

# Qualitative Research

## Identifying Themes

*NSF Summer Research Design  
2006*

# The Basics of Qualitative Analysis

- **Identifying themes**
- **Building and applying codebooks**
- **Describing themes**
- **Make comparisons**
- **Building and testing models**

# Themes

- How do you know if you have found a theme?
  - “What is this expression an example of?”
- How big are themes?
  - Broad and sweeping constructs that link many different kinds of expressions
  - Narrow and focused that link very specific kinds of expressions
- Where do themes come from?
  - A *a priori* approach: (i.e., structural coding)
  - Inductive approach: (i.e., open coding, latent coding)
- How do you identify important themes?
  - How often it appears
  - How pervasive it is across different types of cultural ideas and practices
  - How people react when the theme is violated
  - The degree to which the number, force, and variety of a theme’s expression is controlled by specific contexts

# Techniques for Identifying Themes & Subthemes

- What to Look For

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# Illness Examples

1. Male: The illness episode was preceded by a period of ‘running down my system’ which occurred from studying and working to a point where my sleep was being sacrificed. I recall feeling very tired and somewhat ‘achy’ at first, which was later accompanied by difficulty in breathing and swallowing. This was related to sinus congestion and a sore throat. I also recall that the skin around the openings of the nasal passages began to feel raw and irritated from the constant wiping. My throat felt sore as I mentioned earlier. This makes swallowing difficult and somewhat uncomfortable. There were also periods when I had phlegm which necessitated me to have to spit. The phlegm also had a greenish-yellow color to it, which confirmed the significance of this illness. I think I kept swallowing it and it made me queasy and eventually I puked. ...
2. Female: It began with a slight headache behind the eyes and nose, almost stinging and then a dull pain. My head became heavy and I grew a little more irritable. For a while I became chilly, the hallmark that sickness was on the way. I called in the vitamins to combat the initial siege and the orange juice made me feel better (at least in my head.) It wasn’t too bad, and since it was Christmas vacation and I had little else to do, I got out my Agatha Christi book ...

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    - Unmarked Texts
  - **Theory-related material:** Look for important topics to particular theoretical interests or general social science issues (e.g, social conflict, contradictions, context, process, relationships, structure, etc.)

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- **What to Do (Process Techniques)**
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  - **Key-Words-In-Context:** Condense text down to words or sort specific words in contexts

| <b>KWIC table for the word “deconstruction” in Wright (1997)</b> |   |
|--|---|
| 1  | This varied group of postmodern thinkers employs the tool of <b>deconstruction</b> to critically evaluate--indeed, to peel back the discursive layers of--development's assumptions: capitalist economics, progress, modernity and rationality.   |
| 2  | Their <b>deconstructions</b> reveal development's asymmetric dichotomization of the world into modern, Westernized societies on the one hand and traditional, "backward" societies on the other.  |
| 3  | It will be the purpose of this article to utilize the deconstructive tool from a feminist perspective, to carry the postmodern theorists' <b>deconstructions</b> one step further to unravel the elements of development theory that carry Western gender biases regarding proper roles for women and men based on their "true nature." |
| 4  | This process of feminist <b>deconstruction</b> correlates with a contemporary trend in feminist analysis, that of deconstructing institutions such as the state and law, and discourses of democratic theory and international relations theory, to expose their reliance upon, and infusion with, gender.                              |
| 5  | Feminist <b>deconstruction</b> , then, is distinct from the earlier empirical project that enumerates women's experiences with development.   |
| 6  | Feminist <b>deconstruction</b> is "not simply about women," but about the interdependent constructions of masculine and feminine, and about shifting feminist analysis from the margin to the centre.   |

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  - **Word lists:** Condense text down to words or sort specific words in contexts

## Word List Example

“What is your teenager like now? Does she or he have any special qualities or abilities?”

N=82 mother & 82 fathers

### Mother's Descriptions

| Rank | Freq | Word        |
|------|------|-------------|
| 1    | 22   | good        |
| 2    | 12   | friends     |
| 3    | 11   | loving      |
| 4    | 11   | out         |
| 5    | 11   | people      |
| 6    | 10   | doesn't     |
| 7    | 10   | hard        |
| 8    | 10   | school      |
| 9    | 9    | responsible |
| 10   | 9    | sense       |
| 11   | 8    | caring      |
| 12   | 8    | intelligent |
| 13   | 8    | lacks       |
| 14   | 8    | sensitive   |
| 15   | 7    | bright      |
| 16   | 7    | honest      |
| 17   | 7    | others      |
| 18   | 7    | self        |
| 19   | 7    | time        |
| 20   | 7    | well        |
| 21   | 7    | work        |
| ...  | ...  | ...         |
| 666  | 1    | zest        |

### Father's Descriptions

| Rank | Freq | Word        |
|------|------|-------------|
| 1    | 22   | good        |
| 2    | 16   | school      |
| 3    | 11   | hard        |
| 4    | 9    | intelligent |
| 5    | 8    | bright      |
| 6    | 8    | independent |
| 7    | 8    | out         |
| 8    | 8    | well        |
| 9    | 7    | doesn't     |
| 10   | 7    | lack        |
| 11   | 7    | loving      |
| 12   | 7    | people      |
| 13   | 7    | sensitive   |
| 14   | 7    | sports      |
| 15   | 7    | student     |
| ...  | ...  | ...         |
| 548  | 1    | zero        |

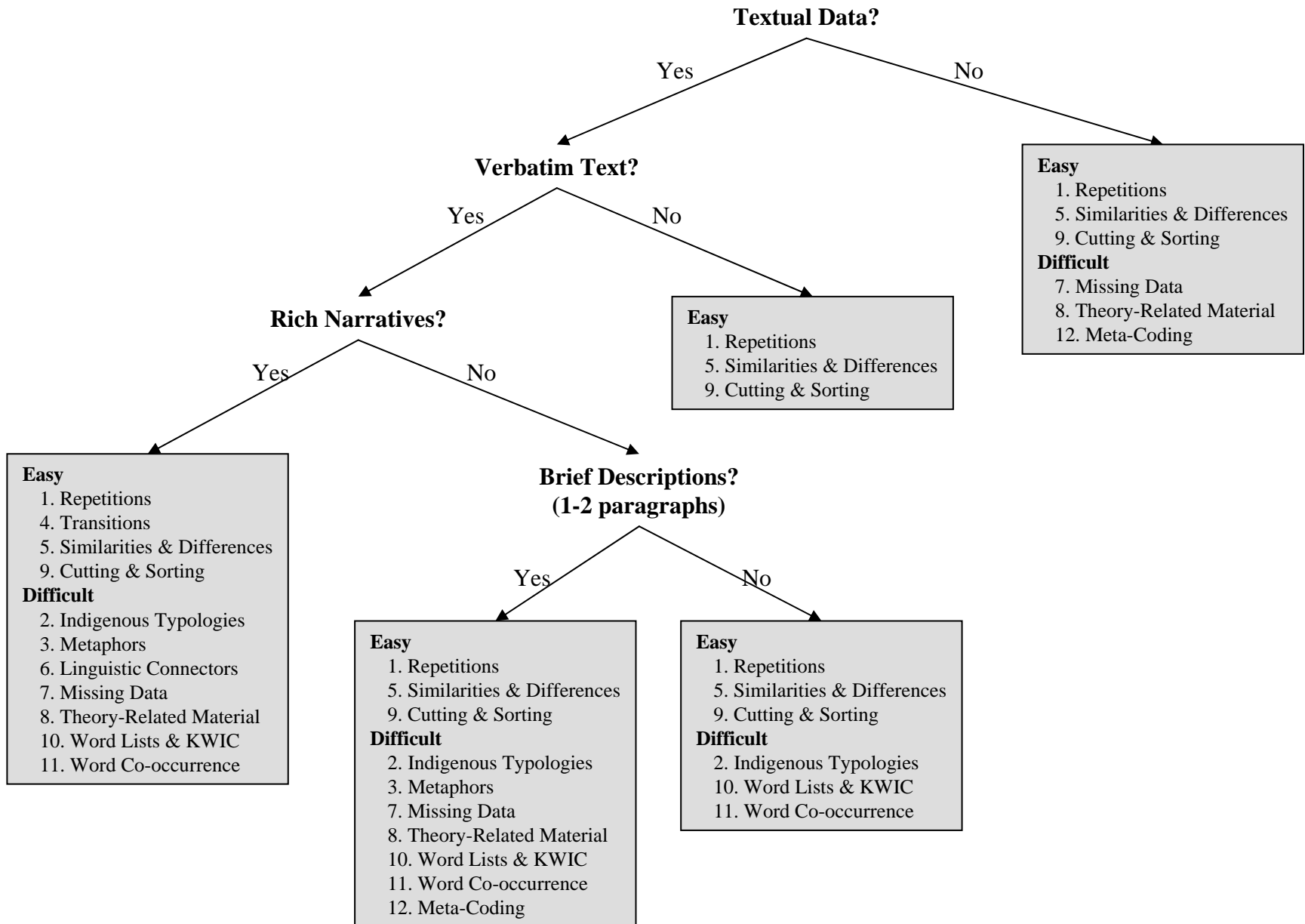
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  - **Word Co-Occurrence:** Use word lists and word-by-word correlational matrices to discover larger themes

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  - **Word Co-Occurrence:** Use word lists and word-by-word correlational matrices to discover larger themes
  - **Metacoding:** Content code a fixed set of data bits for specific themes then use exploratory analysis techniques such as factor analysis to discover overarching *metathemes*

# Selecting among theme-identification techniques



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| Technique                  | Labor Intensity | Expertise |             |                | Stage in Analysis | Number of themes | Type of theme produced  |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
|                            |                 | Language  | Substantive | Methodological |                   |                  |                         |
| Repetitions                | Low             | Low       | Low         | Low            | Early             | High             | Theme                   |
| Indigenous typologies      | Low             | High      | Low         | Low            | Early             | Medium           | Theme, Subtheme         |
| Metaphors                  | Low             | High      | Low         | Low            | Early             | Medium           | Theme                   |
| Transitions                | Low             | Low       | Low         | Low            | Early             | High             | Theme                   |
| Similarities & Differences | Low - High      | Low       | Low         | Low            | Early             | High             | Theme                   |
| Linguistic connectors      | Low             | High      | Low         | Low            | Late              | High             | Theme                   |
| Missing data               | High            | High      | High        | High           | Late              | Low              | Theme                   |
| Theory-related material    | Low             | Low       | High        | High           | Late              | Low              | Theme                   |
| Cutting & Sorting          | Low-High        | Low       | Low         | Low            | Early or Late     | Medium           | Theme, Sub-, Meta-theme |
| Word lists & KWIC          | Low             | Medium    | Low         | Low            | Early             | Medium           | Theme, Subtheme         |
| Word co-occurrence         | Medium          | Medium    | Low         | High           | Late              | Low              | Theme, Meta-theme       |
| Meta coding                | Medium          | Medium    | High        | High           | Late              | Low              | Theme, Meta-theme       |