

THE AESTHETICS OF CODES IN GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH: A
SCIENTIFIC-LITERARY ESSAY

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Abstract

The essay approaches research as an aesthetic practice that involves not only rational-cognitive experiences but also bodily-sensory and affective ones. I outline this assumption using the example of interpretation processes in Grounded Theory research. Here, the analysis of empirical data takes place in the circular process of elaborating codes and categories and aims to develop an empirically based theory. Codes in Grounded Theory research are both analytically condensed and condensing constructs themselves, as they are produced in a co-constructive process that takes place between the researchers and the data. The process of coding thus also implies a relational level—the relationship between the researchers and the field of research, represented by the data—and is characterized by emotions, feelings and bodily-sensory perceptions that shape the production of knowledge about this very field. The codes condense aesthetic experiences, making them available on a discursive and a (self-)reflexive level all at once. Therefore, the article applies the question ‘What do we do with codes?’ to the practice of qualitative social research and seeks to answer it from an aestheticizing perspective, focusing on subjectivity and its epistemological potential.

1 Introduction

As an empirically working sociologist who analyzes her data using Grounded Theory,¹ I often deal with codes. They are a methodological heuristic for reconstructing meaning. Coding, which means the circular process of working out codes and categories in order to analytically ‘break down’ the data, forms the core of the methodology of Grounded Theory. The procedures of coding—open, axial, and selective—aim to structure the data in line with the research question, and to develop a theory that is empirically grounded. The question “What is the main story here?”² guides the coding process. The reconstruction of this ‘story’ holds many surprises for the researcher—not only in terms of the story’s outcome, i.e., surprises regarding the narrative content, but also personal surprises regarding one’s self-awareness. Codes emerge in a co-constructive process involving the researcher and the data. Therefore, codes are also the result of a relationship—the relationship between the researcher and the field of research in the form of the data—and are characterized by personal impressions, feelings and bodily-sensory experiences. Codes condense aesthetic experience, rendering it reflexively available and discursive. The affective and bodily subjectivity of the researcher is interwoven in the codes, it affects the production of the knowledge about the field and the object of research alike and if reflected, it can be transformed

into methodological knowledge. In the following, I will exemplify this using an example from my research. After a short introduction of the methodology of Grounded Theory (2) and its coding procedures (3), I describe my own affective and bodily-sensory experiences with codes (3) and illustrate them with the example already mentioned (4).

2_The Methodology of Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is a research approach characterized by the interconnectedness of empirical research and theory building. The term Grounded Theory stands for both the specific research methodology and its outcome, namely the development of an empirically based theory that is grounded in the data. Grounded Theory does not aim at the empirical testing of an already existing theory, but instead focuses on generating new knowledge and establishing a new theory about social phenomena. Grounded Theory was developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss at a time when social science research and theory building still followed the criteria for scientificity of the natural sciences: a linear and standardized methodological approach, the replicability of results, and the exclusion of subjectivity of the researchers. Glaser and Strauss opposed this by writing *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, a book with polemic intent that created a milestone and furthered the establishment of qualitative social research in the canon of scientific research methods.³ Central elements of Grounded Theory, such as theoretical sampling, i.e. the successive data collection and analysis, the circular research process, contrastive comparisons, and coding, were later adopted by other qualitative methodologies and are now firmly rooted in the self-understanding of contemporary qualitative social research.

Grounded Theory is open to all types of data. Whether interview transcripts, observation protocols, documents, or visual data—depending on the research question, it is possible to make use of different as well as methodologically plural procedures. The empirically based theory that emerges as a result of the research is object-related; it explains what is typically going on in the field. In research practice, this is achieved through the formation of codes. Codes are terms for phenomena in the field that are worked out in the data material. Codes help conceptualize shorter or longer units of meaning in the data, e.g., a word, a phrase, or a passage. Codes may be sociologically constructed or already literally present in the data. The former are formulated by the

researchers and can be changed in the course of data analysis until the formulation is found that describes the phenomenon as precisely as possible. The latter are the so-called *in vivo* codes. These are expressions used by the researched themselves. Codes can consist of a noun or short combinations of words, for example, adjective and noun. In the course of the data interpretation they are gradually related to each other and analytically abstracted until they reach conceptual density. Codes are thus never isolated but emerge from a meaningful context that must first be reconstructed, and at the same time the codes create new correlations and contexts of meaning. The result of the analysis is a grounded theory about the field and the research object; one that emerges through the analytical differentiation of connecting lines in the data material and can be represented as a network of relationships made up of codes.⁴

3_The Coding Process in Grounded Theory

The coding process conventional in Grounded Theory includes three procedures: first, open coding, second, axial coding, and third, selective coding. Although the step-by-step presentation may suggest it, the process is, in fact, not linear. Following a central premise of Grounded Theory methodology, it is a circular process of data collection, data analysis, memo writing, reverting to previous codes, and a constant search for similarities (minimal contrasting) and differences (maximal contrasting) in order to capture the field in its diversity.

Open coding begins with a careful reading of the data material in response to the questions: ‘What is going on here?’ and ‘What is this about?’ Initially, these codes are very close to the text, summarizing in meaningful terms what the sequence is about. In the process of *axial coding*, researchers relate those terms already formulated and find a new term or another code for that relationship. The questions guiding axial coding are: ‘What relationships emerge in the data material?’ and ‘On which conditions do these relationships emerge and which consequences follow?’ Here, coding occurs around the axis of already formed codes and categories. The links give rise to conceptual networks, which become increasingly dense and analytically abstract during the coding process. Researchers determine topics and subtopics, re-sorting and sorting out the codes, always in alignment with the context of the data and the research question. *Selective coding* strives for a further level of abstraction and aims at the elaboration of core categories. The *core categories* are the central result of data

interpretation in the style of Grounded Theory. They are theoretical concepts about the field and researched phenomena that get at the ‘main story’—the thread in the data material that connects the individual themes and turns them into a meaningful context. How can core categories be recognized? First of all, they are central and connected to as many other codes as possible, whereby this connection must be continuously justified and confirmed in the data material itself. Additionally, there are regular occurrences during the evaluation of codes and categories that prove to be relevant to the research question and thus are incorporated into the structure of meaning of the core category. If there exists a certain stability, core categories can be condensed into patterns of references and correlations. Furthermore, core categories are characterized by a slow saturation: The revelation of all connecting lines within the category networks proceeds gradually, due to the multitude of thematic references scattered throughout the material. However, the integrative function of core categories does not only lie in assigning codes and categories in the sense of structuring the content of the data. The process of elaborating and distinguishing core categories also facilitates the gradual development of an empirically based theory. Core categories gain complexity and density by bundling empirical multiplicity: into their core, they incorporate all the conceptual relationships that express the maximum variation of the analyzed phenomenon in the form of subcategories, dimensions, and properties.⁵

The core categories condense the creative power of codes. With each new code, researchers, in a co-constructive process with the data material, create new knowledge about manifold social realities. The codes stand for field-specific problems of action and their answers, and thus depict the inner dynamics of the field: Which topics does the field work on, which typical conventions prevail there? Which irritations emerge and which solutions does the field produce?⁶ All these insights are condensed into a single word, perhaps two—into the codes that become core categories. The path to this goal is arduous and requires creativity, perseverance, and analytical precision from the researchers, but also the ability to be surprised by the data and to respect their resistance.

4_What Do I Do with Codes?

When I code, I sometimes imagine that the codes develop a life of their own, similar to a colorful game: They gravitate towards and mold into each other, they form mean-

ingful communities and build connections, some of them loose, some tight, they engage in power plays and fight over their position as super- or subcategories, assert their relevance and assert themselves, some allow for an easy elimination, some are unwillingly defeated, they gather for a round dance made of fragments of meaning only to drop out at some point, tired of bouncing around, they continue dancing in pairs or stubbornly remain alone until other codes may or may not absorb them. At the end of this game, there are two or three remaining, perhaps even only one: the core category, which precisely sums up ‘the main story’ of the researched phenomenon.

Of course, this game would not be possible without me, the researcher. It is my interpretive work that produces the codes and gets them to play and interact with each other. Interpretation, however, is anything but playfully easy. “Research is hard work,” emphasizes Anselm L. Strauss in an interview.⁷ This also applies to the process of data analysis. It is always a contingent experience for me, which I find to be both fulfilling and exhausting, which makes me doubt and despair, which stimulates my curiosity and makes me happy, drains my strength and feels austere and tough, which seems to me like an opulent table, generous and fruitful, or which makes me walk in a fertile orchard at dusk, fragrant, colorful, musically accompanied by the buzzing of insects and the chirping of birds. My analytical work with the data is rich in associations, fantasy images, intuitive ideas, and synaesthetic sensations. I experience the codes in different colors and sounds each; in front of my inner eye, they set up smaller and larger stages, they are opening doors behind which I sometimes am to discover further doors, they expose riddles to me which also contain the solutions to the questions they raise, and they guide my way right to the contexts of meaning that constitute the phenomenon under investigation.

What do I do with codes? As a sociologist, I interpret empirical data and in the course of this, I also reflect on my researcher-self. I get to know myself each time anew. I gain more insights about my way of reading, understanding, and questioning, about my routines at the desk and about what is important to me as a researcher: to stay tangible and open to this kind of self-awareness that the field and the data material trigger in me, to give myself permission to indulge in the emotional roller coaster and the plethora of associations in order to emerge, catharsis-like, with a newfound and insightful clarity. In the end, the codes that establish themselves as core cate-

gories are those that I have ‘suffered through,’ affectively and bodily. They are also the ones drawing on the epistemological potential of my subjectivity while also objectifying it at the same time.

5_Dancing in the In-Between: Affective and Bodily-Sensory Experiences from an Online Collaborative Interpretation

I would like to exemplify the idea of the aesthetics of codes with an example from my research on the importance of intuition in qualitative social research. For five months, from March to July 2021, I participated in a collaborative interpretation group that met online once a week and interpreted interviews for five hours.⁸ The interviews originated in a medical sociology research project and addressed how experts and those affected dealt with a particular medical diagnosis. For reasons of anonymity, I will not disclose any further information about the interviews. We were a small group: In the beginning we started with four interpreters, a few weeks later, there were three of us. I participated in the collaborative interpretations because of my own research project; so, while I engaged in the meetings, I simultaneously documented my observations, thoughts and ideas about intuition in research. According to Alfred Schütz and his distinction between “common-sense and scientific interpretation,”⁹ my research setting can be characterized as follows: The affected persons and the experts who have their say in the interviews unfold their common-sense interpretations of living and dealing with the diagnosis, producing first-degree constructions. We, the members of the interpretation group, turned to these first-degree constructions analytically and reconstructed them sociologically. Our readings are second-degree constructions in Schütz’s sense. My analytical role in collaborative interpretation, however, went beyond this and was twofold. I participated on the one hand as an interpreter, and on the other hand as an observer with my own research assignment. As an interpreter I devoted myself to the interviews and as an observer to the whole process of collaborative interpretation with all its content-related aspects, interactive practices and situational dynamics. I recorded this process in ethnographic notes. My focus was thus on both first- and second-degree constructions, and at the same time oscillated between external and self-observation. With this focus, I moved to another level of construction, one of the third degree. Thus, this is a complex research setting in which different levels of sociological observation intertwine. In the following, I describe my affective and bodily-sensory experiences with collaborative interpretation and present

an excerpt from the coding of my ethnographic notes. I made the notes during collaborative interpretation and the coding took place outside of the interpretation setting. My observations during the collaborative interpretation focused on the process of generating readings of the interview sequences, for instance what was being said and how, how the interpretations were *justified*, *negotiated* and *enforced* within the group. I primarily paid attention to the discursive processes and to the *interaction* of the interpreters. These are also the initial codes I assigned when going through my notes. Gradually, however, my own subjectivity ‘imposed’ itself more and more. I noticed that I grew increasingly aware of how I felt about the research situation, how I experienced the interview sequences and how I felt with the interpreters—during the interpretation sessions, but also in the time between, before the collaborative sessions started and after they had dissolved. For this, the following codes emerged: *joy* about an interesting interview passage, *being touched* by the content of another, *fun* with the wordplays while developing readings, *curiosity* about and *sympathy* for the interpreters, *exhilaration* of the breaks with the laughter and the lively conversations, *amazement* about how clearly we can see the steam and the golden yellow color of the tea on our screens, the feeling of a *narrowness* and *limitation* due to the fact that our interaction took place exclusively online, the feeling of *familiarity* with the group, but also of *strangeness*, *exhaustion* and *lack of strength* after the sessions ended, *heaviness* that felt physical and also affected me mentally and emotionally, *dancing* after the sessions ended to get rid of this heaviness. All in all, while interpreting together, I experienced a multitude of “impressive situations”¹⁰—in the words of Robert Guggutzer with reference to Hermann Schmitz—multi-layered and interwoven: a “chaos” that had taken hold of me situationally and had to be sorted.¹¹

In my observation protocols, I also covered the periods before and after the sessions because they, too, were charged with affective and bodily-sensory experience. I call them *in-between spaces* because they belong to the research field and constitute specific research situations. These situations are specific because they emerge from the field but take place outside of it. I was the only one involved in them; the other interpreters were no longer present. The *in-between space* is a code that emerged during axial coding: Axial coding focuses on one code—in this case *heaviness*—and, by looking for connections with other codes, links the *heaviness* and the *dancing* after the completion of the online sessions. This produces a new analytical question about

the meaning of these in-between spaces in the context of my research. At first glance, the dance act has a quasi-therapeutic function. It arose from the need to do something about the heaviness I felt at the end of the sessions. I understand this heaviness as a “bodily irritation”¹² that emerged from all the experiences during the interpretation sessions described above, and that I did not verbalize and share with the group. I found an expression for it while dancing. The dance act as bodily movement in time and space¹³ catches up with corporality (*Leiblichkeit*), overcomes the fragmentation and flattening of the bodies on the screens and creates a moving order that enables a way out of the ‘chaos.’ But dancing also has a methodological function: for me, it marks the temporary exit from the digital research field and the transition into everyday life. The interpretation sessions took place at the home office. After their conclusion, we interpreters left the digital space. We participated *in* the interpretation together, but no longer talked *about* the interpretation. And because we were in three different cities, some of them very far apart, we could not share time together in co-presence that would have allowed opportunities for some more lighthearted exchange. After the sessions concluded, I was left speechless. Discoursing the affective and bodily-sensory experiences by writing and coding them acts, on the one hand, as a catharsis in the psychoanalytic sense. On the other hand, it sets processes of reflection in motion that help make the experience scientifically comprehensible and transparent, and also help to explicate its epistemic potential—here the realization of how important it is to consciously shape the exit from the field, even under conditions of digitality.

6_Exiting the Field

I have used an example to show how the aesthetic experience of the researcher, with all its nuance and unpredictability, can flow into the epistemic process. The coding procedure described here is not yet completed and represents only an excerpt from my ongoing research. By treating the dance act as (auto-)ethnographic data and recording it in my observation notes, it can also be regarded as a code and integrated into the data analysis. Only in this way, it is possible for me to develop an analytical distance to the dance act and to reflect on its meaning in the research process. Pragmatically speaking,¹⁴ dancing is the solution to a problem of action: to the need to create (in-between) spaces for communication in the group, dedicated not to empirical

data, but to subjective experiences with these same data and to the process of collaborative interpretation. Sharing the experience with the group, tying it back to the collective context from which it emerged, could transform group routines, trigger new dynamics in the group, and impact data analysis and the progress of the research. Furthermore, such (in-between) spaces can facilitate the temporary exit from the digital field. This is because the exit from the field must be methodically reflected and designed. Simply hanging up, clicking on the ‘leave meeting’ button is not enough.

Research is an aesthetic practice from the very beginning, as this *perspective* has argued. Our personal interests and life stories bring us to the topics and questions we address scientifically, we shape texts and methodological approaches,¹⁵ and in doing so, we are situated in different “sociological cultures of knowledge,”¹⁶ which simultaneously enable and restrict our research in a context-specific way. We burn for our topics, enter the research field with all our senses, are happy about new findings, develop affinities or aversions towards phenomena in the field, are afraid of the failure of a research project, have intuitions about next steps, struggle with writing blocks, and enjoy the gift of inspiration. “Abstraction alone never eliminates all traces of interested individuality,” writes science historian Lorraine Daston.¹⁷ This makes it all the more important to reflect on and explicate subjectivity in research and to make its meaning scientifically comprehensible. Aesthetic experiences in the research process require verbalization and methodological objectification. The codes presented here are a form of such verbalization and objectification. In line with the methodology of Grounded Theory, codes stand for the relationality and circularity of research processes: for the relations between phenomena within the field, between field and researchers, between subjectivity and its scientific legitimation, between passion and cognition.¹⁸

Endnotes

- ¹ Anselm L. Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- ² Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*, 31.
- ³ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).
- ⁴ Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*, 33–36; Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm L. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*

- (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2015); Jörg Strübing, *Grounded Theory: Zur Sozialtheoretischen und Epistemologischen Fundierung eines Pragmatistischen Forschungsstils* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2014).
- ⁵ Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*, 27–36; see also Maya Halatcheva-Trapp, “Grounded Theory Methodologie und Deutungsmusteranalyse—am Beispiel der Erforschung von Elternschaftsdiskursen in der Familienberatung,” in *Handbuch Grounded Theory: Von der Methodologie zur Forschungspraxis*, eds. Claudia Equit and Christoph Hohage (Weinheim: Beltz Juventa, 2016), 361–378, here: 369–370; in my research I am following Anselm Strauss and his variant of Grounded Theory and data analysis. For an overview of the further developments of Grounded Theory, such as the constructivist approach of Kathy Charmaz and the situational analysis of Adele Clarke, cf. Janice M. Morse et al., *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation Revisited* (New York: Routledge, 2021).
- ⁶ Maya Halatcheva-Trapp and Ursula Unterkofler, “Teaching Grounded Theory: Analysis of an Epistemic Practice,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20, (2021): 1–10. Doi: [10.1177/16094069211054937/](https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211054937).
- ⁷ Heiner Legewie and Barbara Schervier-Legewie, “Anselm Strauss: Research is Hard Work, It’s Always A Bit Suffering. Therefore, On the Other Side Research Should Be Fun,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 5, no. 3 (2004). Doi: [10.17169/fqs-5.3.562/](https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-5.3.562).
- ⁸ In qualitative social science research, the joint interpretation of data is a common practice with the aim of exploring different readings and thereby ensuring the quality of the analysis. It depends on the research methodology chosen whether or not coding is used in the process. In the collaborative interpretation discussed here, coding was not used. On the history, theory, and practice of collaborative interpretation, cf. Jo Reichertz, *Gemeinsam interpretieren: Die Gruppeninterpretation als kommunikativer Prozess* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013).
- ⁹ Alfred Schütz, “Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation,” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 14, (1953): 1–37, here: 3.
- ¹⁰ Robert Gugutzer, “Leib und Körper als Erkenntnisobjekte,” in *Handbuch Körpersoziologie: Forschungsfelder und methodische Zugänge*, eds. Robert Gugutzer, Gabriele Kleind, and Michael Meuser (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022), 613–626, here: 617.
- ¹¹ Gugutzer, “Leib und Körper als Erkenntnisobjekte,” 617.
- ¹² Gugutzer, “Leib und Körper als Erkenntnisobjekte,” 618.
- ¹³ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Sinne und Künste im Zusammenspiel. Modi ästhetischer Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2015), 211.
- ¹⁴ John Dewey, *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1938).
- ¹⁵ Wolfgang Krohn, ed., *Ästhetik in der Wissenschaft. Interdisziplinärer Diskurs über das Gestalten und Darstellen von Wissen* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2006).
- ¹⁶ Angelika Pofert and Reiner Keller, “Form und Feld. Soziologische Wissenskulturen zwischen diskursiver Strukturierung und erkenntnisorientiertem Handeln,” in *Wissenskulturen in der Soziologie*, eds. Reiner Keller and Angelika Pofert (Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2018), 18–39.
- ¹⁷ Lorraine Daston, *Wunder, Beweise und Tatsachen. Zur Geschichte der Rationalität* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001), 165.
- ¹⁸ The author is grateful to Jasmin Wittkowski for her careful proofreading of the manuscript and to the editorial team of *On_Culture* for helpful comments on the content.