored studies.

This chapter has introduced our focus and purpose, by explaining its hands-on approach to research and outlining its qualitative interpretive methodological nature. Chapter 2 on the *Set up of The European*

Parliament provides an overview of the existing research on the European Parliament and its political groups, as well as key information on the Parliament as a setting for qualitative research. It also provides key preliminary insights about conducting qualitative research in the European Parliament by engaging with key concepts and discussing them in the unique context of the European Parliament. In addition, we stress the high level of informality in the parliamentary work of the European Parliament, highlighting the contributions qualitative research makes to a field still largely dominated by quantitative research. The study of everyday dynamics and informal practices reinforces the importance of utilising a qualitative toolkit and data from interviews and ethnography, as well as broadening the range of research participants beyond political elites to include parliamentary staff.

Chapter 3 is the last of the background chapters. Here we introduce our research data and highlight the methodological innovations they generated to understand genderedness and intersecting (in)equalities in the European Parliament. The chapter outlines our two phases of data collection: a pilot study and the main data-gathering period. The variety of the data are emphasised by tables which illustrate the distribution by gender and nationality, as well as the political group affiliation and role of the research participants in the European Parliament. We explain and demonstrate the recording practices and techniques for parliamentary ethnography we employed, which elicited such a detailed understanding of informal political group dynamics. Finally, we consider how the research data was processed, archived and categorised, drawing on valuable lessons from the pilot study.

The main analytical chapters of the book—Chapters 4 to 7—provide details on the data gathering and analysis. Chapter 4 *How was data gathered? Doing research interviews and ethnography* describes the process of gathering data for research interviews and ethnography. First, we discuss the ethical review process and the impacts of the General Data Protection Regulation on interviews and ethnography. Chapter 4 also provides a detailed overview of the selection and recruitment of interviewees, how the interviews were conducted and describes the preparatory steps we took prior to the interviews. It also offers various ethnographic practices that researchers can use in parliamentary research, which is especially pertinent in light of Covid-19, and the impact this had on how the interviews were conducted and how the European Parliament operated in general.

In the first of two chapters that delve into the specificities of data analysis, Chapter 5 *Coding the data*, presents the strategies we used, and didn't use, to code dense interview, ethnographic and document data. Importantly, we generate important pointers regarding the use of software tools for qualitative analysis and highlight the intricacies of using such tools as a team with concrete examples. Additionally, we outline the technical and logistical issues that we faced when coding data collaboratively.

We move on to key methodological steps and strategies we employed for the interpretation of data. Chapter 6 *Interpreting the data*, provides a guide to conducting qualitative analysis driven by research questions that are intrinsically constructivist, interpretivist and/or post-structuralist. Here we are concerned with moving beyond coding and transforming our analysis into material that can be used to produce scientific studies for peer-reviewed publications. We cover the practical steps such as exporting code reports from ATLAS.ti and reviewing them in a collaborative fashion. It also includes a critical review of epistemological reflections that pertain to interpreting qualitative data. In this respect, the chapter not only excavates the specificities of how frames and discourses were interpreted from coded qualitative data but also how formal and informal practices were interpreted from 'texts'.

Our concluding chapter offers an open-ended discussion on future venues for qualitative research in political institutions in general and the European Parliament in particular. In summarising the key elements of the book, we stress the informality of many procedures, practices and mechanisms we witnessed and discuss their meaning for transparency and democracy. We also provide an open and thorough discussion of what we would do differently given the luxury of hindsight, offering our thoughts on the future direction for qualitative research in the European Parliament.

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