

Excerpted from: Analyzing Qualitative Data

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The mechanics of coding

Those new to coding often find one of the most challenging things to begin with is identifying chunks of text and working out what codes they represent in a way that is theoretical and analytic and not merely descriptive. This involves careful reading of the text and deciding what it is about. In the visual arts the term 'intensive seeing' is used to refer to the way that we can pay close attention to all the things we can see, even the commonplace and ordinary. In the same way, you need to undertake 'intensive reading' when coding. Charmaz suggests some basic questions to ask as you undertake this intensive reading that will help you get started:

- What is going on?
- What are people doing?
- What is the person saying?
- What do these actions and statements take for granted?
- How do structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede or change these actions and

statements? (Charmaz, 2003, pp. 94–5)

An example

To illustrate this initial stage, consider the following example. It is taken from a study of carers for people with dementia and is an interview with Barry, who is now looking after his wife, who has Alzheimer's disease. The interviewer has just asked Barry, 'Have you had to give anything up that you enjoyed doing that was important to you?', and he replies:

BARRY

Well, the only thing that we've really given up is – well we used to go dancing. Well she can't do it now so I have to go on my own, that's the only thing really. And then we used to go indoor bowling at the sports centre. But of course, that's gone by the board now. So we don't go there. But I manage to get her down to works club, just down the road on the occasional Saturdays, to the dances. She'll sit and listen to the music, like, stay a couple of hours and then she's had enough. And then, if it's a nice weekend I take her out in the 10 car.

Description

At one level this is a very simple reply. In lines 2 to 6 Barry gives two examples of things that he and Beryl used to enjoy together, dancing and indoor bowling, then, without prompting, he lists two things that they still do together, visiting dances at the works club and going out for a drive. So a first idea is to code lines 2 to 4 to the code 'Dancing', lines 4 to 6 to 'Indoor bowling', 6 to 9 to 'Dances at works club' and 9 to 10 to 'Drive together'. Such coding might be useful if you are analyzing interviews with lots of carers and you wanted to examine the actual activities given up and those still done together and compare them between couples. Then retrieving all the text coded at codes about such activities would enable you to list and compare what people said about them.

Categorization

However, such coding is simply descriptive; there are usually better ways to categorize the things mentioned and there are other things indicated by Barry's text. In analysis you need to move away from descriptions, especially using respondent's terms, to a more categorical, analytic and theoretical level of coding. For example, you can code the text about dancing and indoor bowling together at a code 'Joint activities ceased', and text on works club dances and driving together to the code 'Joint activities continuing'. Assuming you have done the same in other interviews, you can now retrieve all the text about what couples have given up doing and see if they have things in common. In so doing you have begun to categorize the text.

Analytic codes

Thinking about this suggests another way to code the text. Both dancing and bowling are physical activities involving some degree of skilled movement. Clearly Beryl has lost that, so we could code lines 2 to 6 to the code 'Loss of physical co-ordination'. This code is now slightly more analytic than those we started with, which just repeated Barry's descriptions. Barry does not talk about loss of physical co-ordination, but it is implied in what he says. Of course you need to be careful. This is an interpretation, based, here, on very little evidence. You need to look for other examples in Barry's interview of the same thing and perhaps other evidence in what he says of Beryl's infirmity.

Another thing to notice about this text is the way Barry changes from using 'we' about what they used to do together, to saying 'I' when he turns to the things they do now. This suggests another pair of analytic codes, one about joint activity with a sense of being a couple, the other about activity where the carer is just doing things for his partner. You might code these as 'Togetherness' and 'Doing for'. Note that these codes do not simply code what happened, but rather suggest the way in which Barry thought about, or conceptualized, these things.

Other things you might have noticed about the passage that might be candidates for codes include Barry's rhetorical use of 'Well' in lines 2 and 3. He says it three times. Is this an indication of a sense of resignation, loss or regret? Again, from such a short passage it is not clear. But you might code it 'Resignation' for now and later see if it is consistent with other text of Barry's you have coded to 'Resignation'. It is interesting to note that Barry says he still goes dancing, on his own. A different interpretation of this use of 'well' and the fact that it is the first thing that Barry mentions, is that dancing was a key thing that he and Beryl did together as a couple. You might therefore think that it is a kind of core or central activity of the couple, something that was central to their life together as a couple. Again, it would be useful to examine other carers to see if there are similar defining activities and to see if this identifies any

differences between carers. Perhaps carers where the defining activities have been less affected by Alzheimer's are different from those where it has.

In summary, here are the codes that might be used to code the passage by Barry.

Descriptive codes: 'Dancing', 'Indoor bowling', 'Dances at works club', 'Drive together'.

Categories: 'Joint activities ceased', 'Joint activities continuing'.

Analytic codes: 'Loss of physical co-ordination', 'Togetherness', 'Doing for', 'Resignation', 'Core activity'.

Of course, it is unlikely that you would use all these codes to code just one short passage like this, but I have used them here to illustrate the way you need to move from descriptive coding, close to the respondent's terms, to categorization and to more analytic and theoretical codes. Also notice that I have used the codes only once in this short text. Normally, you would look through the rest of the text to see if there are any more passages that can be coded to the same code and do the same with other participants.

How you develop these thematic codes and which of them you focus on will depend on the aim of the research. In many cases, research is driven by funding bodies and what you have agreed with the funders that you will do. For example, if the research on those suffering from Alzheimer's disease was funded by the bodies that provide services to carers, then you might focus on the themes 'Doing for' and 'Joint activities'. On the other hand, if you were doing a PhD on the social psychology of couples, you might focus on 'Core activity' and 'Togetherness'.

Marking the coding

When using paper, coding is done by jotting the code name in the margin or by marking text with colour (either in the margin or using highlighter pens). Figure 4.1 shows some of these ways of indicating this coding on the transcript. There are boxes with linked names (I used arrows), shading (e.g. with a highlighter pen) and linked code name. The right-hand margin is used with brackets to indicate the lines coded. I have circled or highlighted some key words or terms such as emotive words, unusual terms, metaphors and words used for emphasis.

Data-driven or concept-driven?

The construction of codes in a codebook is an analytic process. It is the building up of a conceptual schema. Although in the illustrations I have discussed the codes were derived from and are grounded in the data, it is possible to build a codebook without initial reference to the data collected.

Concept-driven coding

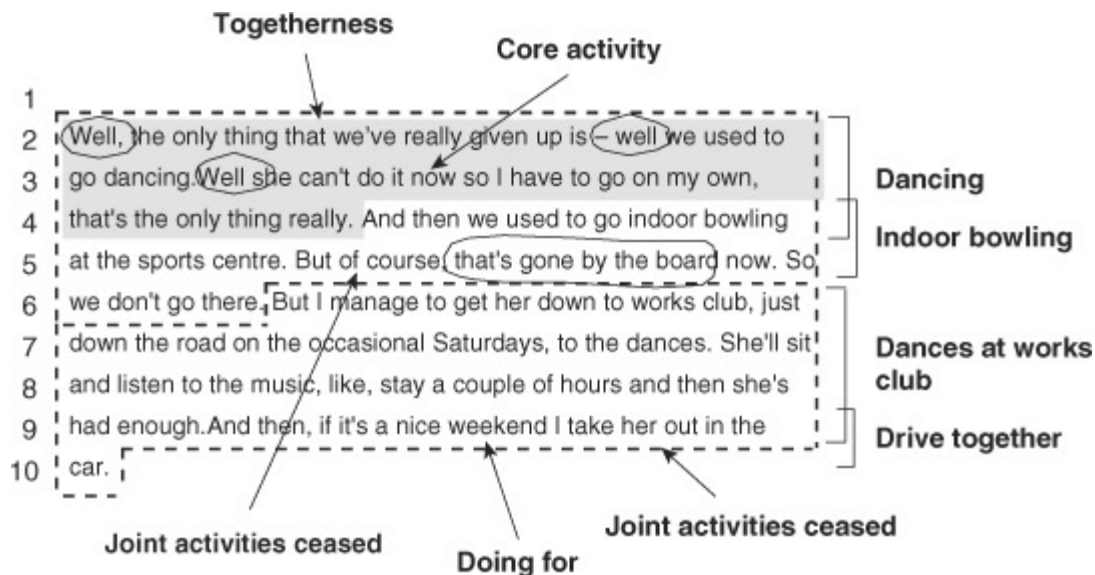
The categories or concepts the codes represent may come from the research literature, previous studies, topics in the interview schedule, hunches you have about what is going on, and so on. It is possible to construct a collection of codes in a codebook without, at first, using them to code the data. Such a view is taken by Ritchie et al.(2003) in their advocacy of framework analysis. In framework analysis, before applying codes to the text, the researcher is encouraged to build up a list of key thematic ideas. These can be taken from the literature and previous research but are also generated by reading through at least some of the transcripts

and other documents such as field notes, focus groups and printed documents. A similar view is taken by King (1998), who recommends the construction of a template, using similar sources of inspiration, which is a hierarchical arrangement of potential codes. In both King's template analysis and framework analysis, coding consists of the identification of chunks of text that exemplify the codes in this initial list. However, all these authors recognize that the researcher will need to amend the list of codes during analysis as new ideas and new ways of categorizing are detected in the text.

FIGURE 4.1 Barry's reply with coding

Data-driven coding

The opposite of starting with a given list of codes is to start with none. This approach is usually called open coding (see the discussion later in this chapter), perhaps because one tries to do it with an open mind. Of



course, no one starts with absolutely no ideas. The researcher is both an observer of the social world and a part of that same world. We all have ideas of what we might expect to be happening and as social scientists we are likely to have more than most as a result of our awareness of theoretical ideas and empirical research. Nevertheless one can try, as far as possible, not to start with preconceptions. Simply start by reading the texts and trying to tease out what is happening. Such an approach is taken by the advocates of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Glaser, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1997; Charmaz, 2003) and by many phenomenologists in their concept of bracketing – setting aside presuppositions, prejudices and preliminary ideas about phenomena (Moustakas, 1994; Maso, 2001; Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). But even they accept that a complete *tabula rasa* approach is unrealistic. The point is that, as far as possible, one should try to pull out from the data what is happening and not impose an interpretation based on pre-existing theory.

These two approaches to generating codes are not exclusive. Most researchers move backwards and forwards between both sources of inspiration during their analysis. The possibility of constructing codes before or separately from an examination of the data will reflect, to some extent, the inclination, knowledge and theoretical sophistication of the researcher. If your project has been defined in the context of a clear theoretical framework, then it is likely that you will have some good ideas about what potential codes you will need. That is not to say that they will be preserved intact throughout the project, but at least it gives you a starting point for the kinds of phenomena you want to look for when reading the text. The trick here is not to become too tied to the initial codes you construct.

What to code

The example of coding I have discussed above is very short and specific to one context – caring for those suffering from dementia. What about interviews, notes and recordings on other topics? What other kind of things can be coded? The answer depends to some extent on the kind of analysis you are intending to do. Some disciplines and theoretical approaches like phenomenology, discourse analysis or conversation analysis will require that you pay special attention to certain kinds of phenomena in the texts you are examining.

Fortunately, for a very wide range of types of qualitative analysis that includes much policy and applied research and evaluation work as well as interpretive and hermeneutic approaches, there is a common ground of phenomena that researchers tend to look for in their texts. Some typical examples are listed in Table 4.1. Different authors have a different emphasis, but many of the ideas in the table will be useful to any analysis of texts.

Note that many of the examples in this table are rather descriptive. I have given these because it is easier to illustrate the phenomena with concrete examples. However, as I have suggested above, it is necessary to move from descriptions, especially those couched simply in terms used by participants, to more general and analytic categories. For example, rather than the event 'Joining a sports club' you might want to code this text to 'Activity to make friends' or 'Commitment to keeping fit' or even 'Identity as a fit person', which make

1. Specific acts, behaviours – what people do or say.

Avoiding the question. Getting the opinions of friends.

2. Events – these are usually brief, one-off events or things someone has done. It is not uncommon for the respondent to tell them as a story.

Being rejected at job interview. Moving into a homeless hostel. Finding husband has another woman. Joining a sports club.

3. Activities – these are of longer duration than acts and often take place in a particular setting and may have several people involved.

Going dancing. Taking a training course. Helping partner with dementia get washed and dressed. Working in a bar.

4. Strategies, practices or tactics – activities aimed towards some goal.

Using word of mouth to find jobs. Getting divorced for financial reasons. Entering a relationship to get somewhere to live.

5. States – general conditions experienced by people or found in organizations.

Resignation, e.g. 'At my age it's hard to find work.' Working extra hours to get the job done.

6. Meanings – a wide range of phenomena at the core of much qualitative analysis. Meanings and interpretations are important parts of what directs participants' actions.

(a) What concepts do participants use to understand their world? What norms, values, rules and mores guide their actions?

The idea of 'on-sight climbing' amongst rock climbers to describe doing a climb without inspection, artificial aids, pre-placed protection or previous practice, with the implication that this is a superior way of doing a climb.

(b) What meaning or significance does it have for participants, how do they construe events, what are their feelings?

Blame, e.g. 'His letter made me feel I was to blame.'

(c) What symbols do people use to understand their situation? What names do they use for objects, events, persons, roles, settings and equipment?

Delivery van referred to as 'the old bus' (affectionately or dismissively). Teaching referred to as 'work at the chalkface' (like work at the coalface, not administration).

7. Participation – people's involvement or adaptation to a setting.

Adjusting to a new job, e.g. 'I find I have to be careful what I say now, because I know about things before they are finalized.'

TABLE 4.1 What can be coded? (with examples)

8.	Relationships or interaction – between people, considered simultaneously. Enjoying the family, e.g. ‘ . . . they’re 26 and 21 and most boys of that age are married, but mine aren’t and they like to come home, have friends to stay. I like that.’
9.	Conditions or constraints – the precursor to or cause of events or actions, things that restrict behaviour or actions. Firm’s loss of markets (before lay-offs). Divorce (before financial difficulties).
10.	Consequences – What happens if . . . Experience gets jobs, e.g. ‘So what you get is, people that haven’t got no qualification, but have got a few months’ experience are walking into jobs.’
11.	Settings – the entire context of the events under study. Hostel for the homeless. Training college. Day care centre.
12.	Reflexive – the researcher’s role in the process, how intervention generated the data. Expressing sympathy, e.g. ‘It must be hard for you in that situation.’

Adapted from Strauss (1987), Bogdan and Biklen (1992), Mason (1996).