Description

This method is also called “topic coding” “topic tagging,” or “index coding” in some of the literature, but Descriptive Coding will be used in this manual to align with Wolcott’s terminology. The phenomenon of hashtags or the # symbol preceding a topic for social media communication is a popular form of Descriptive or “hashtag” Coding since it identifies and links comparable contents.

Descriptive Coding summarizes in a word or short phrase—most often a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data. To clarify, Tesch (1990) differentiates that “it is important that these [codes] are identifications of the *topic*, not abbreviations of the *content*. The topic is what is talked or written *about*. The content is the substance of the message” (p. 119).

Applications

Descriptive Coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, ethnographies, and studies with a wide variety of non-interview data (e.g., field notes, journals, documents, diaries, correspondence, artifacts, video, social media).

Descriptive Coding of audio and video archives greatly assists with indexing topics and subtopics with key words for future cross-reference. For example, recordings of politicians' speeches can be meticulously coded by topic or key word to assess factual information, opinion, or policy consistency and change across time. Descriptively coded survey or structured interview data can also serve mixed methods studies by calculating percentages, frequencies, and other descriptive measures of response. However, I strongly recommend that Descriptive Coding *not* be used for individual case study or small-group interview transcripts because the noun-based codes of this method will not reveal very much insight into participants' minds. Rely instead on other meaning-driven methods such as In Vivo, Values, Emotion, and/or Dramaturgical Coding.

Many ethnographic studies usually begin with such general questions as "What is going on here?" and such reflective questions as "What is this a study about?" Descriptive Coding is just one approach to analyzing the data's basic topics to assist with answering these types of questions. Turner (1994) calls this cycle the development of a "basic vocabulary" of data to form "bread and butter" categories for further analytic work (p. 199). Description is the foundation for qualitative inquiry, and its primary goal is to assist the reader to see what you saw and to hear what you heard (Wolcott, 1994, pp. 55, 412), rather than scrutinize the nuances of people in social action.

Descriptive Codes from data collected across various time periods and charted in matrices are useful for assessing longitudinal

participant change (Saldaña, 2003, 2008). Quantitative meta-analyses, or qualitative metasummaries and metasyntheses, can employ descriptive coding for comparing treatment effects or impact of findings across different studies. This method has utility for big data projects with its quantitative and qualitative summaries. The coding method is also appropriate for documenting and analyzing the material products and physical environments of ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Example

An ethnographer walks through an urban, lower-income neighborhood in a large metropolitan area and takes field notes describing the setting. The field notes are written descriptively—that is, factually and objectively as much as possible. The italicized “OC” sections interspersed throughout are observer’s comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, pp. 163–4), subjective impressions, or memos embedded within the factual description, which also merit consideration for codes. Note how several Descriptive Codes repeat as the topics shift:

Code example 6.1

Driving west along the highway’s access road and up Main St. to Wildpass Rd. there were [1] abandoned warehouse buildings in disrepair, [2] spray painted gang graffiti on walls of several occupied and unoccupied buildings. I passed a [3] Salvation Army Thrift Store, Napa Auto Parts store, a tire manufacturing plant, old houses in-between industrial sites, an auto glass store, Market/Liquors, Budget Tire, a check cashing service. [4] More spray paint was on the walls.	[1] buildings [2] graffiti [3] businesses [4] graffiti
OC: [5] *There seems to be an abundance of car-oriented businesses in the neighborhood. Industrial looking atmosphere—no “showroom” qualities. Here is where “repair” is more important than sales.*	[5] businesses
I parked on Turquoise Rd. and walked along the periphery of an elementary school lot. [6] The majority of the homes had dirt front yards; the only vegetation	[6] houses [7] graffiti

growing were weeds. Maybe one house per block had what would be called a lawn. The majority seem unattended, not cared for. The homes look like they were built in the 1930s, 1940s at the latest. [7] I saw spray paint on the “No Trespassing” sign of the elementary school and smaller gang symbols on it. [8] A beer bottle and beer can were against the fence of the school. [9] Surfaces on the houses vary—maybe one per block looks fairly well painted. The majority are peeling in paint, rotted wood, various materials (wood, stucco, tin) on the same house.	[8] trash [9] houses
OC: *Priorities, energies, financial resources do not go into the appearance of homes. There are more important things to worry about.* [10] 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.” OC: *There’s an attempt to keep things at home safe. Protection from robbers, protection of property. Keep your distance—this is mine.*	[10] security

Analysis

Descriptive Coding leads primarily to a categorized inventory, tabular account, summary, or index of the data's contents. It is essential groundwork for second cycle coding and further analysis and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994, p. 55). In the example above, all qualitative data passages coded with houses, for example, would be extracted from the main body of field notes and reassembled together in a separate file for an organized and categorized narrative portrait of the environment for further analysis:

> Priorities, energies, and financial resources of this neighborhood's residents do not go into the appearance of their homes (there are more important things to worry about).
>
> Houses appear to have been built in the 1930s through 1940s. I notice TV antennas (rather than cable) on several roofs. Surfaces on the houses vary. Maybe one per block looks fairly well painted. But the majority's exteriors have peeling paint, rotting wood, and an assembly of wood, stucco, and tin on the same house. Some, because of their disrepair, look unattended and abandoned. But look in the yards and inside the homes through their windows: people still live here.
>
> Laundry hangs on clotheslines in the back yards of several homes. The majority have dirt front yards where the only vegetation growing is weeds. Maybe one house per block has what would be called a lawn; other front yards contain desk chairs and worn upholstered furniture. There's a house with a small statue of the Virgin Mary in front. Another house has a picture portrait of Jesus and a cross on its front wall.

Berger (2014b), Clarke et al. (2018), and Hammersley and Atkinson

(2019) emphasize that fieldwork and field notes should place particular importance on interpreting the symbolic meanings of artifacts and physical environments of our social worlds. Everything from maintenance to design of homes, businesses, schools, recreation areas, streets, and so forth is inference-laden. A home is not merely a structure but a physical and symbolic representation of its residents' identity, biography, and values (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, pp. 135-6). Descriptive Coding is one approach to documenting from rich field notes the tangible products that participants create, handle, work with, and experience on a daily basis.

Some recommended ways to further analyze Descriptive Codes are (see Appendix B):

- Subcoding, Hypothesis Coding, Domain and Taxonomic Coding, Focused Coding, and Pattern Coding
- content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Neuendorf, 2017; Schreier, 2012; Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003)
- cross-cultural content analysis (Bernard, 2018)
- descriptive statistical analysis (Bernard, 2018)
- domain and taxonomic analysis (Schensul et al., 1999b; Spradley, 1979, 1980)
- frequency counts (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013)
- graph-theoretic techniques for semantic network analysis (Namey et al., 2008)
- grounded theory (Bryant, 2017; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, 2019; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Stern & Porr, 2011)
- longitudinal qualitative research (Giele & Elder, 1998; McLeod & Thomson, 2009; Saldaña, 2003, 2008)

- mixed methods research (Creamer, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010)
- qualitative evaluation research (Patton, 2008, 2015)
- quick ethnography (Handwerker, 2001)
- social media analysis (Kozinets, 2020; Paulus & Wise, 2019; Rogers, 2019; Salmons, 2016)
- thematic analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998; Smith & Osborn, 2015)
- within-case and cross-case displays (Miles et al., 2020; Shkedi, 2005).

Notes

Descriptive Coding is a straightforward method for novices to qualitative research, particularly for those first using CAQDAS programs. The method categorizes data at a basic level to provide the researcher with an organizational grasp of the study. Coding with simple descriptive nouns alone, however, may not enable more complex and theoretical analyses as the study progresses, particularly with interview transcript data.

See Collins and Durington (2015) for the strategic use of hashtags in the coding of posted digital materials (pp. 48–52). And access *The New York Times* November 2019 report, “The Twitter Presidency,” for its descriptive (qualitative and quantitative) content analysis of Tweets: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/02/us/politics/trump-twitter-presidency.html