The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers

Johnny Saldaña

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安徽理工大学
图书馆藏书

SAGE

Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore • Washington DC

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First published 2009

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008931307

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84787-548-8
ISBN 978-1-84787-549-5 (pbk)

Typeset by C&M Digitals Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall
Printed on paper from sustainable resources

The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers

Acknowledgments

Thanks are extended to:

Patrick Brindle of SAGE, London, who initially encouraged me to create this manual;

My qualitative research instructors at Arizona State University: Tom Barone, Mary Lee Smith, and Amira De la Garza, for introducing me to the methods and literature of qualitative inquiry;

Harry F. Wolcott, Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, Mitch Allen, and Laura A. McCammon, for their inspiration, mentorship, and collegial support for my own research endeavors;

Anne Kuckartz of MAXQDA/VERBI Software, Thomas Ringmayr of ATLAS.ti, and Karen Thomas of NVivo/QSR International Pty Ltd, for their assistance with CAQDAS screenshots and permissions;

Laura Steward of Elsevier Ltd, and Patricia Zline of Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, for their assistance with figure permissions;

Claire Lipscomb and Vanessa Harwood of SAGE, London and the anonymous manuscript reviewers for their pre-publication guidance throughout this project;

Jonothan Neelands and Tony Goode for the formatting ideas;

Lisa A. Kramer and Chiara M. Lovio for selected data contributions from fieldwork;

Jim Simpson for the "shop talk" and support; and

All writers of references listed in this manual whose works, brought together in this collection, provide us with the right tools for the right job.

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You have just finished typing the fieldnotes from your final observation of the study and you proceed to file them. There, facing you, is all the material you have diligently collected. An empty feeling comes over you as you ask, "Now what do I do?"

(Robert C. Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods,* 2007, pp. 172–3)

I code, therefore I am.

(Anonymous, written on a seminar room chalkboard)

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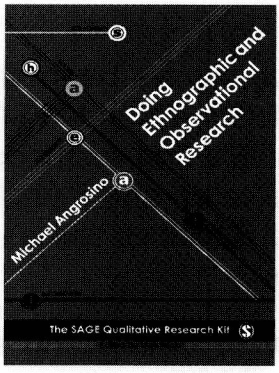

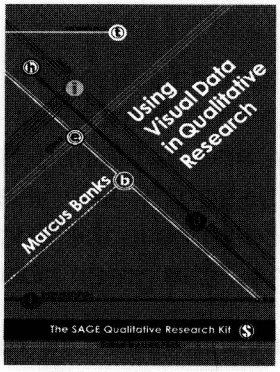

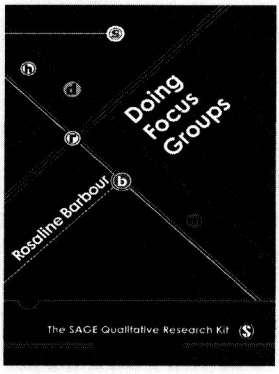

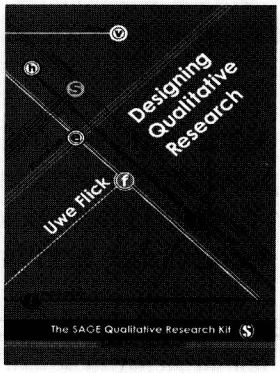

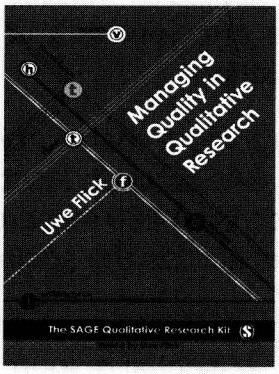

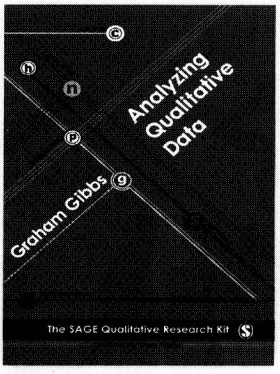

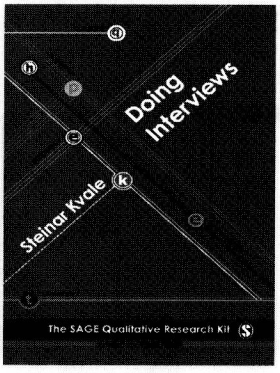

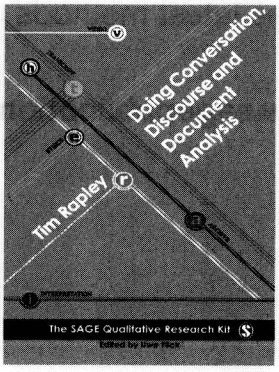

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One

An Introduction to Codes and Coding

> Any researcher who wishes to become proficient at doing qualitative analysis must learn to code well and easily. The excellence of the research rests in large part on the excellence of the coding.
>
> (Anselm L. Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*, 1987, p. 27)

Purposes of the Manual

The three primary purposes of *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* are:

- to briefly discuss the functions of codes, coding, and analytic memo writing during the qualitative data collection and analytic processes
- to profile a selected yet diverse repertoire of coding methods generally applied in qualitative data analysis, and
- to provide readers sources, descriptions, examples, recommended applications, and exercises for coding and further analyzing qualitative data.

This manual does not address such matters as qualitative research design or how to conduct interviews or participant observation fieldwork. These topics are already masterfully discussed in other textbooks. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* is intended as a reference to supplement those existing works. This manual focuses exclusively on codes and coding and how they play a role in the qualitative data analytic process. For newcomers to qualitative inquiry it presents a repertoire of coding methods in broad brushstrokes. Additional information and extended discussion of the methods can be found in most of the cited sources. Grounded theory (discussed in Chapter Two), for example, is elegantly profiled, streamlined, and re-envisioned in Kathy Charmaz's (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*; while Graham R. Gibbs' (2007) *Analyzing Qualitative Data* provides an elegant survey of basic analytic processes.

The Coding Manual does not maintain allegiance to any one specific research genre or methodology. Throughout this book you'll read a breadth of perspectives on codes and coding, sometimes purposely juxtaposed to illustrate and highlight the diverse opinions among scholars in the field. No one, including myself, can claim final authority on the "best" way to code qualitative data. In fact, there are a few instances where I take moderate liberty with adapting and even renaming prescribed coding methods for clarity or flexibility's sake. This is not intended to standardize terminology within the field, but simply to employ consistency throughout this particular manual. My perspective acknowledges and promotes the pragmatist paradigm (Patton, 2002), which chooses "the right tool for the right job" since all research questions, methodologies, conceptual frameworks, and fieldwork parameters are context-specific.

I also wrote this manual because I find it problematic (but not difficult) to teach coding in my own qualitative research methods course. I provide students with an array of readings about the process from multiple sources because I have yet to find that single satisfactory book (to me) that focuses exclusively on the topic. General introductory texts in qualitative inquiry are so numerous and well-written that it becomes difficult not to find the best one to use, but which one of such quality works to select as the primary textbook. This manual supplements introductory works in the subject because most limit their discussions about coding to the writer's prescribed, preferred, or signature methods. I wanted to provide in a single resource a selected collection of various coding methods developed by other researchers (and myself) that provides students and colleagues a handy reference for classroom exercises and assignments, and for their own independent research for thesis and dissertation fieldwork and future qualitative studies. But by no means is it an exhaustive resource. I deliberately exclude such discipline-specific methods as Behavior Coding (which notes problematic respondent and interviewer behaviors during survey interviews [Singleton & Straits, 2002, p. 65]) and such signature methods as the Davis Observation Code system (for medical interviews [Zoppi & Epstein, 2002, p. 375]). If you need additional information and explanation about the coding methods, check the References.

The Coding Manual is intended primarily as a reference work. It is not necessarily meant to be read cover-to-cover, but it certainly can be if you wish to acquaint yourself with all 29 coding methods profiles and their analytic possibilities. There are, in fact, several principles related to coding matters not discussed in the first two chapters that are unique to some of the profiles. If you choose to review all the contents, read selected sections at a time, not all of them in one sitting, otherwise it can overwhelm you. If you're scanning the manual to see which coding method(s) might be appropriate for your particular study,

read the profiles' Description and Applications sections to see if further reading of the profile is merited. It's doubtful you'll use every coding method included in this manual for your particular research endeavors throughout your career, but they are available here on an "as needed" basis for your unique projects. Like an academic curriculum, the sequential order of the profiles has been carefully considered. They don't necessarily progress in a linear manner from simple to complex, but are clustered generally from the fundamental to the intermediate to the advanced.

What is a Code?

A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. The data can consist of interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journals, documents, literature, artifacts, photographs, video, websites, e-mail correspondence, and so on. The portion of data to be coded during First Cycle coding processes can range in magnitude from a single word to a full sentence to an entire page of text to a stream of moving images. In Second Cycle coding processes, the portions coded can be the exact same units, longer passages of text, and even a reconfiguration of the codes themselves developed thus far. Just as a title represents and captures a book or film or poem's primary content and essence, so does a code represent and capture a datum's primary content and essence.

Coding examples

An example of a coded datum, as it is presented in this manual, looks like this when taken from a set of field notes about an inner city neighborhood. The one-word capitalized code in the right column is called a Descriptive Code, which summarizes the primary topic of the excerpt:

[1] I notice that the grand majority of homes have chain link fences in front of them. There are many dogs (mostly German shepherds) with signs on fences that say "Beware of the Dog."	[1] SECURITY

Here is an example of several codes applied to data from an interview transcript in which a high school senior describes his favorite teacher. The codes are based on what outcomes the student receives from his mentor. Note that one of the codes is taken directly from what the participant himself says and is placed in quotation marks – this is called an In Vivo Code:

[1] He cares about me. He has never told me but he does. [2] He's always been there for me, even when my parents were not. He's one of the few things that I hold as a constant in my life. So it's nice.	[1] SENSE OF SELF-WORTH [2] STABILITY
[3] I really feel comfortable around him.	[3] "COMFORTABLE"

Did you agree with the codes? Did other words or phrases run through your mind as you read the data? It's all right if your choices differed from mine. Coding is not a precise science; it's primarily an interpretive act.

Also be aware that a code can sometimes *summarize* or *condense* data, not simply *reduce* it. The introductory examples above were kept purposely simple and direct. But depending on the researcher's academic discipline, ontological and epistemological orientations, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and even the choice of coding method itself, some codes can attribute more evocative meanings to data. In the excerpt below, a mother describes her teenage son's troubled school years. The codes emerge from the perspective of middle- and junior high school years as a difficult period for most youth. They are not specific types of codes; they are "first impression" phrases derived from an open-ended process called Initial Coding:

[1] My son, Barry, went through a really tough time about, probably started the end of fifth grade and went into sixth grade.	[1] MIDDLE-SCHOOL HELL
[2] When he was growing up young in school he was a people-pleaser and his teachers loved him to death.	[2] TEACHER'S PET
[3] Two boys in particular that he chose to try to emulate, wouldn't, were not very good for him.	[3] BAD INFLUENCES
[4] They were very critical of him, they put him down all the time, and he kind of just took that and really kind of internalized it, I think, for a long time.	[4] TWEEN ANGST
[5] In that time period, in the fifth grade, early sixth grade, they really just kind of shunned him all together, and so his network as he knew it was gone.	[5] THE LOST BOY

Note that when we reflect on a passage of data to decipher its core meaning, we are *de*coding; when we determine its appropriate code and label it, we are *en*coding. For ease of reference throughout this manual, *coding* will be the sole term used. Simply understand that coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis.

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