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## Affective polarization and qualitative methods

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## 6. Affective polarization and qualitative methods

Lena Röllicke

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### INTRODUCTION

The question of how best to measure affective polarization has received increasing attention. It has become particularly pertinent in the context of multiparty systems. However, the question of measurement is, of course, not limited to the challenges of translating research on affective polarization from the US context to multiparty systems. As others in this volume have pointed out, questions of measurement are tightly related to conceptual questions (see Chapter 2 in this *Handbook*). In other words, we need to know what exactly we want to capture before thinking about how best to capture it. The previous chapters have thus proposed a conceptual distinction of affective polarization from neighboring concepts, as well as different ways of measuring affective polarization, using both traditional and novel measurement instruments (Chapter 4 in this *Handbook*). They have also reflected on how to adjust those measures to the specific conditions of multiparty contexts, suggesting a more explicit assessment of the role of identity in affective polarization (Chapter 5 in this *Handbook*).

What has remained conspicuously absent from those discussions, however, as well as from the burgeoning literature on affective polarization more generally, are qualitative approaches to studying affective polarization. While this is not uncommon in research on public opinion and political behavior, we might nevertheless miss important insights and opportunities for cross-fertilization and reflection by leaving qualitative approaches out of the equation.

The overarching question this chapter aims to address is thus: What can qualitative approaches contribute to research on affective polarization? In particular, how can they contribute to efforts to ‘measure’ affective polarization? I argue that qualitative approaches could make at least three valuable contributions to the field: First, *refining measures of affective polarization*. Here, I will argue that qualitative approaches can help to pre-test survey questions or strengthen the construct and ecological validity of quantitative measures. Second, *exploring the concept of affective polarization beyond questions of measurement*. This could, for example, entail disentangling the different components of the concept of affective polarization and studying their meaning and interrelations in depth. Third, *broadening the perspective*. In particular, studies employing qualitative methods could generate new insights into the wider phenomenon, adopt a context-sensitive account, and take a more critical, reflexive stance towards the concept of affective polarization.

I start by providing a brief overview of the state of the art of qualitative approaches in the literature on affective polarization and public opinion more generally. I then briefly discuss what is ‘special’ about qualitative research, before outlining three main ways in which qualitative approaches could contribute to research on affective polarization.

## STATE OF THE ART

### **There Are Very Few Studies Using Qualitative Approaches in Research on Affective Polarization...**

A systematic review of research on affective polarization in multi-party systems (Röllicke, 2023) shows that, out of the 78 articles published by October 2022, only two adopt a qualitative approach: Schieferdecker (2021) conducts in-depth interviews to shed light on belief systems, attitude structures, and communicative practices of different opinion groups in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. Providing a thick description of the mental networks and communicative practices of his interview partners, he identifies clearly defined stereotypes of two camps, each with a different view of the adequacy and effectiveness of COVID-19 containment policies (p. 317). His analysis shows, among others, that in-group identities played less of a role than often assumed in the affective polarization literature, but that people did have strong meta-perceptions – an insight that could provide an interesting starting point for further investigation into affective polarization between opinion groups.<sup>1</sup> Kinga (2020), on the other hand, identified dynamics of affective polarization when conducting an ethnography of the democratic transition in Bhutan, reflecting in particular on the role of moralizing discourses in creating affective polarization in the absence of any real ideological differences between the two major parties competing during the first democratic election.

In the meantime, a few more qualitative studies have been published in the field of affective polarization. To the best of my knowledge, however, those are less than a handful. Most recently, Versteegen (2024) used in-depth interviews to illustrate what kind of emotions partisans report and how they express them. Building on his qualitative material, he makes the argument that partisans might ascribe normatively desirable emotions to their in-groups and undesirable emotions to their out-groups, thus potentially strengthening affective polarization by making their in-group superior to out-groups. Balinhas (2023), in his review article on the possible contributions of critical psychology to the study of (affective) polarization, includes an empirical illustration of how to use qualitative analysis, in particular a discursive psychology approach (Edwards & Potter, 2000; Potter & Edwards, 1999; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to gain a more context-sensitive, critical understanding of affective polarization, e.g., in the context of the polarizing dynamics between the Spanish right-wing party Vox and the feminist movement. Revers (2023) conducts a case study of the anti-Critical Race Theory campaign in the USA to illustrate how polarization can be understood as performance, thus linking the field of affective polarization to theoretical approaches from neighboring disciplines such as cultural sociology. Revers & Coleman (2023) adopt the same performance-theoretical lens but use interview data on family and friendship disputes during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK and Germany to explore dynamics of “micropolarization” on the interpersonal level and their intersection with the ‘public drama of political conflict’ (p. 1).

Apart from those studies that specifically look at affective polarization, there are some qualitative studies that focus on related topics or phenomena but explicitly mention or discuss affective polarization. Those include, e.g., Korstenbroek’s (2024) ethnography of right-wing virtual communities and Mau et al.’s (2024) focus group research on conversational trigger points. Next to that, there are some ongoing projects that aim to use qualitative methods, e.g., the NotLikeUs project in Belgium (<https://notlikeus.be/project/>), or include more qualitative

material, such as open-ended survey questions, in their data collection (e.g., Hartevelde et al., 2022).

Overall, however, and despite some calls for more context-sensitive research (e.g., Balinhas, 2023) or research questions that would lend themselves well to qualitative research (e.g., Von Scheve, 2024), qualitative approaches remain largely under-represented in research on affective polarization.

### **... and in Research on Public Opinion more Generally**

This relative lack of qualitative approaches in studying affective polarization – while arguably an important blind spot – is, however, not surprising. In fact, the entire field of public opinion research is largely dominated by quantitative methodologies (e.g. Igo, 2008; Pierson, 2007). Interestingly, this has not always been the case. For the founding fathers of public opinion research, such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, it had been obvious that quantitative research needed to be complemented with qualitative approaches. As Merton (as in Lazarsfeld et al., 1979) observes:

Paul [Lazarsfeld, who is today thought of as perhaps the founding father pioneer of quantitative opinion research] took it as his ‘moral duty’ to demonstrate the value and [...] necessity of combining quantitative inquiry with qualitative insight. More than once, as he confronted overly-zealous sociometricians persuaded that numbers are all, Paul could be heard intoning the monitory words of St. Augustine: ‘So it is, O Lord my God, I measure it and know not what it is I measure.’. (p. 20)

With the behavioral revolution of the 1950s and 60s and the increasing specialization and siloing of different social science disciplines, however, the natural interplay between quantitative and qualitative approaches almost disappeared from public opinion research (Converse, 1984; Dahl, 1961; Key, Jr., 1960). Critics have long lamented that the sole reliance on polls, i.e., on aggregated individual responses that are taken out of their social contexts, risks resulting in an overly homogenized picture of citizens’ thinking (Blumer, 1948), which overestimates the quality of citizens’ attitudes and capacity for political deliberation, and underestimates how much opinions are unstable, context-dependent, idiosyncratic (Bishop, 2005, p. xvi) and variable over time (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Zaller, 1992). As Saunders et al. (2020) state:

In social psychological and political research, political attitudes are most commonly measured using Likert scales. Such measurement assumes people have a pre-formed and consistent attitude equal in meaning for everyone who ticks the same box on a questionnaire. In reality, survey answers often provide ill-thought-through responses. ‘Real’ answers do not always fit neatly into a box. On many issues, up to four out of five citizens do not have stable, non-random opinions. Instead, they have pseudo-opinions and sometimes satisfice to please the interviewer. (p. 2)

Similarly, a study by Bishop (2005) asking respondents about non-existent policies underscores concerns that much of what is measured through polls is ‘an illusion, an artefact of measurement and created by the way in which survey questions are designed and administered to the respondents’ (Bishop, 2005, p. xvi).

More recently, however, some groundbreaking qualitative studies that have been published in the past few years, such as Katherine Cramer’s (2016) *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* and Arlie Hochschild’s (2018) *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, have received

widespread attention across disciplinary silos, making an important case for the argument that it might be worth reviving qualitative perspectives in public opinion research.

## QUALITATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

What, then, is special about qualitative approaches? And what *are* qualitative approaches in the first place? As Aspers and Corte (2019) illustrate with a systematic review of a vast body of qualitative literature, there is no clear definition of ‘qualitative research.’ This is not least due to the fact that the attribute ‘qualitative’ can ‘refer to at least one of three different elements of the research project: the *type of data*, the method of *data collection*, or the approach to *data analysis*’ (Small & Calarco, 2022, p. 9). Next to that, qualitative research can span different epistemologies – ranging from more positivist to interpretivist approaches – and ontologies, ranging from more holistic to particularist ones (Blatter et al., 2016).<sup>2</sup> Different qualitative methodologies, thus, combine different stances on ontology and epistemology with different ‘concrete methods and techniques of data collection/production and data analysis/interpretation’ (p. 2). Lastly, qualitative approaches can be used independently or in a mixed methods design. As Collier et al. (2003) describe it, qualitative (as well as quantitative) scholars can thus ‘specializ[e]’ on their respective approach or ‘bridg[e]’ qualitative and quantitative approaches (p. 6). I will not be able to systematically discuss all those different ways of doing qualitative research in this chapter. Instead, I will focus on three different ‘contributions’ that qualitative approaches (broadly understood) can make to research on affective polarization – spanning different qualitative methods, methodologies, ontologies, and epistemologies. I call those three contributions ‘Refining existing measurements,’ ‘Exploring the concept,’ and ‘Broadening the perspective,’ and present them in turn in the following subsection. In doing so, I also gradually move from the challenge of ‘measuring’ affective polarization to approaches to ‘capturing’ and ‘understanding’ affective polarization. The focus of this chapter is on how we can measure affective polarization, what we do in fact measure, and what we should potentially measure – in other words, on questions of measurement and conceptualization. However, my discussion will also touch upon questions of causes and consequences and discuss the potential of qualitative research to add a critical, reflexive perspective on affective polarization.

### Refining Existing Measurements

The first – and most direct – way in which qualitative approaches can contribute to the study of affective polarization is by refining existing or future quantitative measurements. This could, for example, entail pre-testing survey questions through cognitive interviewing (Beatty & Willis, 2007; Willis, 2005) or improving the construct and ecological validity of survey questions and experiments by conducting in-depth interviews or ethnographic research (Fine & Elsbach, 2000; Pérez Bentancur & Tiscornia, 2024; Sherman & Strang, 2004; Thachil, 2018).

Cognitive interviewing is probably one of the qualitative methods that is most closely related to quantitative research on public opinion. Cognitive interviews are a tool to pre-test survey questions and assess the quality of the responses they generate (Beatty & Willis, 2007) before fielding the survey to a large-*n* sample. They entail going through the intended survey questions with a small sample of interview partners and using either direct probes or a so-called

*think-aloud* technique to find out whether and how people understand the question, how they construct their answers, and whether they face any difficulties in answering the questions. Ultimately, one of the aims of this method is to minimize the potential response error brought about by poor wording of the questions (Willis, 2005).

Improving the question wording as such is not the only benefit of a more qualitative exploration of respondents' survey answers, however. Gaining insight into what people have in mind when answering the survey question also helps shed light on the question's construct validity. Among the central survey instruments used to measure affective polarization are the so-called like-dislike scale, or, especially in the US-American context, the feeling thermometer (see also Chapters 4 and 5 of this *Handbook*). While the question of the like-dislike scale seems straightforward at first sight,<sup>3</sup> I argue elsewhere (Röllicke, 2024) that it is not entirely clear what exactly 'dislike,' one of the central concepts of affective polarization, actually entails and, importantly, what respondents themselves take it to mean. This applies both to the concept of 'dislike' as such and to the concrete like-dislike scores people assign to specific groups. To gain a better understanding of what exactly people associate with a 0, an 80, or a 50, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews, asking my interview partners to elaborate on what a given like-dislike score means to them. While this approach bears a resemblance to cognitive interviewing, I followed a more open, conversational style, aiming not to test the survey question as such but to gain insight into how people make sense of the concept behind the questions. However, even without following the more technical approach of cognitive interviewing, several themes emerged that underscore the potential contribution of qualitative approaches to refining quantitative measurements. To illustrate, I briefly highlight three of those themes.

Firstly, several of my interview partners expressed a sense of unease about the question itself – not only because they found it difficult to assign a specific score but also because they found it unethical to do so. Secondly, many seemed to have a wish for consistency in their scores, sometimes wanting to adjust their initial scores after having elaborated on their answers or when assigning a score to the next group. Not only does this highlight interesting deliberation processes that might take place during interviews, but it also points to potential practical questions that might need to be considered during the survey design, e.g., whether or not to allow respondents to go back to previous questions to adjust scores after reflection. Some online surveys, for example, show respondents the complete grid of scores, allowing them to calibrate their responses for different parties, voters, or leaders. This might be harder to implement with other modes of data collection, such as face-to-face interviewing. Even in those cases, however, one could consider giving respondents visual props and allowing them to adjust their scores after deliberation.

Thirdly, and more substantively, the interviews showed that, despite the wish for consistency, the same numerical score can mean rather different things to different people – and even to the same person. This is not only a matter of degree, however – in other words, of choosing a 30 instead of a 40 or a 90 instead of an 80. It also points to the different ways in which respondents reconcile potentially ambivalent attitudes towards an out-group into one single like-dislike score. In the wider literature on attitudes and public opinion, the concept of ambivalence, the colloquial "mixed feelings" about someone or something, is extensively discussed (e.g., Craig & Martinez, 2005; Gainous et al., 2010; Meffert et al., 2004). In research on affective polarization, however, attitudes towards in- and out-groups are still largely conceptualized as unidimensional, in other words, as *either* positive *or* negative. What the qualitative

elaboration on like-dislike scores suggests is that people can, in fact, have *both* positive *and* negative evaluations of the same group at the same time. Not only that, there are different ways in which my interview partners have expressed ambivalence: While some differentiate between subgroups of the out-group or between individual members they like and the group as such which they might dislike, others differentiate between various aspects of the out-group which they evaluate differently, for example, their political positions compared to more personal characteristics of group members. Unsurprisingly, the way in which such different conflicting attitudes translate into a single like-dislike score is far from straightforward. Some opt for a mid-point score;<sup>4</sup> others, by contrast, seem to simply bracket one part of their evaluation and instead choose the more positive or negative score. Having a better understanding of the way in which people deal with ambivalence in their in- and out-group evaluations thus seems important to ensure a consistent measurement of affective polarization.

Beyond the issue of construct validity discussed above, a final way in which qualitative approaches can help refine existing measures of affective polarization is by improving the ecological validity of quantitative measures of affective polarization – not only survey questions but also experiments. Insights from interviews as well as from ethnographic research can provide rich contextual knowledge that can be used to ensure that the concepts and questions in surveys and experiments make sense in the specific context in which they are fielded. As Thachil (2018) points out, ethnography can be particularly useful in less well-studied places, for example, to identify innovative sampling strategies, but also to design meaningful vignette texts and, at a later stage, to suggest potential causal mechanisms that can inform post-treatment survey questions. Even beyond less well-studied populations, however, ethnographic research can be combined with survey questions and experiments, providing necessary context knowledge to ensure ecological validity (for concrete recommendations on how to conduct ethnographic experiments, see, e.g., Fine & Elsbach, 2000; Pérez Bentancur & Tiscornia, 2024). In research on affective polarization, this could, for example, be particularly relevant for identifying meaningful political in- and out-groups, for suggesting context-sensitive examples of potential behavioral implications of dislike (e.g., by reflecting on the possibly different cultural norms around expressing dislike of political out-groups; the appropriateness of asking, e.g., how one would feel about one's child marrying someone from the out-group; or the possible underlying meaning of certain behavioral intentions<sup>5</sup>), or for choosing realistic scenarios of the political behavior of affectively polarized elites or individuals in vignette experiments.

### **Beyond 'Measurement': Exploring the Concept**

The potential of qualitative approaches for studying affective polarization, however, goes beyond refining quantitative measures. Among the specific strengths of qualitative research are the capacity to 'dig deeper,' uncover the meaning of stated attitudes, identify underlying worldviews and motivations, and to gain a more in-depth, nuanced understanding of how people themselves make sense of and interpret politics, political conflicts, or group identities. In the context of affective polarization, this means, for example, that qualitative methods can be used to disentangle the different components of the concept and study them in depth. Central components of the 'traditional' conceptualization of affective polarization include, for example, the presence of more or less mutual *dislike* between different political groups, which

can (but possibly need not) be grounded in specific *emotions*, and which is, in some way or another, linked to questions of group *identity*.

One rather straightforward way of exploring what role exactly those components play in affective polarization is by conducting qualitative interviews and asking people to describe in their own words how exactly they feel about their respective in- and out-groups, what it is they like or dislike about them, and why. In the interview study briefly described above, for example, the justifications participants gave for their respective like-dislike scores suggested that there might be different underlying dimensions of ‘dislike,’ including different bases of evaluation (ranging from more political to more personal characteristics of the group), different evaluation criteria (some more based on assessing similarity or simple taste, and others more normative or moral), and different kinds of considerations that together inform the overall evaluation (Röllicke, 2024). Rather than focusing on ‘degrees’ of like and dislike, this qualitative study thus suggests that it would be instructive to also take into account different types or ‘qualities’ of dislike.

A related, yet somewhat different approach to unpacking the concept of dislike using qualitative research is to look more closely at emotions. The concept of ‘dislike’ as such simply denotes an evaluation of a certain attitude object with a negative valence (Verplanken et al., 1998). To what extent this evaluation is linked to specific emotions – and if so, which ones – is a question that is only starting to be explored more systematically (Berntzen et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022; Renström et al., 2023; Webster, 2020; Webster & Albertson, 2022; see Chapter 13 in this *Handbook*). Accordingly, there have recently been several calls to look more closely at the role of emotions in affective polarization (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024; Scherer, 2024; Von Scheve, 2024). While Bakker and Lelkes (2024) suggest more research into the physiological reactions individuals show in contexts of heightened affective polarization, many of the avenues for future research that von Scheve (2024) outlines in his response, in fact, lend themselves very well to being investigated with qualitative methods. This includes using interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic methods to identify the nature of specific discrete emotions of individuals but also to explore how those are shaped by collective emotions and intersubjectively constructed or institutionalized feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979). Not only can such more in-depth, contextualized accounts refine our understanding of the phenomenon of affective polarization itself; they can also help disentangle the concept of affective polarization as such from possible antecedents and consequences. Versteegen (2024), for example, conducted in-depth interviews with right-wing individuals in Germany, focusing in particular on the emotions they report when talking about their respective in-groups and out-groups. He suggests that, rather than necessarily talking about the emotions they ‘actually’ feel, affectively polarized individuals might (consciously or unconsciously) use emotion *portrayals* to strengthen their in-groups and delineate them clearly from their out-groups, thus pointing to a performative role of emotions in affective polarization.

As this example shows, qualitative approaches can also contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between dislike, emotions, and identities, as well as the role of identities more generally, in affective polarization. This can include a closer investigation of what motivates potential negative identities (Mayer & Russo, 2024; see also Chapter 12 in this *Handbook*) and how people conceptualize their respective in- and out-groups in the first place. As Harteveld also points out in Chapter 17 in this *Handbook*, not least in contexts in which political parties play a less prominent role in structuring the political field or in which affective polarization takes place between opinion groups, the question of entitativity, in other

words, the extent to which a group is actually perceived as a group, is very relevant when discussing affective polarization. Additionally, different people might associate the same group with very different attributes, which in turn might give way to different types of ‘like’ and ‘dislike.’ Such questions of group perceptions and feelings of group belonging or rejection can be captured very well with methods such as interviews or focus groups and analyzed from different theoretical angles.<sup>6</sup> Schieferdecker’s (2021) interview study in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany, for example, suggests that, at least in the case of issue-based affective polarization, positive social identities might play less of a role in generating affective polarization than generally assumed in the literature. However, even in a context as novel as the COVID-19 pandemic, group stereotypes and meta-perceptions are clearly emerging, pointing to interesting avenues for future research on *processes* rather than *states* of affective polarization (see also Röllicke, 2023).

### Broadening the Perspective

‘Broadening the perspective’ can take different forms, of which I want to briefly highlight three: looking at the wider phenomenon, taking context into account, and taking a critical-reflexive stance. Apart from illuminating the components of the traditional conceptualization of affective polarization as described above, qualitative approaches can also serve to explore the wider phenomenon more openly, thus potentially generating new ways of looking at affective polarization that can inspire future research. Moving from a narrow focus on the concept of affective polarization to an exploration of the wider phenomenon of political inter-group conflict could, for example, be inspired by the focus group study conducted by Mau et al. (2024), who identified certain ‘trigger points’ in conversations about hotly debated political topics. While the focus of their study was initially on ideological polarization in Germany, the notion of trigger points established a potential link between ideological disagreements and the emotionalization of debates that could be instrumentalized, for example, by political entrepreneurs to create a breeding ground for more affective polarization.

Another example of a more exploratory approach could be to study the lived experience of affective polarization using ethnographic participant observation. The ethnographic research conducted by Arlie Hochschild (2018), for example, at first sight, focused on exploring the lived experience of Trump supporters. However, with her study, Hochschild essentially provides a new way of making sense of the deeply polarized political context of the United States through the eyes of the members of one of the two camps. Rather than using the already existing concepts to describe the antagonism between Republicans and Democrats, she develops two novel concepts that might also be relevant to the way in which we understand affective polarization: the notion of a deep story – in the case of Trump supporters, this was based on the feeling of being in the waiting line while others, in other words, the out-group, are either ‘jumping the queue’ (e.g., migrants) or ‘inviting others to jump the queue’ (e.g., Democrats) – and the idea of an empathy wall, which stands in the way of true understanding between Republicans and Democrats.

Similarly, Korstenbroek (2024) suggests, based on his ethnographic research on right-wing (virtual) communities in the Netherlands, that at least part of their anger is due to feeling excluded from the democratic sphere and essentially experiencing an empathy wall not unlike the one described above. One way of dealing with increasing affective polarization might thus, according to the author, be to aim at crossing such empathy walls – which is something

that deep listening methods, such as in-depth interviews, already contribute to, potentially also serving as a blueprint for the design of future interventions.

As those studies already partly suggest, qualitative approaches allow us to consider not just the individual and their attitudes but also the social context in which they are embedded. This has several advantages. Using ethnographic methods to study individuals in their context, rather than a more ‘artificial’ survey or experimental setting, can, for example, help overcome the risk of the attitudinal fallacy (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014), which more verbal accounts such as surveys – but also interviews – entail. Rather than (potentially falsely) deducing people’s behavior from their stated attitudes, ethnography allows researchers to observe how people actually behave in practice. For research on affective polarization, this could, among other things, entail observing how people relate to their out-groups in actual everyday life encounters. This not only has the potential to directly study the behavioral implications of affective polarization; it can also shed light on potential discrepancies between people’s stated attitudes and their actual behavior, which could provide interesting insights into social norms of relating to political out-groups on the one hand, and potentially diverging perceptions and interpretations of reality on the other.<sup>7</sup>

Next to that, taking context into account also contributes to an understanding of the interaction between macro-level structures and discourses and micro-level attitudes. Disciplines such as social psychology and sociology – especially the qualitative strands within them – have made important theoretical contributions to the complex relationship between individuals and social contexts. Introducing the study of such relationships is thus not only a question of using other – in this case, qualitative – methods but also of getting inspiration from the theoretical traditions in which such methods are traditionally used, such as cultural sociology or discursive psychology. Two of the few qualitative studies on affective polarization, by Revers (2023) and Revers and Coleman (2023), for example, adopt a performance theoretical lens inspired by cultural sociology and use qualitative interviews to analyze the interplay between macro discourses of affective polarization and intra-personal conflicts during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany and the UK. Coming from a different angle, but equally building on sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Clifford Geertz, Damhuis and Westheuser (2024) use in-depth interviews to uncover how cleavage structures are reflected in different types of ‘common sense reasoning’ amongst different social groups. While their study does not directly speak to the theme of affective polarization, it nevertheless provides a potential blueprint for studying, for example, in how far different sides of affectively polarized divides also reflect – or inform – certain features of larger macro divides such as cleavage structures.

Lastly, paying more attention to the context in which affective polarization unfolds also allows for taking a more critical perspective on the phenomenon: for example, is affective polarization really best described as a symmetrical process of deteriorating intergroup relations? What role do inequalities or power relations play in what is currently often somewhat apolitically treated as ‘mutual dislike’? Balinhas (2023) discusses these questions in depth, making a convincing call to develop more sensitivity to power relations and inequalities in research on affective polarization by taking into account the meaning and historical development of specific group identities and emotions. As Balinhas illustrates, this could, for example, be done using discursive analysis – which can be applied to different kinds of qualitative data, whether political text, ethnographic field notes, or interview transcripts. Taking a critical perspective can also include adopting a reflexive stance on affective polarization, asking what social function affective polarization might fulfil (Kumkar, 2024) and in how far research and

discourses on affective polarization might themselves be performative (see, e.g., Balinhas, 2023).

## BEYOND THE QUANT-QUAL DIVIDE: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Of course, qualitative approaches do not come without challenges and limitations. One of the most obvious ones is the limited generalizability of the findings due to a lack of representativeness of an often inevitably small sample. Contrary to quantitative research, which often requires compromising depth for breadth, in qualitative research, the increase in depth mostly comes at the cost of breadth. Secondly, while accounting for some biases in quantitative research, qualitative research might bring about different kinds of bias. As a study by Liu and Wang (2015) shows, face-to-face interviewing yields different results on the like-dislike scale than a web-based survey, pointing to a potentially larger social desirability bias in more direct interaction with the researcher. Such potential biases, as well as the higher degree of subjectivity in the data production and analysis in qualitative research more generally, of course, require a great degree of reflection, which needs to be considered in the analysis.

Next to that, while qualitative methods allow for more complexity and can help trace causal mechanisms by studying a small number of cases in depth, it is nevertheless harder to *isolate* causal mechanisms with qualitative methods. While there is a large body of literature on how to identify causality using qualitative methods (e.g., Gerring, 2012; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Mahoney & Goertz, 2006), it is also possible to simply turn qualitative findings into new hypotheses which can then be tested more systematically with quantitative approaches.

Lastly, while quantitative research is not without ethical challenges, the increased closeness between researcher and research subjects (Aspers & Corte, 2019) gives rise to specific ethical questions (see, e.g., the debate by McVeigh (2017) and Shapira (2017) on the normative desirability of attempts to ‘cross the empathy wall’; or Cyr and Goodman (2024) and Damhuis and de Jonge (2022) on the ethical challenge of building rapport with those one politically disagrees with).

Despite those challenges, however, I have tried to suggest that qualitative research could contribute in very different ways to the study of affective polarization: by refining existing or future (quantitative) measures; by exploring the concept of affective polarization; and by broadening our perspective, generating new insights on the wider phenomenon, adopting a context-sensitive account and taking a more critical, reflexive stance towards the concept of affective polarization. On a more practical level, there are many different ways of doing this. These include, for example, engaging with existing qualitative work on related topics or adding qualitative elements to one’s research design. They can also entail establishing more institutional cooperation between different methodological approaches, for example, by explicitly inviting different perspectives and methodological approaches to conferences and workshops or by collaborating in multidisciplinary and multi-method research projects.

The central question is, of course, what we want to find out – to then adjust our choice of measurement accordingly. In the words of Katherine Cramer:

I find mass-sample public opinion surveys enormously helpful for capturing what a large population of people think at a given point in time. But for the task of figuring out why people think what they

do I have found no better substitute than listening to them in depth. [...] Poll-based analyses of opinion ought to be accompanied not just by focus groups or in-depth interviews but also by listening methods that expose us to the conversations and contexts of everyday life. (2016, p. 20–21).

Quantitative measurements, especially if used carefully and adjusted to the complexities of the respective contexts as suggested by the authors of Chapters 4 and 5 in this *Handbook*, can undoubtedly be the best choice, especially if the aim is to get a representative, large-scale picture that can be relatively easily compared across countries. As this chapter has shown, however, it is possible to appreciate the complementary potential of qualitative approaches without denying the value of quantitative approaches. This chapter thus aims to widen our perspective to approaches that have thus far been largely overlooked, but which allow us to look at the phenomenon of affective polarization from a slightly different angle.

## NOTES

1. See also Hobolt et al. (2020) and Herold et al. (2023) on this variant of affective polarization.
2. Blatter et al. (2016) provide a very helpful categorization of different qualitative methodologies into a two-dimensional space which distinguishes epistemological approaches by how much they are oriented towards ‘coherence’ as opposed to ‘correspondence,’ and the ontological dimension by how much it presumes ‘holism,’ i.e., that ‘the interaction of the units are strongly influenced by the entire web of interactions’ as opposed to ‘particularism,’ which does not accord the whole an ontological status as such but sees it as ‘a product of the particular elements and their interactions’ (p. 3).
3. In the CSES surveys, for example, the question wording is as follows: ‘I’d like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If I come to a party you haven’t heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so. The first party is PARTY A.’ In other surveys, this wording is adjusted to ask not only about parties but also about partisans or members of opinion groups. In some cases, the scale also runs from 0 to 100 or -5 to +5, or asks about warm or cold feelings, instead of ‘like’ and ‘dislike’.
4. Which is hard to distinguish from a ‘neither positive nor negative’ and an ‘indifferent,’ as, for example, Martinez et al. (2005) have pointed out.
5. As Klar et al. (2018) have pointed out, for example, not wanting to have in-laws from one’s political out-group might be less indicative of dislike as such and more about not wanting to have political discussions at the dinner table.
6. Zollinger (2024) also demonstrates a very convincing way of analyzing people’s identities as expressed in open-ended survey questions using quantitative methods. However, she, too, points to the potential of further developing ideal typical descriptions of universalist and particularist identities using qualitative analysis. Such an analysis can, for example, also be guided by theoretical traditions such as discourse analytical approaches (Billig, 1996; Edwards & Potter, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) or social representations theory (Howarth, 2002; Moscovici, 1988; Potter & Edwards, 1999).
7. Some of the climate activists I interviewed, for example, expressed love and pity for those who do not take climate change very seriously. They also explicitly stated that they believe everyone has a right to their opinion, even if they disagree with it. At the same time, however, they engaged in acts of civil disobedience that directly targeted car

drivers: blocking the roads and thus preventing car drivers from driving further and *de facto* limiting their freedom to act the way they otherwise would. In the media and the wider public, those acts have largely been interpreted as expressions of moral condemnation and, in the language of affective polarization, out-group dislike. In the eyes of the climate activists, however, their actions do not contradict their stated attitudes, especially since the main aim of this form of protest was not to punish car drivers but to generate attention. It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to delve deeper into the role of meta-perceptions or into the ways in which people justify their own behavior as consistent with their attitudes. For understanding dynamics of affective polarization, however, this example raises the important question of whether the stated attitude or the actual behavior (as well as how it is perceived by others) is the most relevant aspect to determine people's relationship with their political out-groups. Qualitative insights can help disentangle these different elements and critically reflect on their relationship with each other.

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