

CODING AS A PART OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WRITING PROCESS



Tahseen Shams

UCLA Graduate Writing Consultant



Common problems related to coding in research writing

- “I don’t know what my findings are.”
- “I know what my finding is but I don’t know what or how to write about it.”
 - Both issues are related to coding.
 - To solve them, we have to go back to our data.



What is coding?

- Coding is a process that connects raw data to research writing.
- A code is word or phrase that you think best captures or summarizes a certain section (e.g., sentence or paragraph) of your fieldnotes.
- Does not necessarily come after fieldwork is complete.
- You “code as you go.”



Stages of coding

Stage 1: Open Coding

Stage 2: Focused Coding

Stage 3: Memo-ing



Stage 1: Open Coding

1. Carefully read through all your raw data.
2. As you read, identify and categorize all the themes, ideas, and issues that come up in your data — this process is called “open coding”
3. Read through your codes — what themes come up again and again? Is there a pattern emerging? Are some of the codes talking about a common topic?



Stage 2: Focused Coding

1. Organize your codes into categories. For example, say you have coded for “happiness,” “sadness,” and “anger.” You can include them in to one overarching category, like “feelings.”

The categories you come up with are also codes, but a little more developed than the first open codes.

2. Now select a category that you will focus on in your next reading of the data.



Focused coding (continued)

3. In your notes, look for details, variations, and examples of the patterns of the category you selected.

For example:

- Who are the main actors in your examples?
- What are they doing? What are they not doing?
- How are they doing it?
- What are they saying?
- Is there a difference between what they say and what they do?
- Where are the examples taking place?
- Are there differences between your examples?



Stage 3: Memo-ing

1. Try to connect all the codes and patterns together by writing freestyle reflection notes for yourself.
 - Are the codes related to an overarching theme or process?
 - Are they different? How are they similar or different?
 - What are the things — like, actors and settings — that you think are connecting all the codes, themes, and patterns together?



Example 1: Open coding

am home
alone / lonely
When you move into your own home, you're alone. There is no bustle of people around the
people around
house. I miss company
miss company
I put the TV or some music so
background noise
there's some background noise, the silence makes me feel so alone. Sometimes I will be sat
lonely
watching trash TV and thinking I should be out doing something rather than watching this
wasting time / inactive
rubbish. I read a lot but
doing
sometimes I am too tired and just want to veg out. But it's been good
bored / depressed
unhealthy to be dependent
to move out of mum and dads as it's not healthy to rely on them as they won't last forever. I
independence
become independent and made my own decisions. It's good they still there when I need them.
support
distance
It's good to have some distance as when I was at home I was arguing a lot with my dad and
conflict
that was made me decide it was time to go.
moving out



Example 1 (cont'd.): Focused coding

When you move into your own home, you're alone. There is no bustle of people around the house. I miss having someone to chat to when I get home. I put the TV or some music so there's some background noise, the silence makes me feel so alone. Sometimes I will be sat watching trash TV and thinking I should be out doing something rather than watching this rubbish. I read a lot but sometimes I am too tired and just want to veg out. But it's been good to move out of mum and dads as it's not healthy to rely on them as they won't last forever. I become independent and made my own decisions. It's good they still there when I need them. It's good to have some distance as when I was at home I was arguing a lot with my dad and that was made me decide it was time to go.

feelings

Living alone

New relationship with parents

Independence

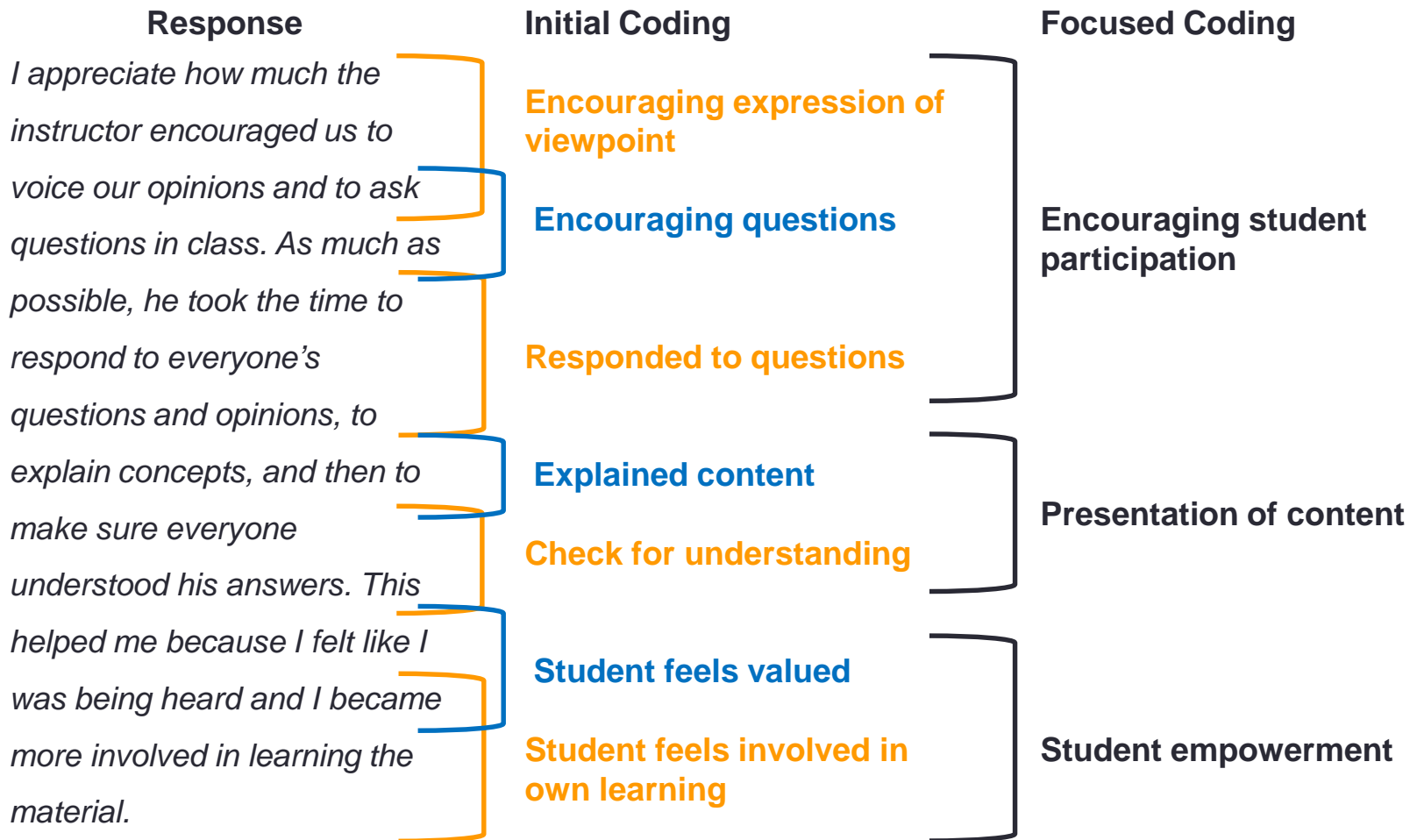
Old relationship with parents

Argument with Dad
Relation with father



Coding at work — Example 2

Question: “What in this course has helped you the most?”



From coding to writing

Three questions to ask before writing:

1. What is my research question asking? In other words: **What am I looking for?**
2. **What is the best example** in my data that answers my research question?
3. Why is it the best example? I.e., **how is this example answering my research question?**



How to start writing

1. Begin describing the best example from your notes.
2. **Answer the three questions** from the previous slide.

Use the template below:

My paper asks [insert research question, e.g., what role food plays in immigrant communities]. *Based on* [insert brief description of dataset, e.g., 5 months' worth of observations on immigrants' interactions centering around food], *I found a pattern that* [describe pattern, e.g., immigrants often talk about their homeland when they are around ethnic food]. *An interaction from one of my fieldsites* — [insert setting, e.g., an ethnic grocery store] — *best exemplifies this pattern.* [Describe the interaction in detail here].

3. Now describe another example related to your RQ from your notes.



Writing the first draft of findings

1. After describing all your examples, integrate your analytical memos with your descriptions. You can copy and paste your analyses from your memos. The main goal is to write down all your thoughts and explanations of what is going on in your paper.
2. Write a “zero draft” of what you think is happening in your fieldsite. A zero draft is the very first draft or the initial mess that you make through free-form drafting, thought-pieces, and source analyses. The structure is not important.
3. Read through your zero draft and start editing and organizing to give it some structure. Congratulations! You now have a first draft!



Conclusion

- Different ways of coding
- No “one” right way to code
- Coding is a process of discovery
- Way you immerse yourself in your data and identify findings



References

- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Saldaña, Johnny. 2009. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Becker, Howard S. 2007. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (Second Edition). Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.



Exercise

If you have already collected some data, select a passage that you find most interesting from your fieldnotes or interview transcripts.

If you have not yet begun collecting data, select a descriptive newspaper article, such as this one from *The New York Times*:

“The Rohingya Suffer Real Horrors. So Why Are Some of Their Stories Untrue?” by Hannah Beech; Feb 1, 2018
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/world/asia/rohingya-myanmar-camps.html>)



Exercise (continued)

Use the next 10-15 minutes to do open coding on as much of the passage as you can.

Did you find recurring or similar codes? Could some of these codes be grouped together under a common category?

Use the next 5-7 minutes to think about your codes. See if there is any link among the codes and if some of them could be grouped together.

Now use the 5-7 minutes to write a reflection piece or an analytical memo about your data and your codes. What have you discovered in your data about your participants or fieldsites through your coding?



Get more writing help at the
Graduate Writing Center!

B11 Student Activities Center
310-267-4805

gwc@gsa.asucla.ucla.edu

<https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/>

