

# 5 Building Blocks of Analysis

Identifying themes

Building and applying codebooks

Describing themes

Making comparisons

Building and testing models



# What is a **theme**?

*An underlying dimension of meaning, or a construct,  
that cuts across a variety of expressions*

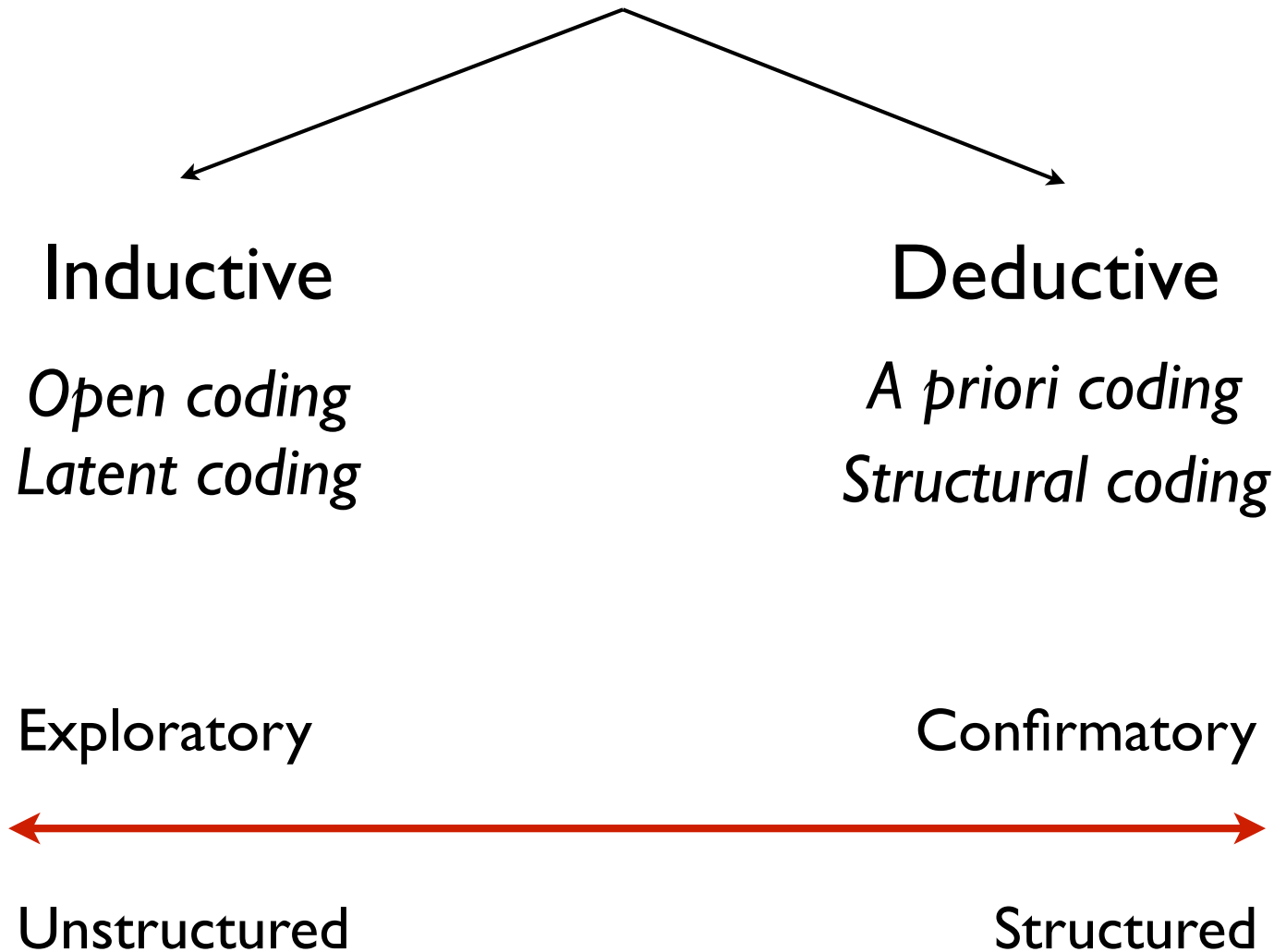
# What is a **theme**?

*Answers the question, “What is this an example of?”*

# What is a **theme**?

*Can be broad constructs that link many kinds of expressions,  
or narrow ones that identify specific kinds of expressions*

# Where do **themes** come from?



# Techniques to Identify Themes

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*Theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research. It also is one of the most mysterious. Explicit descriptions of theme discovery are rarely found in articles and reports, and when they are, they are often relegated to appendices or footnotes. Techniques are shared among small groups of social scientists, but sharing is impeded by disciplinary or epistemological boundaries. The techniques described here are drawn from across epistemological and disciplinary boundaries. They include both observational and manipulative techniques and range from quick word counts to laborious, in-depth, line-by-line scrutiny. Techniques are compared on six dimensions: (1) appropriateness for data types, (2) required labor, (3) required expertise, (4) stage of analysis, (5) number and types of themes to be generated, and (6) issues of reliability and validity.*

*Keywords:* theme identification; qualitative analysis; text analysis; open coding; qualitative research methods

Analyzing text involves several tasks: (1) discovering themes and subthemes, (2) winnowing themes to a manageable few (i.e., deciding which themes are important in any project), (3) building hierarchies of themes or code books, and (4) linking themes into theoretical models.

We focus here on the first task: discovering themes and subthemes in texts—and in other qualitative data, like images or artifacts, for that matter.<sup>1</sup> We outline a dozen techniques, drawn from across the social sciences and from different theoretical perspectives. The techniques range from simple word counts that can be done by a computer to labor-intensive, line-by-line analyses that, so far, only humans can do.

Each technique has advantages and disadvantages. Some methods are more suited to rich, complex narratives, while others are more appropriate for short responses to open-ended questions. Some require more labor and expertise on behalf of the investigator, others less.

Making explicit the techniques we use for discovering themes in qualitative data is important for three reasons. First, discovering themes is the basis

# 12 Techniques for Identifying Themes



## Observational

Word repetition

Indigenous categories

Metaphors and analogies

Transitions

Similarities and differences

Linguistic connectors

Missing data

Theory-related material

## Processing

Cutting and sorting

Word lists and KWIC

Word co-occurrence

Metacoding

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“ “ 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.... ” ”

“ “ 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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# Word List Example

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

## **Mothers**

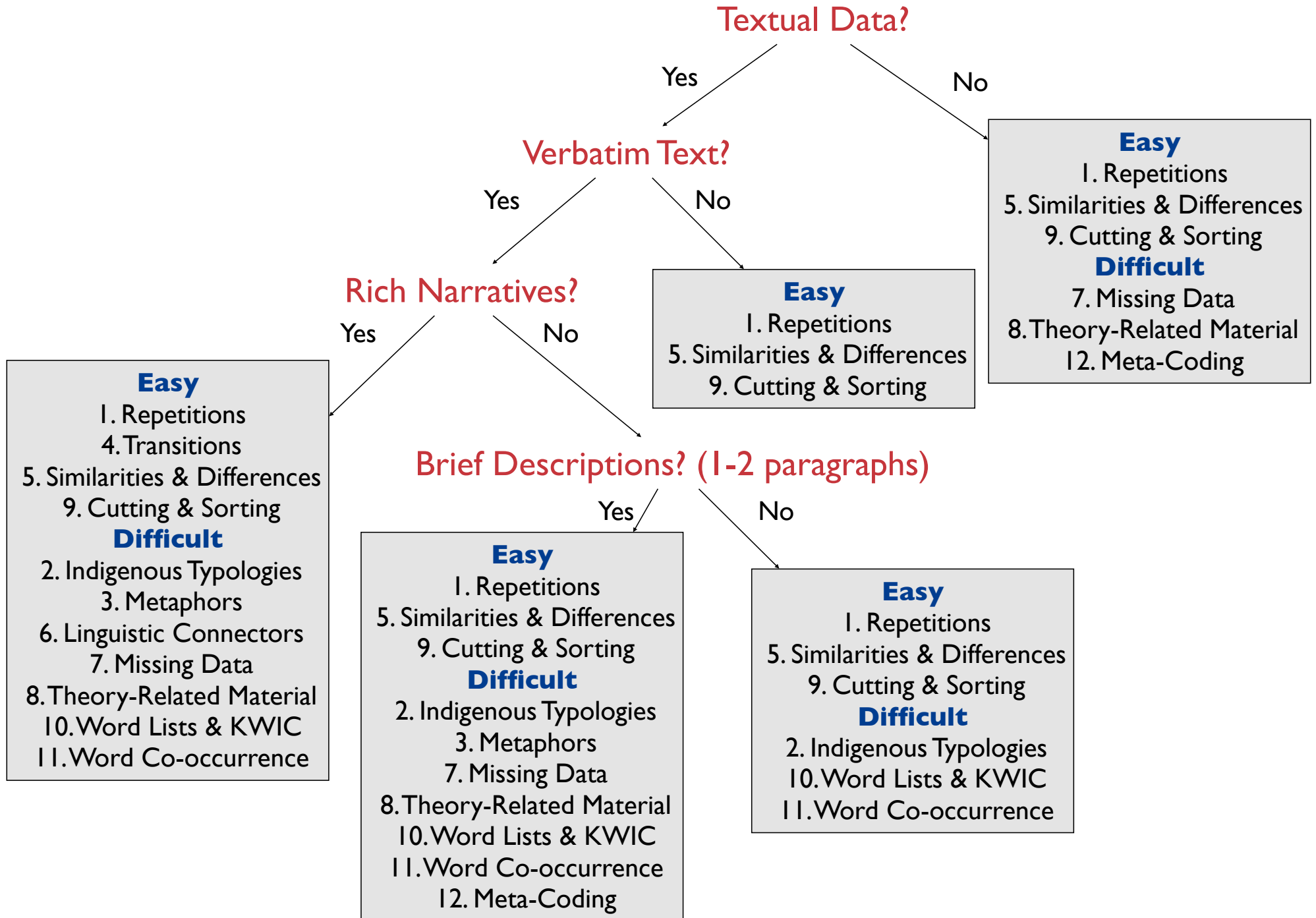
Rank	Frequency	Word
1	22	good
2	12	friends
3	11	loving
4	11	out
5	11	people
6	10	doesn't
7	10	hard
8	10	school
9	9	responsible
10	9	sense
11	8	caring
12	8	intelligent
13	8	lacks
14	8	sensitive
15	7	bright
16	7	honest
17	7	others
18	7	self
19	7	time
20	7	well
21	7	work
...	...	...
666	1	zest

Ryan and Weissner (1996)

# A Key-Word-in-Context (KWIC) Example

KWIC table for the word “deconstruction” in Wright (1997)	
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.

# Selecting among theme-identification techniques



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Technique	Labor	Expertise			Stage in Analysis	Number of themes	Type of theme produced
	Intensity	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