🌻 Factor labels – a creative challenge

Where do the labels for the causal factors come from? As with ordinary QDA and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), approaches vary in the extent to which they are purely exploratory or seek to confirm prior theory (Copestake, 2014). Exploratory coding entails trying to identify different causal claims embedded in what people say, creating factor labels inductively and iteratively from the narrative data. Different respondents will not, of course, always use precisely the same phrases, and it is a creative challenge to create and curate this list of causal factors. For example, if Alice says 'Feeling good about the future is one thing that increases your wellbeing', is this element 'Feeling good about the future' the same as 'Being confident about tomorrow' which Bob mentioned earlier? Should we encode them both as the same thing, and if so, what shall we call it? We might choose 'Positive view of future', but how well does this cover both cases? Laukkanen (1994) discusses strategies for finding common vocabularies. As in ordinary QDA, analysts will usually find themselves generating an ever-growing list of factors and will need to continually consider how to consolidate it – sometimes using strategies such as hierarchical coding or 'nesting' factors (as discussed in the following section).

The alternative to exploratory coding is confirmatory coding, which employs an agreed code book, derived from a ToC and/or from prior studies. QuIP studies mostly use exploratory coding but sometimes supplement labels with additional codes derived from a project's ToC, for example, 'attribution coding' helps to signify which factors explicitly refer to a specific intervention being evaluated (Copestake et al., 2019b: 257). However, careful sequencing matters here because pre-set codes may frame or bias how the coder sees the data (Copestake et al., 2019a). Again, the positionality of the coder matters just as much when doing causal coding as it does for any other form of qualitative data coding.