

The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation Thursday Talks



“Better Strategies for Analyzing Narrative Data”

Reina Neufeldt, University of Waterloo



Part 1: Overview



MercyCorps

About the Speaker:

Ms. Neufeldt is an Assistant Professor in the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo. She has engaged in program design, monitoring, evaluation and learning in peacebuilding and conflict resolution for over fifteen years.



Reina has an MA in Social Psychology (York University) and a PhD in International Relations (American University); she is trained in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Reina’s current research focuses on field learning and explores the role of reflective practice in improved peacebuilding.

Presenter Remarks:

The presentation began with Reina specifying that while the methods and strategies for analyzing narrative data discussed could be effective with other forms of textual and narrative data, the comments of the presentation would be focused on text generated from interviews. Furthermore, the presentation would not be about how to perform an interview, but how to analyze it, and how to create more trustworthy interpretations of interview data.

Reina asserted that interview data adds depth and texture to an evaluation. Interview data allows an evaluation to better understand complexity and how individuals view change and intervention. Interview data allows a look at how participants see the world, provides opinion data, and reveals how participants explain events, all rich information that help evaluators and those looking at evaluation work gain a deeper understanding of a situation.

Reina shared a short story to illustrate the poor use of narrative data. In the example, consultants analyzed data but looked only at small slice of their data, elevating a small set of conversations from a few “key informants”, the themes were cherry picked and reflected the existing views of the consultants. The consultants were unable to explain their methodology. The result was that stakeholders felt misrepresented and ignored, creating an environment of suboptimal engagement with assessment. The story highlighted the power of interviews to shape evaluators’ view of an initiative, the power of an evaluator to shape



how an interviewee's comments are viewed by an outside audience, and the danger of listening for selective information.

To do better, and improve the use of narrative data, Reina presented three phases of interview analysis, and with each phase there was an accompany strategy.

Three Phases of Interview Analysis

1) Setting the Stage

- a. Transcribe your interviews.
 - i. Verbatim text, be as true to the participants response as possible.
 - ii. "What I think she said", clearly acknowledge where you approximate and fill gaps in a text.
 1. A benefit to this process is that by making you go through the wording slowly and thoughtfully, the process helps you code your answers.
 - iii. Think of interviews in same way as quantitative data, as data that needs to be treated carefully. This will help make your raw analysis trustworthy.
- b. Read your interviews.
 - i. Record your initial observations .
 - ii. Remember that shortcuts undermine the depth of understanding data, and negatively affect the overall quality of the report.

Strategy One: Take better care of your data.

2) Coding and Analyzing the data

- a. Reread transcripts carefully.
 - i. Word by word, line by line.
- b. Coding – Round 1
 - i. Label key ideas, phrases, sentences, paragraphs.
 - ii. Focus on what is most relevant (intended and unintended outcomes).
 - iii. Filter with pre-existing categories or be open-ended.
 - iv. There are many content analysis approaches, but this presentation focused on thematic coding.
 - v. Coding can be done by hand or computer programs. **For a visual example of this process, please refer to the accompanying Powerpoint.*
- c. Coding – Round 2
 - i. Cluster codes into larger categories (or themes).
 - ii. Keep, drop, combine codes.
 - iii. Label your larger categories (or themes).
 - iv. Check your categories by going back to the data.
 1. Ask: does the label make sense? (ask questions of yourself and of your assumptions).
- d. Analysis of coding: how do the categories relate?

September 18, 2014, 2014

- i. be creative in presentation. **Please refer to the accompanying Powerpoint for a further description/example*

Strategy Two: Careful, comparative coding of interview data.

3) Write Up

- a. Explain your coding methodology.
 - i. Opportunity to build your credibility.
- b. Explain your choices.
- c. Support your interpretation with extensive use of quotes.

Strategy Three: more thorough reporting of interview data

Part 2: Question & Answer

Melanie Kawano-Chiu (moderator): You spoke a lot about trustworthiness and trustworthy interpretations. Please speak more about that.

Reina (speaker): With narrative data and content analysis, you are interpreting meaning. To describe this, I use the word trustworthy, but it speaks to the same considerations as reliability or validity. There is an interpretive element, so we have to be clear about what our assertions are based on. Trustworthiness is important because this is what gives our recommendations credibility.

Marylin Davison (attendee): What is the name of the software that aides in interview coding?

Reina: I use NVivo. **Please [click here](#) for more on NVivo.*

Kerry Abbot (attendee): In the story of the consultants who used narrative data poorly, the problem cited was related to lack of coverage, and perhaps not the best range of questions, not to how the gathered interview data was coded. It makes me wonder about the consultant selection process. What was in the technical proposal that led this consultant to be chosen? Was there an interview? Did the hiring office and the consultant go over the evaluation plan and methods?

Reina: The consultants in the story, we can't talk about their coding, because they were unable to present it. It seemed that all their data was linked to expert interviews, which focused their results and were done in a shoddy matter. This group was hired for good reasons, and may have been good at other parts of their jobs, but could not point to any of their techniques or demonstrate the reliability of their qualitative data.

Ruth Simpson (attendee): I have two questions. 1) What do you do when analyzing nonverbal data during interviews - such as observations of mood, emotions, and tensions during interviews? How would you link this to what was actually said? 2) How do you

September 18, 2014, 2014

manage the challenges of translation (if the interpreter during interview is translating for you but often paraphrasing?)

Reina: In response to 1) During interviews, there is a lot that goes unsaid, and the gaps in what participants say can also be informative. If someone does not want to talk about something, that can be an indicator that you need to dig deeper.

In response to 2) When addressing what's lost in translation, you need to recognize the limitations of your data in your evaluation. For example, make a note in your evaluation that, "this data was gathered through an interpreter". If it is a great concern, you may use many interpreters to triangulate the true meaning.

Kudakwashe Chirambwi (University of Bradford-UK): How best can you capture emotions? And can you consider them as data?

Reina: When trying to capture emotions as data, you can track them if they are obvious (a heated discussion in a focus group). One can even ask participants to speak about emotions, and have it laid out on the table. What are more challenging are emotions people don't want to talk about, in such a case you must be clear in your data and presentation that what you are putting forth is your own understanding of what you observed.

Melanie Kawano-Chiu (moderator): What does it look like to combine qualitative and quantitative data? And to do it well? How do these strategies line up with other techniques? Do you promote the use of case studies as well (a place where narrative data is often used)?

Reina: Interviews do some things very well for evaluations, but not all things. In a mixed methods model, you use the methods that will get you the deepest understanding of a specific experience. With interviews you can unravel complicated events and things that have evolved over time, to know how people experience things over time as they happen. Interviews can also be used early in an evaluation process to inform data down the road.

[If you have any follow-up questions, please post them on the Thursday Talk Discussion Forum here.](#)