Description

Some publications in grounded theory refer to Theoretical Coding as "selective coding" or "conceptual coding." Theoretical Coding will be used in this manual since it more appropriately labels the outcome of this analytic cycle.

A Theoretical Code functions like an umbrella that covers and accounts for all other codes and categories formulated thus far in grounded theory analysis. Integration begins with finding the primary theme of the research—what is called in grounded theory the *central* or *core category*—which "consists of all the products of analysis condensed into a few words that seem to explain what 'this research is all about'" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 146) through "what the researcher identifies as the major theme of the study" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 8). Stern and Porr (2011) add that the central/core category identifies the major conflict, obstacle, problem, issue, or concern to participants.

In Theoretical Coding, all categories and concepts now become systematically integrated around the central/core category, the one that suggests a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 13). The theoretical code—as a few examples: survival, positioning, adapting, personal preservation while dying, and so on—is not the theory itself, but an abstraction that models the integration (Glaser, 2005, p. 17). It is a key word or key phrase that triggers a discussion of the theory itself.

More about theory will be discussed in Chapter 15, but, for now, a theory (as it is traditionally conceived in social science research) is a generalizable statement with five main characteristics. A theory, such as *"friends are defined by shared psychological intimacies"* (Riley & Wiggins, 2019, p. 255, emphasis added),

1. expresses a patterned relationship between two or more concepts ("friends" and "psychological intimacies");

2. predicts and controls action through if–then logic (“are defined by”);
3. accounts for parameters of and variation in the empirical observations (not explicitly stated in the theory but inferred: friends are the focus of the theory, as opposed to strangers, casual acquaintances, or enemies);
4. explains how and/or why something happens by stating its cause(s) (“shared psychological intimacies”); and
5. provides insights and guidance for improving social life (not explicitly stated in the theory but inferred: to cultivate a friendship, become psychologically intimate with another person).

If Kathy Charmaz calls codes the “bones” that form the “skeleton” of our analysis, then think of the central or core category as the *spine* of that skeleton, the “backbone” which supports the corpus and aligns it. Strauss (1987) expands the metaphor by noting that continuous and detailed coding cycles eventually put “analytic meat on the analytic bones” (p. 245). Glaser (2005) asserts that development of a Theoretical Code is not always necessary for every grounded theory study, and it is better to have none at all rather than a false or misapplied one.

Applications

Theoretical Coding is appropriate as the culminating step toward achieving grounded theory (but see the notes at the end of this profile for theory-building caveats). Sigauke and Swansi (2020) label this method the “third cycle” of coding.

Theoretical Coding integrates and synthesizes the categories derived from coding and analysis to now create a theory. At this cycle, categories developed thus far from In Vivo, Process, Initial, Focused, and Axial Coding “have relevance for, and [can] be applicable to, all cases in the study. It is the details included under each category and subcategory, through the specifications of properties and dimensions, that bring out the case differences and variations within a category” (Glaser, 1978, p. 145). A Theoretical Code specifies the possible relationships between categories and moves the analytic story in a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2014, p. 150). In dramaturgical parlance, the central/core category identifies the major conflict that initiates trajectories of action (i.e., a process) by its character/participants to (hopefully) resolve the conflict (Stern & Porr, 2011).

Original theory development, however, is not always necessary in a qualitative study. Hennink et al. (2020) note that research that applies pre-existing theories in different contexts or social circumstances, or that elaborates or modifies earlier theories, can be just as substantive. But most important during this cycle of theory building is to address the “how” and “why” questions to explain the phenomena in terms of how they work, how they develop, how they compare to others, or why they happen under certain conditions.

Example

The example content from the Initial, Focused, and Axial Coding profiles will be applied here; refer to those first before proceeding. A well-developed analytic memo about theory can extend for pages, but only an excerpt is provided below. Notice that *memo writing serves as a code-, category-, theme-, and concept-generating method*; *and it is from carefully sorted memos themselves that the theoretical code is derived and the theory articulated* (Glaser, 2005, p. 8). By this cycle of Theoretical Coding, the primary shift in narrative is toward the confirmed central/core category and its related categories.

As a reminder, the major categories outline derived from the Focused Coding example included:

I. DEFINING ONESELF AS A FRIEND
   A. Maintaining Friendships
      1. Setting Criteria for Friendships
   B. Dispelling Stereotypes of the Groups
      1. Labeling the Groups
      2. Qualifying the Groups

And some of the major Axial Codes illustrated in the analytic profile included:

1. SOCIALIZING
2. BEING SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE/EXCEPTABLE
3. ACCEPTING THROUGH EXCEPTING
4. EXCEPTING THROUGH ACCEPTING

Analysis

The researcher now reflects on all of these major codes and categories to determine the central/core process, theme, or problem. The central/core idea may lie in the name of one of the codes or categories developed thus far, but it may also be developed as a completely new word or phrase that subsumes all of the above (see Pattern Coding in Chapter 14). Previously written analytic memos become key pieces to review for possible guidance and synthesizing ideas. Graphics-in-progress that illustrate the central/core category and its related processes are also most helpful. Figure 13.5 shows the model for this particular case.

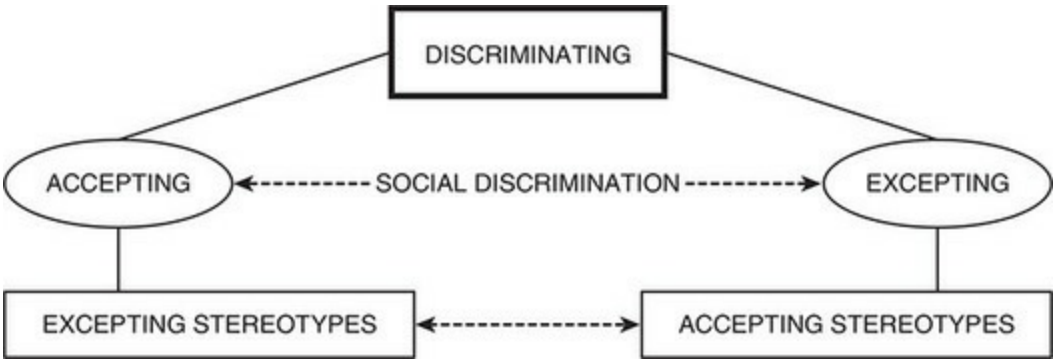

Figure 13.5 A diagram for a central/core category and its major processes

In the analytic memo below, the categories and subcategories are capitalized to emphasize their woven integration into the narrative:

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5 June 2007

CENTRAL/CORE CATEGORY: DISCRIMINATING

The central/core category of this study is: DISCRIMINATING.

Adolescents DISCRIMINATE when they choose their friends. They DISCRIMINATE through a process of ACCEPTING AND EXCEPTING. Adolescents SOCIALLY DISCRIMINATE as an action, and *are* SOCIALLY DISCRIMINATE in their choice of friendships.

We have generally constructed the term DISCRIMINATION as an abhorrent quality in ourselves and in others. The term in negative contexts suggests racism, sexism, and other "-isms" based on learned yet STEREOTYPING attitudes, values, and beliefs about others. But to DISCRIMINATE also means to distinguish by examining differences, to carefully select based on quality.

When adolescents DISCRIMINATE (as a verb) they carefully select their friendships from a spectrum of peers BELONGING to various SOCIAL GROUP IDENTITIES. They are also DISCRIMINATE (as an adjective) when they observe the distinguishing SOCIAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES between themselves and others.

ACCEPTING AND EXCEPTING suggests a continuum, ranging from full admission of an individual into one's personal confidence or SOCIAL GROUP; through neutrality or indifference about the individual; to overt exclusion, rejection, or avoidance of the individual. Adolescents ACCEPT others when the conditions for FRIENDSHIP are positive, including such properties as *compatibility* and *shared interests*. Adolescents EXCEPT others when the conditions for FRIENDSHIP lie on the opposite side of the spectrum.

But regardless of where a teenager's choices about peers lie on the continuum, he or she is actively DISCRIMINATING. We DISCRIMINATE when we ACCEPT and we DISCRIMINATE when we EXCEPT. We DISCRIMINATE

> when we EXCEPT the STEREOTYPES of selected adolescent SOCIAL GROUPS (e.g., dumb jocks, killer geeks) and ACCEPT them as FRIENDS. But we can also ACCEPT the STEREOTYPES of these same SOCIAL GROUPS and EXCEPT them as candidates for FRIENDSHIP.
>
> So, after all this, what's my theory? At this time I'll put forth the following: *An adolescent's inclusion and exclusion criteria for friendships are determined by the young person's ability to discriminate both positively and negatively among socially constructed peer stereotypes.*

In some published grounded theory research, authors neglect to explicitly state, "The central/core category of this study is …" and "The grounded theory proposed is …." Make certain that your analytic memos and final report include these phrases; overtly name the category and state the theory in one italicized sentence with an accompanying narrative. If you cannot, then you most likely have not constructed a grounded theory. (More on theory development is discussed in Chapter 15.)

The central or core category may appear frequently in the data coded and recoded thus far, and is phrased as an abstract concept that permits it to "explain variation as well as the main point made by the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 147). By this cycle, "If all data cannot be coded, the emerging theory does not fully fit or work for the data and must be modified" (Glaser, 1978, p. 56). Analytic memos and the final written report should explain and justify—with references to the data themselves—how categories and subcategories relate to the central/core category. The narrative also describes its related components (e.g., contexts, conditions, interactions, and consequences) for the reader.

Additional or selective sampling of new or existing participant data is encouraged to identify any parameters and variations within the developing theory. Morse (2007) recommends that researchers ask participants themselves to title their own stories after an interview to

capture analytic leads toward a “supercode” or “core variable” (p. 237). Diagram refinement of the categories, process, and theory (begun during Axial Coding) is encouraged during this cycle to develop an operational model of the phenomenon or process and to map the complexity of the story, though Glaser (2005) discourages graphic representation and feels a Theoretical Code should be constructed from analytic memos and explained solely through narrative.

Though centrality and frequency are two important criteria for a Theoretical Code (Holton & Walsh, 2017, pp. 88–9), I caution that numeric frequency of a code or category from data analysis and memos is not necessarily a reliable and valid indicator of a central/core category. In one of my ethnographic studies (Saldaña, 1997), the In Vivo Code “survival” appeared only four times in 20 months’ worth of field notes and interview transcripts. Yet the code held summative power for all major and minor categories in the corpus and became the through-line for the study. So be conscious of a code’s *qualities* as well as its quantity. In some cases, less is more (Saldaña, 2003, p. 115), for the criteria of a theory are its “elegance, precision, coherence, and clarity” (Dey, 2007, p. 186).

In Glaser’s (1978, 2005) early and later work, he lists “coding families” to guide researchers labeling data at the conceptual level. These families were intended to sensitize the analyst to the many ways a category could be examined, and included such things to consider as: *unit* (e.g., family, role, organization), *degree* (e.g., amount, possibility, intensity), *strategy* (e.g., techniques, tactics, means), and *cutting point* (e.g., boundary, benchmark, deviance). The “bread and butter” coding families for sociologists are what he labels “The Six C’s: Causes, Contexts, Contingencies, Consequences, Covariances and Conditions” (1978, p. 74). In his later work (2005), Glaser provides additional examples of Theoretical Code families such as *symmetry–asymmetry*, *micro–macro*, *social constraints*, *levels*, and *cycling*.

Glaser also noted in his early work that one type of core category could be a sociological “basic social process” (BSP), which includes

such examples as *becoming*, *career*, and *negotiating*. BSPs "are theoretical reflections and summarizations of the patterned, systematic uniformity flows of social life" (1978, p. 100). BSPs are processual, meaning that they occur over time and involve change over time, most often demarcated in stages. If emergent as a central/core category, BSPs should also exhibit properties and dimensions with a particular emphasis on the temporal aspects of action/interaction. Conversely, Strauss and Corbin (1998) caution that "one can usefully code for *a* basic social or psychological process, but to organize every study around the idea of steps, phases, or social-psychological processes limits creativity" (p. 294).

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

- assertion development (Erickson, 1986)
- grounded theory (Bryant, 2017; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, 2019; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Stern & Porr, 2011)
- illustrative charts, matrices, diagrams (Evergreen, 2020; Miles et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2008; Northcutt & McCoy, 2004; Paulston, 2000; Wheeldon & Åhlberg, 2012)
- longitudinal qualitative research (Giele & Elder, 1998; McLeod & Thomson, 2009; Saldaña, 2003, 2008)
- memo writing about the codes/themes (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987)
- situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2015a, 2018)
- thematic analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Notes

To appreciate the breadth and depth of Strauss (1987) and Corbin and Strauss's (2015) discussion of central/core categories, memos, and process, readers are referred to *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* and *Basics of Qualitative Research* for a full explanation and thorough examples of memo development and grounded theory explained in narrative (storyline) format, respectively. Glaser's (2005) monograph on Theoretical Coding presents a more in-depth discussion of the subject from his perspective, while Stern and Porr (2011) and Holton and Walsh (2017) provide an elegant overview of "classic" grounded theory development with an excellent description of Theoretical Coding.

Analysts should also examine Clarke et al.'s *Situational Analysis* (2018), which does not approach data analysis as a reductive act, but as one that intentionally maps the complexity of it:

> We propose complicating our stories, representing not only difference(s) but also contradictions and incoherencies, noting other possible interpretations and some of our own anxieties. … We need to make the downright messiness of the empirical world part of our representational practices—not scrub it clean, make it hygienic … and dress it up for the special occasion of a presentation or a publication. (p. 38)

Researchers should also note postmodern and post-structural perspectives on theory building. Though Clarke et al. (2018) are advocates of grounded theory's initial analytic methods and constructions, ultimately they feel that "It makes no sense to write a grand theory of something that is always changing" (p. 54). Methodologists such as Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) and Jackson and Mazzei (2012) also challenge the codification, categorization, themeing, and patterning of data, preferring more "problematizing"

approaches to analysis.

Finally, examine Ian Dey's (1999) *Grounding Grounded Theory*, which critiques the method and takes issue with finding a central/core category: "[T]he problem arises that data suggesting alternatives may be ignored. By focusing on a single core variable, the research agenda may become one-dimensional rather than multi-dimensional" (p. 43).