Code standardisation

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Even though syntactic coding introduces one level of standardisation to the coding, open coding still means that in some cases different words were used in the fields of story grammars to code the same basic information. This results from the nature of qualitative coding, since codes are closely following what is said in the texts. For qualitative analysis it matters a lot whether a document is using one label for an activity or social group or another (e.g., homosexuals, gays, or same sex couples). But at another level of analysis, such differences are no longer important; more comprehensive and abstract codes are needed. In order to allow both types of analysis, the individual codes entered to the system by researchers were organised into a hierarchical structure.

Code hierararchy with list of occurrences

In this standardisation process codes that are similar to one another were organised into more general, higher-level codes. During this standardisation process it was an important principle to try to be relatively free of any theoretical bias, staying as close to the original meanings of codes as possible, and focusing on standardisation and logical organisation. Rather than using a fixed set of generality levels, the depth of hierarchies vary between the different branches in the categories, allowing both 'flat categories' that simply group codes into a smaller (manageable) number of categories on the same level, as well as categories with several levels of groupings inside so that the analysis can be executed on several levels of generality.

 Besides the flexibility in terms of the depth of hierarchy, codes could also be attached to more than one category, allowing a multi-dimensional grouping of codes. Thus, e.g., the category of 'migrant girls' was added to the categories of 'females', 'children', and 'migrants', all organised within even more general categories ('gender', 'age', 'citizenship') within the overarching category of social groups. The hierarchy also allowed for cross-linking categories so that the first decidedly 'un-theoretical' categorisation could be regrouped to create more abstract analytic categories. (E.g., linking together institutional actors (feminist NGOs and gender departments), with the social group 'gender' and references to gender-relevant international documents to create the abstract category of 'gendering').

The flexibility of this hierarchical organisation means that the analysis of documents can be accomplished on several levels, including detailed comparison of a smaller number of documents as well as comparison of overarching categories among various countries or even the whole database. This bottom-up method of starting from close-to-text coding and using groupings to achieve higher levels of abstraction also has the advantage of being transparent: the process of abstraction is traceable in the construction of the hierarchy.