

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

## Selective Coding

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Selective coding is a late phase of analysis in the grounded theory approach to qualitative data as presented by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, when explanations of phenomena (e.g., events, actions, processes) are emergent. Open coding, the earliest phase of identifying and labeling concepts in raw data (e.g., interviews, fieldnotes, art), sets the stage for axial coding, where the dissected data is reassembled as the researcher develops and relates categories. Axial coding is succeeded by selective coding where the analyst selects a central (core) category as a vehicle for the integration of the other major categories thereby developing and refining theoretical claims.

Linking (integrating) categories is essential to developing a story about “what is happening” in the data (explaining phenomena) and relies on the choice of a central category that represents the major theme or “essence” of the research. The central category should be highly frequent and salient, and it should be possible to relate all the major categories uncovered in [p. 806 ↓ ] the data to it. For example, a central category that might emerge from a study of children of incarcerated offenders is heightened deviant behavior. Other major categories uncovered might be types of deviance, seriousness of the act, and childhood phase. These (and many others) would be linked to the central category in an attempt to develop a theoretical scheme to better understand and explain the deviant activity. The choice of the core category and the explanation provided is the researcher's interpretation of what is happening. It is almost certainly not the only possible interpretation of the data, but one of several different, equally logical possibilities.

Techniques are offered to help researchers commit to a central category (often said to be difficult but key to theory development) and relate other major categories to it. These include writing an initial sketch of the main story concerning what is at issue in the data, using diagrams, and making use of notes kept throughout data analysis (memos). Through the process of category integration, a theoretical scheme emerges.

In refining the theory, the researcher aims to insure that the major categories' properties and dimensions have been adequately uncovered—that *density* has been achieved. For example, in studying children of incarcerated offenders, if the researcher notices that female delinquent children have been more sparsely coded than males, more data concerning this category would need to be gathered. Also, in addition to weeding out less relevant concepts, the researcher is advised to make sure the derived theory is both logical and consistent with the raw data analyzed, checking to see how well it “fits the data” in terms of explaining the central phenomenon.

In generating theory grounded in data, it can be difficult to determine when to stop searching for more detail. The guideline for when to stop collecting and analyzing data is when new aspects of categories no longer emerge and no new relationships are discovered in analysis (theoretical saturation).

There is some disagreement among grounded theorists about when selective coding should occur. However, seeking a central, organizing category as the core of a storyline (one that integrates major categories) seems to be a generally agreed upon approach to theoretical development.

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*See also*

#### Further Readings

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage