

## Description

Some publications in grounded theory refer to Focused Coding as “selective coding” or “intermediate coding.” Focused Coding will be used in this manual since it derives from Charmaz’s work.

Focused Coding follows In Vivo, Process, and/or Initial Coding—first cycle grounded theory coding methods—but it can also be applied with other coding methods to categorize the data. Focused Coding searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus and “requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138).

## Applications

Focused Coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for studies employing grounded theory methodology, and the development of major categories, themes, or concepts from the data.

Focused Coding, as a second cycle analytic process, is a streamlined adaptation of grounded theory's Selective and Axial Coding. The goal of this method is to develop categories without distracted attention at this time to their properties and dimensions. Dey (1999), however, cautions that categories, particularly in qualitative inquiry, do not always have their constituent elements sharing a common set of features, do not always have sharp boundaries, and that "there are different degrees of belonging" (pp. 69–70).

## Example

The interview transcript excerpt from the Initial Coding profile in [Chapter 6](#) is used again to show how the codes transformed from the first to the second cycles; refer to that first before proceeding. In the example below, data similarly (not necessarily exactly) coded are clustered together and reviewed to create tentative category names with an emphasis on process through the use of gerunds (“-ing” words; see Process Coding). Note that just one coded excerpt is the only one in its category:

Code example 13.1

Category: DEFINING ONESELF AS A FRIEND	
I think people, <sup>31</sup> people define me as popular	<sup>31</sup> defining self through  others: “popular”

Code example 13.2

Category: MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS	
<sup>1</sup> I hang out with everyone. Really.  <sup>3</sup> I can look back to kindergarten, and at some point I was <sup>4</sup> best friends with everybody who’s been here.  And so there are <sup>7</sup> certain people that I’ve just been <sup>8</sup> friends with since forever	<sup>1</sup> “hanging out with everyone”  <sup>3</sup> recalling friendships  <sup>4</sup> “best friends

	<p>with everybody”</p> <p><sup>7</sup> friends with “certain people”</p> <p><sup>8</sup> friends with “since forever”</p>
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Code example 13.3

Category: LABELING THE GROUPS	
<p><sup>10</sup> really super popular pretty girls are all mean</p> <p><sup>14</sup> geeky people</p> <p><sup>16</sup> strange-psycho-killer-geek-people-who-draw-swastikas-on-their-backpacks</p> <p><sup>23</sup> jocks</p>	<p><sup>10</sup> labeling: “really super popular pretty girls”</p> <p><sup>14</sup> labeling: “geeky people”</p> <p><sup>16</sup> labeling: “strange-psycho-killer-geek”</p> <p><sup>23</sup> labeling: “jocks”</p>

Code example 13.4

Category: QUALIFYING THE GROUPS	
<sup>5</sup> practically	<sup>5</sup> qualifying: “practically”

<sup>6</sup> Almost everybody in my grade	<sup>6</sup> qualifying: “almost”
<sup>15</sup> Some of them though	<sup>15</sup> qualifying: “some of them”
<sup>17</sup> kind of geeks	<sup>17</sup> qualifying: “kind of”
<sup>18</sup> some of them are kind of	<sup>18</sup> qualifying: “some of them”
<sup>19</sup> But then again	<sup>19</sup> qualifying: “but then ...”
<sup>21</sup> not all of them are completely, like	<sup>21</sup> qualifying: “not all of them”

Code example 13.5

Category: DISPELLING STEREOTYPES OF THE GROUPS	
<sup>9</sup> not fair of me to stereotype either	<sup>9</sup> “not fair to stereotype”
<sup>11</sup> they’re all snobby and they all talk about each other	<sup>11</sup> identifying stereotypes
<sup>12</sup> ‘cause they don’t. Some of them, some of them don’t	<sup>12</sup> dispelling stereotypes
<sup>20</sup> there’s not the complete stereotype	<sup>20</sup> dispelling stereotypes
<sup>24</sup> not all of the guys are idiots	<sup>24</sup> dispelling stereotypes

Code example 13.6

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## Category: SETTING CRITERIA FOR FRIENDSHIPS

<p><sup>2</sup> I choose</p> <p><sup>13</sup> those are the ones I'm friends, friends with</p> <p><sup>22</sup> I'm friends with those people</p> <p><sup>25</sup> I'm friends with the ones who can carry on a conversation</p> <p><sup>26</sup> I'm friends with someone because of who they are,</p> <p><sup>27</sup> not because of what group they, they hang out in basically. 'Cause I think</p> <p><sup>28</sup> that's really stupid to be, like,</p>	<p><sup>2</sup> "choosing" who you hang out with</p> <p><sup>13</sup> choosing friends: "super popular pretty girls"</p> <p><sup>22</sup> choosing friends: "geeks"</p> <p><sup>25</sup> choosing friends: jocks "who can carry on a conversation"</p> <p><sup>26</sup> criteria for friendship: "who they are"</p> <p><sup>27</sup> criteria for friendship: not group membership</p> <p><sup>28</sup> ethics of friendship</p>
<p><sup>29</sup> "What would people think if they saw me walking with this person?" or something.</p> <p>[I: So you wouldn't define yourself with any specific group?]</p> <p><sup>30</sup> No. I would rather hang out with someone who's</p> <p><sup>32</sup> good hearted but a little slow, compared to someone</p>	<p><sup>29</sup> not concerned with what others think</p> <p><sup>30</sup> maintaining individuality</p> <p><sup>32</sup> criteria for friendship: "good hearted but slow"</p> <p><sup>33</sup> criteria for friendship: not those "very smart but very evil"</p>

<sup>33</sup> very smart but very evil	
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## Analysis

The codes *qua* (in the role of) categories are now listed for a review:

DEFINING ONESELF AS A FRIEND

MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS

LABELING THE GROUPS

QUALIFYING THE GROUPS

DISPELLING STEREOTYPES OF THE GROUPS

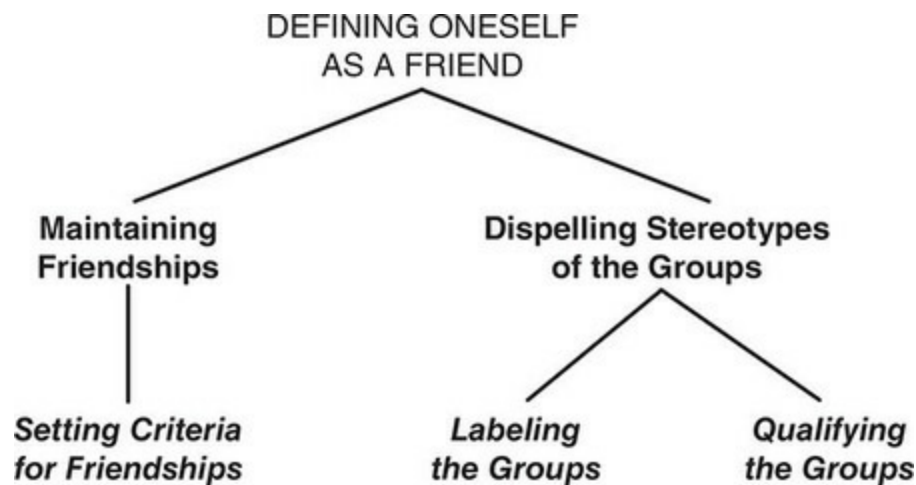
SETTING CRITERIA FOR FRIENDSHIPS

Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommend that simple organizational or hierarchical outlining of the categories and subcategories gives you a handle on them. Using the major categories from above, the outline might read:

- I. 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

The same categories and subcategories can also be plotted as a tree diagram for a visual “at-a-glance” representation of the phenomenon or process (see [Figure 13.2](#)).





**Figure 13.2** A tree diagram from categories and subcategories

An analytic memo reveals the researcher's thinking process about the codes and categories developed thus far. Notice that *memo writing also serves as a code-, category-, theme-, and concept-generating method*. The deliberate linking or weaving of codes and categories within the narrative is a heuristic to integrate them semantically and systematically (see [Chapter 3](#)). Dey (2007) reminds us of the integrated nature of the theory-building process by advising that we “do not categorize and then connect; we connect by categorizing” (p. 178).

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## CODING: FOCUSING THE CATEGORIES

After reviewing the categories, I feel that QUALIFYING THE GROUPS can be subsumed under DISPELLING THE STEREOTYPES OF THE GROUPS. Tiffany provides exceptions to the stereotypes through her use of qualifiers. DEFINING ONESELF AS A FRIEND seems to have some connection with how adolescents go about MAINTAINING

FRIENDSHIPS. Perhaps DEFINING ONESELF AS A FRIEND might be more accurately recoded as PERCEIVING ONESELF AS A FRIEND. According to Tiffany, others perceive her as “popular,” so that’s how she may perceive herself, which in turn influences and affects how she goes about MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS both in the past and present.

Students in high school culture adopt the social group labels and stereotypes passed on to them from oral tradition, influences of media, and personal observation. Tiffany seems very aware of the social group names and how the group becomes stereotyped with particular attributes. But she negates the stereotyped images by finding exceptions to them. And it is those in the exceptions category who become her friends. She seems to be ACCEPTING THROUGH EXCEPTING. She acknowledges that some of her friends belong to the social groups with subcultural labels and that they carry stereotypical baggage with them. Labels are for baggage, not for friends.

The earlier Initial Coding memo on DISCRIMINATING as a process seems to still hold during this cycle of coding. Once I get more data from other students, I can see if this category does indeed hold.

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Focused Coding enables you to compare newly constructed codes during this cycle across other participants’ data to assess comparability and transferability. The researcher can ask other high school participants how they construct friendships, then compare their coded data to Tiffany’s to develop categories that represent participants’ experiences. Also note that categories are constructed from the reorganization and recategorization of participant data: “Data should not be forced or selected to fit pre-conceived or pre-existent categories or discarded in favor of keeping an extant theory intact” (Glaser, 1978, p. 4).

CAQDAS programs lend themselves very well to Focused Coding since they simultaneously enable coding, category construction, and analytic memo writing.

Some recommended ways to further analyze Focused Codes are (see [Appendix B](#)):

- Axial Coding and Theoretical Coding
- grounded theory (Bryant, 2017; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, 2019; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Stern & Porr, 2011)
- interactive qualitative analysis (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004)
- memo writing about the codes/themes (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987)
- situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2015b, 2018)
- social media analysis (Kozinets, 2020; Paulus & Wise, 2019; Rogers, 2019; Salmons, 2016)
- splitting, splicing, and linking data (Dey, 1993)
- thematic analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Boyatzis, 1998; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

## Notes

See Themeing the Data: Categorically and Phenomenologically, and Pattern Coding as methods related to Focused Coding.