RiDNet Brown Bag Lunch Series: Coding strategies

In this session we want to briefly discuss coding strategies for qualitative data collection and analysis. This is not meant to be a training session but rather an opportunity to exchange sources, recommended applications, and ideas for coding data.

I. Codes assign attributes to fragments of data.

Code: usually a word or phrase
Attribute: interpretation/ representation/ meaning/ essence
Data: usually language based (visual, audio, audiovisual) data

A code is not just a label – it is a link: it links ideas that emerge from different fragments of data.

There are different types of codes: Descriptive Codes (summarising the meaning of an excerpt), **In Vivo Codes** (code taken directly from the text, usually in quotation marks), **Initial Codes** (first impression of the researcher), **Process Codes** (codes that capture action)

Difference between **index codes** and **analytic codes:** Index codes organise your data (top-down approach: this is about X and goes into chapter Y). Analytic codes should **emerge from your data** (bottom-up approach) and contribute towards the construction of categories yet to be explored!

II. Coding means to decode a meaning of a text and to encode it by giving it a label.

Coding is an interpretative act, and as such (inter-)subjective.
Usually, data are not precisely bounded. It is the researcher who decides about these boundaries. Coding reflects how you interpret your data as seen to *your* analytic lens. Coding involves 'pattern recognition' or the imposition of structure on your data.
Coding is an analytic activity that involves i) constant comparison, ii) reflexivity, and iii) making important decisions about your research.

III. Coding Strategies

Coding: Search for patterns in data - and for ideas that explain why those patterns are there

What to code: actors, activities & behaviours (practices, routines, tasks...), time (e.g. episodes), places (e.g.settlements), encounters, social relationships, roles, groups and organisations, subcultures **AND**
From what perspective: focus on cognitive meanings (identities, rules, ideologies), emotional aspects (feelings of anger, work balance satisfaction)

Questions to ask: WHO is doing **WHAT** and **HOW**? What do **PEOPLE** think they are doing? How do they **understand** what is going on? What are their **assumptions**? Why do they tell **ME** that/ behave like that? What do **I** think that they are doing? What do I **learn** from this? What are my **assumptions**? **WHY** do I code this?
How to code: Reading and highlighting; preliminary codes/jottings; lumper coding (brush-stroke representations), splitter coding (splitting data into smaller fragments/moments)
Different coding techniques: Manual coding vs qualitative data analysis software (NVivo, Atlas.ti); line coding, paragraph coding, open coding,...

Coding cycles: Many studies go through two and more coding cycles. Typical first cycle methods include (but are not limited to): descriptive attribute coding, In Vivo coding, emotion coding, values coding, narrative coding, motif coding. Second or third cycle codes often relate to the theming of the data. They include focused and axial coding, theoretical coding and longitudinal coding.

IV. Coding and Categorising

Codes are usually organised in categories: families for groups of codes with interrelated meanings: "Use classification reasoning plus your tacit and intuitive senses to determine which data [...] 'feel alike'... " (Saldaña, 2009, 9)

Categories, themes and theories are (in most grounded theory frameworks) **outcomes** of codings.
Hierarchy (bottom-up): codes - groups of codes - categories - concepts - themes - theories

V. Problems: Lost in Codes?

Four types of problems:
- **too many codes** (no useful strategy of comparison - everything appears unique), to many overpalling codes (a mess);
- **boring codes** (codes used like an indexing system - no analytical quality to the codes);
- **no surprise** (conceptual framework and hypotheses have been imposed on the data in an overly rigid manner - alternative perspectives and issues are removed from sight)
- it all takes up **too much time**

What you can do: create a code book (and think about it, discuss it with supervisors etc); write memos about codes that interest or annoy you; do some manual line coding on paper to open up your understanding of your data and codes; code with others and observe them coding your stuff; give a presentation on data fragments and your interpretations of them (research seminar) and ask for feedback.

Coding takes up a lot of time and can be quite tedious. It is your analysis and thus requires you to make strategic choices as to what you really want to focus on. Superficial coding is usually not helpful. Better decide on a limited number of fragments and do them properly. You can then link them to the stuff you have (just) read and pick another couple of fragments (→ theoretical sampling, informed case selection etc).

Great Book on Coding: Saldaña, Johnny (2009): The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers. London: Sage. (Sociology A-2 SAL).

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