

The coding scheme determines what data you collect and is, thus, an essential part of your behavioral study. Setting up a coding scheme is not as straightforward as it may seem. It often requires quite some thinking to define the perfect coding scheme. The Observer XT supports the whole process of refining and re-arranging the coding scheme by allowing you to build your coding scheme during scoring. Also the possibilities to score subjects or comments only and to define (up to ten) hierarchical levels, make that you can arrange your coding scheme any way you like it. This flexibility is one of the key features of The Observer XT.

ON THE FLY CODING

As a behavioral researcher you will recognize the need for a well-defined coding scheme. In many cases your coding scheme is not perfect at the beginning. Some behaviors may be too detailed and others may be missing. The Observer XT allows you to fine-tune your coding scheme while observing. You can add elements during scoring and afterwards reorganize your coding scheme and delete redundant elements. This means that you can start your observations with a draft coding scheme and develop and re-fine it to bring it to perfection. You can also decide to start your observation with an empty coding scheme and develop it entirely as you code.

SUBJECTS OR COMMENTS ONLY

In the coding scheme you can define your subjects and behaviors and use modifiers to specify your subjects and behaviors more precisely. Examples of modifiers are the number of words an infant utters when speaking or the person whom the focal subject is talking to. Modifiers can be nominal or numerical.

The order in which you score the coding scheme elements is not fixed. You can score your data in the

order you prefer, instead of subject – subject modifier - behavior - behavior modifier, you can score, for instance, behavior - behavior modifier – subject – subject modifier. It is not mandatory to score all four elements, you can use any combination you like, for instance, score subjects and behaviors without modifiers or score behaviors only. In fact, you can also decide to score none of the usual elements (subjects, behaviors and modifiers), but record comments only. You can start your study by registering comments, synchronized with video or in a live situation. Based on these comments you can make a draft coding scheme and use this to start scoring.

MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE, START-STOP OR POINT EVENTS

In The Observer XT you can define your behaviors as 'mutually exclusive' or 'start-stop'. Mutually exclusive means that you define a group of behaviors which exclude each other, for instance the behavioral group 'locomotion' with the behaviors 'standing' and 'walking'. The advantage of having mutually exclusive behaviors is that during coding you do not need to stop behaviors. When you start a new behavior, the previously coded behavior within the group automatically stops.

If you have to code behaviors that do not exclude each other, you may want to use start-stop behaviors (behaviors with a start code and a stop code). Setting up a coding scheme with start-stop behaviors requires little thinking. It is, for instance, not necessary to organize your behaviors in groups. So, if you have rather simple coding work and you have little time to spend, start-stop behaviors may be a solution.

If you are not interested in the duration but only in the frequency of the behaviors that you score, you can define them as point events. Because point

events do not have a duration, they only have a start code, no stop code. Setting up a behavioral study with only point events is quite straightforward. It is, for instance, not necessary to organize point events in groups.

Behaviour Name	
File	f
Edit	e
View	v
Insert	i
Break	b
Page Numbers	n
Date and Time	d
AutoText	a
Field	q
Symbol	s
Comment	c
Reference	r
Web Component	w
Picture	p
Clip Art	i
From File	l
From Scanner or ...	m
New Drawing	t
AutoShapes	u
WordArt	y
Organization Chart	z
Chart	1
Diagram	g
Text Box	x
Object	o
Bookmark	k
Hyperlink	h
Format	2
Tools	3

Figure 1. A coding scheme used in a study to evaluate a computer course in Microsoft Word. The test participants are asked to add a picture to a document which they have written in the previous task.

For instance, when you are setting up an experiment to test the usability of a computer program, you can define the program’s menu and sub-menu items as hierarchical levels and sub-levels. In this way, you get a conveniently arranged coding scheme that, in spite of its possible complexity, is easy to use.

You can assign key codes to items at all levels. This means that, in fact, you make a copy of the program structure in your coding scheme.

CODING FROM A DIVERSITY OF SOURCES

The Observer XT allows you to score from various sources. You can choose to score live, from one or more (up to four) media files simultaneously, from digital tape, a USB camera or a FireWire camera. Live scoring has the advantage that you can see the context of the behavior that you score. Scoring from a media file or a digital tape is practical when your coding scheme is more complex. You can playback the file or tape as often and at the speed you like so you cannot miss anything. You can combine these two methods by first scoring live while a recording is made and coding the video file or tape in detail afterwards. When you use multiple media files (from multiple cameras) you have the opportunity to observe your subjects from different angles.

HIERARCHICAL LEVELS

The coding scheme can be anything, from simple and straightforward to complex and hierarchical. Hierarchical coding is especially useful in usability studies.

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