

Description

Axial Coding extends the analytic work from Initial Coding and, to some extent, Focused Coding. The goal is to strategically reassemble data that were “split” or “fractured” during the Initial Coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Boeije (2010) succinctly explains that Axial Coding’s purpose is “to determine which [codes] in the research are the dominant ones and which are the less important ones ... [and to] reorganize the data set: synonyms are crossed out, redundant codes are removed and the best representative codes are selected” (p. 109). Sigauke and Swansi (2020) cleverly label Axial Coding a form of “refocused coding” (p. 18).

The “axis” of Axial Coding is a *category* (like the axis of a wooden wheel with extended spokes) discerned from first cycle coding. This method “aims to link categories with subcategories and asks how they are related,” and specifies the properties and dimensions of a category (Charmaz, 2014, p. 148). Properties (i.e., characteristics or attributes) and dimensions (the location of a property along a continuum or range) of a category refer to such components as the contexts, conditions, interactions, and consequences of a process—actions that let the researcher know “if, when, how, and why” something happens (p. 62).

Applications

Axial Coding is appropriate for studies employing grounded theory methodology, and studies with a wide variety of data forms (e.g., interview transcripts, field notes, journals, documents, diaries, correspondence, artifacts, video). Codes developed from Process Coding or Concept Coding (see [Chapter 6](#)) might also serve as second cycle Axial Codes.

Grouping similarly coded data reduces the number of In Vivo, Process, and/or Initial Codes you developed while sorting and relabeling them into conceptual categories. During this cycle, “the code is sharpened to achieve its best fit” (Glaser, 1978, p. 62), and there can be more than one Axial Code developed during this process —termed “multiaxial.” Axial Coding is the transitional cycle between the First Cycle and Theoretical Coding processes of grounded theory, though the method has become somewhat contested and downplayed in later writings (see the Notes at the end of this profile).

Example

The categories from the Focused Coding example in this chapter will be used here; refer to that first before proceeding. Keep in mind that only one participant's data are analyzed as an example, along with the experiential data (i.e., personal knowledge and experiences) of the researcher. The analytic memo is an uncensored and permissibly messy opportunity to let thoughts flow and ideas emerge. Also notice that *memo writing 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](#)).

There are two Axial Codes explored below: socializing and accepting through excepting. These two new codes were created by pooling the six major categories developed during Focused Coding:

1. DEFINING ONESELF AS A FRIEND
2. MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS
3. LABELING THE GROUPS
4. QUALIFYING THE GROUPS
5. DISPELLING STEREOTYPES OF THE GROUPS
6. SETTING CRITERIA FOR FRIENDSHIPS

[Figure 13.3](#) illustrates how socializing and accepting through excepting became the two Axial Codes around which the other six revolve.

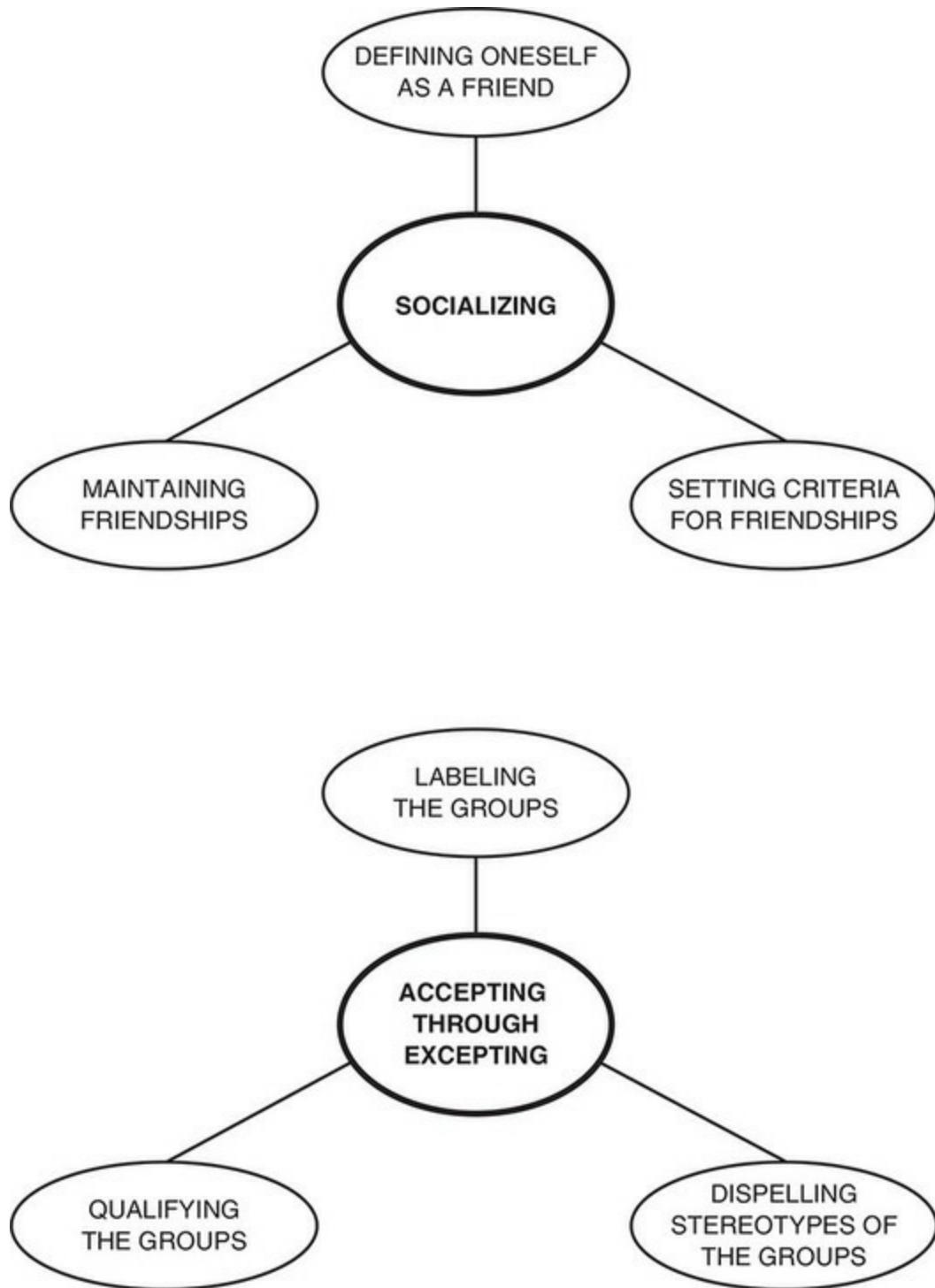


Figure 13.3 Two Axial Codes and their related categories

Analysis

Analytic memo writing is a critical component of Axial Coding. The focus, however, is placed on the codes themselves, along with the categories' properties and dimensions. Glaser (2014) advises that memos about properties should:

- define the code's or category's *boundaries*;
- propose the *empirical criteria* on which the code or category rests;
- explicate the *conditions* under which properties emerge or become evident;
- describe their *connections* to other codes; and
- assert the properties' *significance* in the overall analysis. (p. 126)

An extended analytic memo reads:

3 July 2014

AXIAL CODE: BEING SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE/EXCEPTABLE

The high school as social system is, to both adults and adolescents, a place to *socialize*. *SOCIALIZING* by adults happens when they indoctrinate young people to the cultural knowledge and ethos of the country, while *SOCIALIZING* by adolescents is an opportunity to establish and maintain possibly lifelong friendships. I remember reading an article that said adolescents who participate in extracurricular athletics and arts activities like first and foremost the

opportunities these activities provide to socialize with friends—check out the specific reference and log it in a memo later. (I could have used an Axial Code labeled FRIENDING instead of SOCIALIZING, but that's traditionally associated with online Facebook interaction, and the participant's referring to her in-school and live experiences.)

ACCEPTING THROUGH EXCEPTING was one of the Focused Codes that could possibly transform into a category during this cycle of memo writing and analysis. ACCEPTING is a bit broader as a code and category, but I feel ACCEPTING THROUGH EXCEPTING has a conceptual “ring” to it.

BEING SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE is not just adhering to expected norms of behavior. To adolescents, BEING SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE/EXCEPTABLE are the action/interaction patterns of friendships—who’s in and who’s out.

The *properties* (characteristics or attributes) of BEING SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE:

- Adolescents accept peers with whom they find *perceived similarities*.
- Adolescents accept those with whom they feel *compatible*.
- Adolescents accept those with whom they feel *safe*, or at least *secure*.
- Adolescents accept those with whom they have *shared interests*.
- Adolescents accept those who are *doing something they want to get into* (e.g., drugs, sports).

- Adolescents accept those with whom they have *fun*.

If you're none of the above, you're most likely **SOCIALLY EXCEPTABLE**.

The *dimensions* (the location of a property along a continuum or range; the conditions, causes, and consequences of a process that tell if, when, how, and why something happens) of BEING **SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE/EXCEPTABLE**:

- Popularity: You can be perceived as popular by some people, and disliked by others (e.g., some people admire Charlie Sheen while others feel he is “socially unacceptable”).
- Popularity: Teens perceived as popular can come from several subcultures/cliques, not just the “popular pretty girls” and “jocks” (e.g., a popular goth, even a popular geek).
- Popularity: Some gravitate toward the popular because it builds their own self-esteem; others gravitate toward the popular because they’re trendy; others gravitate toward the popular because “there’s just something about them”—charisma?
- Acceptability: We can accept some people but not be their friends—we except them.
- Exceptability: Even the “outcasts” seem to find a group somewhere.
- Acceptable while exceptable: Some groups will let “that one kid” hang out with them even though he may not be particularly well liked.

- Stereotypes: We can acknowledge the stereotypes, but can find exceptions to the rule. “They’re usually like this. But”

My psychologist buddy shared with me that the human need to BELONG is to be part of something (like clubs, organizations). But to be ACCEPTED means to be validated, that I’m OK, that I’m a person, I have worth. *If somebody belongs to something they are being accepted. If you’re excepted, you don’t belong. But even the excepted can find acceptance somewhere.* I know that I’m ACCEPTED by some and EXCEPTED by others for such SOCIAL CATEGORIES as my ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, size, etc. But it’s being with your own kind, like with like, that makes me feel comfortable, compatible. However, I can physically BELONG to a group without feeling fully ACCEPTED by them—I feel EXCEPTED by them.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) advise that “categories should not be so abstract as to lose their sensitizing aspect, but yet must be abstract enough to make [the emerging] theory a general guide to multi-conditional, ever-changing daily situations” (p. 242). Northcutt and McCoy (2004), in their signature qualitative analytic system, observe that a participant will sometimes unknowingly do the analytic work for the researcher when participant quotes in interview transcripts that lend themselves as Axial Codes are found: “Respondents will often describe how one [category] relates to another in the process of discussing the nature of one [category]” (p. 242).

Also note that analytic memos during Axial Coding explicate or “think through” four additive elements of process or causation suggested by the data—elements necessary for traditional grounded theory explication (Boeije, 2010, pp. 112–13):

- the contexts—settings and boundaries in which the action or

process occurs (“The high school as social system is, to both adults and adolescents, a place to *socialize*”); plus

- the *conditions*—routines and situations that happen (or do not) within the contexts (“SOCIALIZING by adolescents is an opportunity to establish and maintain possibly lifelong friendships”); plus
- the *interactions*—the specific types, qualities, and strategies of exchanges between people in these contexts and conditions (“adolescents who participate in extracurricular athletics and arts activities like first and foremost the opportunities these activities provide to socialize with friends”); equals
- the *consequences*—the outcomes or results of the contexts, conditions, and interactions (“*If somebody belongs to something they are being accepted. If you’re excepted, you don’t belong*”).

Creswell (2015) differentiates between *conditions* that are *causal* and *intervening*, the former influencing the yet-to-be-determined central/core category (see Theoretical Coding), and the latter influencing the interactions or strategies taken by participants to affect the consequences.

One of the ultimate goals during Axial Coding (along with continued qualitative data gathering and analysis) is to achieve *saturation*—“when no new information seems to emerge during coding, that is, when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136).

Diagrams of the phenomena at work are also encouraged during the Axial Coding process (see [Figure 13.4](#)). These displays can be as simple as tables, charts, or matrices, or as complex as flow diagrams. Illustrative techniques bring codes and analytic memos to life and help the researcher see where the story of the data is going. One of Strauss’s students shared that her “diagramming process would begin

with a phrase of single code, perhaps even a hunch about what was important in the analysis at that point in time [with] arrows and boxes showing connections of temporal progression" (Strauss, 1987, p. 179). Clarke et al.'s (2018) situational, social worlds/arenas, and positional maps are highly advised as heuristics to explore the complexity of relationships among the major elements of the study.

| ACCEPTABLE | EXCEPTABLE |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Acknowledging Exceptions to the Stereotypes ----- | Accepting the Stereotypes |
| Those with Common Interests ----- | Those with Uncommon Interests |
| "Popular" and Liked by Some ----- | "Popular" and Liked by Others |
| Belonging and Accepted ---- | Belonging but Not Accepted ---- |
| Accepted and Belonging ---- | Not Belonging or Accepted |
| Accepted and Belonging ---- | Accepted but Not Belonging ---- |
| Accepted and Belonging ---- | Not Accepted or Belonging |

Figure 13.4 A simple properties and dimensions table derived from Axial Coding

To appreciate the breadth and depth of Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin's (1998) discussion of Axial Coding, readers are referred to *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* and the 1998 second edition of *Basics of Qualitative Research* for a full explanation on such matters as action/interaction; structure and process; and causal, intervening, and contextual conditions (also discussed for longitudinal qualitative research studies in Saldaña, 2003).

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

- Theoretical Coding
- grounded theory (Bryant, 2017; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, 2019; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Stern & Porr, 2011)

- interrelationship (Saldaña, 2003)
- 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)
- meta-ethnography, metasummary, and metasynthesis (Finfgeld, 2003; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Sandelowski et al., 1997)
- situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2015a, 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

Charmaz (2014) and Dey (1999) take issue with Axial Coding. Charmaz perceives it as a cumbersome step that may stifle analytic progress achieved from previous Initial Coding toward Theoretical Coding. Dey feels the logics of categorization and process were not fully developed by grounded theory's originators. Even as grounded theory evolved, the methodological utility of Axial Coding became a controversial issue between Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin (Kendall, 1999). Corbin herself downplays the method in her later editions of grounded theory's procedures, yet acknowledges that her late co-author employed the method to link two or more concepts together (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). All sources are worth examining as supplemental references before and during Axial Coding.