

10-19-2009

Decoding Coding via The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers by Johnny Saldaña

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Recommended APA Citation

Cooper, R. (2009). Decoding Coding via The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers by Johnny Saldaña. *The Qualitative Report*, 14(4), 245-248. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2009.2856>

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Abstract

The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers by Johnny Saldaña is a valuable resource for novice and experienced qualitative researchers alike, offering a clear, comprehensive explanation of codes and coding methods and the role they play in qualitative research. This explanation includes a discussion of writing analytic memos and a detailed list of First Cycle and Second Cycle coding methods. The book also includes useful appendices with samples of data and exercises for readers to practice coding.

Keywords

Coding, Manual, Qualitative, Research, First Cycle, and Second Cycle

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Decoding Coding via *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Johnny Saldaña

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The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers by Johnny Saldaña is a valuable resource for novice and experienced qualitative researchers alike, offering a clear, comprehensive explanation of codes and coding methods and the role they play in qualitative research. This explanation includes a discussion of writing analytic memos and a detailed list of First Cycle and Second Cycle coding methods. The book also includes useful appendices with samples of data and exercises for readers to practice coding. Key Words: Coding, Manual, Qualitative, Research, First Cycle, and Second Cycle

Perhaps we could call Johnny Saldaña (2009) the Dan Brown of qualitative research. Or perhaps he was the inspiration for the lead character in Brown's suspense novels, Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon. Certainly, this is a man who knows how to decode the mysteries of coding qualitative data. While Saldaña's new book, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, may not be marketed as a thriller, students, teachers, and practitioners of qualitative research may well find themselves thrilled by the clarity and comprehensiveness of Saldaña's text.

One of the strengths of the book is its clear focus. From the outset Saldaña establishes, "This manual focuses exclusively on codes and coding and how they play a role in the qualitative data analytic process" (p. 1). He does not attempt to address all stages of the research process, instead referring readers to other quality texts that provide such overviews. By focusing solely on coding, Saldaña is able to include a comprehensive explanation and guide for qualitative researchers. In his opening chapter, he provides an introduction to coding in qualitative research, beginning with a definition of the term *code* itself:

A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. (p. 3)

There's that symbolism again! This introductory chapter also includes a description of different stages of the coding process, as well as different types of codes, such as descriptive codes and In Vivo codes.

As I began reading *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, I was struck favorably not only by the content of the book but also by the standpoint and approach of its author. Time and again, Saldaña indicates that he is not seeking to be prescriptive nor to box researchers into restrictive, inflexible processes that impede their analytic work. He points out that "coding is not a precise science; it's primarily an interpretive act" (p.

4). He reinforces this point by explaining, “Coding is a heuristic (from the Greek, meaning ‘to discover’)—an exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas to follow” (p. 8). This is not to suggest that Saldaña is wishy-washy in his discussion of coding. Rather, he is acutely aware of the multiple approaches and perspectives that enter into the coding process in qualitative research. As he notes,

The act of coding requires that you wear your researcher’s analytic lens. But how you perceive and interpret what is happening in the data depends on what type of filter covers that lens. (p. 6)

He then compares the various ways that a grounded theorist, urban ethnographer, and critical race theorist might code the same datum. In light of the many possible and varying research objectives and research questions involved in qualitative research, what *The Coding Manual* offers is “a repertoire of possible filters” researchers might utilize in their analyses (p. 7).

Following this introduction to the topic in Chapter 1, Saldaña discusses in detail the role of analytic memos in the coding and analysis process. Initially, I wondered why he devotes an entire chapter to this subject in a book on coding, but the author explains that he sees the writing of analytic memos as a companion activity to the coding process.

The purpose of analytic memo writing is to document and reflect on: your coding process and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data—all possibly leading toward theory. (p. 32)

As I read the discussion of analytic memos, I found myself relating the ideas to my current dissertation research. I have primarily used two ways to keep track of such memos: by noting them in my day planner, which has the several advantages of being always at hand, holding the memos within a bound, zipped case, and including dated pages so that I can see at a glance when I wrote the memo. My other practice is to note jottings related specifically to methodological issues in a Word document. I was interested in Saldaña’s list of the various types of memos he has identified in his own work, and which he points out can themselves be coded:

- How you personally relate to the participants and/or the phenomenon
- Your study’s research questions
- Your code choices and their operational definitions
- The emergent patterns, categories, themes, and concepts
- The possible networks (links, connections, overlaps, flows) among the codes, patterns, categories, themes and concepts
- An emergent or related existent theory
- Any problems with the study
- Future directions for the study
- The analytic memos generated thus far
- The final report for the study (p. 40)

The substantive core of *The Coding Manual* can be found in chapters 3 and 4, in which Saldaña describes in detail numerous coding methods that can be used in both First Cycle and Second Cycle coding. Explaining the distinction between these two cycles, Saldaña comments,

Second Cycle coding methods, if needed, are advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through First Cycle methods....The primary goal during Second Cycle coding, if needed, is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes. (p. 149)

Each coding profile includes sources for information on the coding procedure, a description of the code and its function, applications of the method, an example, what type of analysis might take place after use of that coding method, and in some cases additional comments. Saldaña organizes the extensive list of First Cycle codes by grouping them into coding categories such as grammatical methods, elemental methods, affective methods, literary and language methods, exploratory methods, and procedural methods. Second Cycle coding methods include pattern coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding, among others.

While I was aware of the more common and widely-used First Cycle coding methods such as descriptive coding, In Vivo coding, and narrative coding, there were other methods that I had not come across as having distinct headings and usages. I'm sure that the relevance and value of the various methods described will be determined by the specific interests and research objectives of the readers. For me, as a doctoral candidate in Conflict Analysis and Resolution, I was especially drawn to values coding and versus coding, which will have immediate applicability for my current dissertation research.

In his concluding chapter, Saldaña presents recommendations to help qualitative researchers transition from coding to writing the final reports of their studies. These recommendations include strategies for getting unstuck or getting past the feeling of being overwhelmed by the data. My favorites among these strategies were the focusing strategy he calls the study's "trinity" and the closure strategy. Saldaña offers additional support to readers in several appendices that include coding exercises and samples of data for coding.

By the time I finished *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, I felt I had gained considerable knowledge of coding methods and their applicability. This is not a book to read straight through, as you might read a Dan Brown novel on the beach, but it is a remarkable resource that will undoubtedly prove useful to novice and experienced qualitative researchers alike.

Reference

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: Sage.

Author Note

Robin Cooper is a doctoral candidate in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University and is an adjunct professor in the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the university's Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences. She also serves as *The Weekly Qualitative Report's* Reviews Editor and as an Associate Editor for *The Qualitative Report*. Robin's research interests include culture and ethnic conflict, national belonging, collective identity, gender and social control, and qualitative research. Her current dissertation research is a phenomenological study of the transition to a majority-minority community. She may be contacted at robicoop@nova.edu.

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Article Citation

Cooper, R. (2009). Decoding coding via *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Johnny Saldaña. *The Weekly Qualitative Report*, 2(42), 245-248. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/WQR/saldana.pdf>
