Thematic analysis: Understanding the approaches, and why, when, and how (not) to use them

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Using thematic analysis in psychology

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Thematic analysis is a poorly demarcated, rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method within psychology. In this paper, we argue that it offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data. We outline what thematic analysis is, locating it in relation to other qualitative analytic methods that search for themes or patterns, and in relation to different epistemological and ontological positions. We then provide clear guidelines to those wanting to start thematic analysis, or conduct it in a more deliberate and rigorous way, and consider potential pitfalls in conducting thematic analysis. Finally, we outline the disadvantages and advantages of thematic analysis. We conclude by advocating thematic analysis as a useful and flexible method for qualitative research in and beyond psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology 2006: 3:77–101

Key words: epistemology; flexibility; patterns; qualitative psychology; thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged method (Boyatzis, 1998; Robson, 2001) within and beyond psychology. In this paper, we aim to fill what we, as researchers and teachers in qualitative psychology, experience as a current gap—the absence of a paper which adequately outlines the theory, application and evaluation of thematic analysis, and one which does so in a way accessible to students and those not particularly familiar with qualitative research. That is, we aim to write a paper that will be useful as both a teaching and research tool in qualitative psychology. Therefore, in this paper we discuss theory and method for thematic analysis, and clarify
Before we begin

- Located thinking
  - Disciplinary
  - Geographically
  - Identity and imagining...
Understanding TA
TA is not a single thing... more like a family

- Our way of clustering...
  - ‘Coding reliability’ versions of TA
  - ‘Codebook’ versions of TA (different names)
  - ‘Reflexive’ versions of TA (our approach)
  - Other versions
- Finlay’s differentiation:
  - Scientifically descriptive
  - artfully interpretative

What *unites* this family?

“At a very basic level, TA is a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate analytic purpose. TA is – more or less – a method for data analysis, rather than a methodology” (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

- Focus on patterns of meaning aka themes *across* a dataset (but what’s a pattern?)
- Processes of coding >> themes
- Reporting ‘themes’
- A *method* not a *methodology*
- (but: method-ish)

Family differences

• Paradigmatic differences... or... what are we (conceptually) doing here?
• What paradigm are we operating within?
  • Small q // postpositivist
  • Big Q // nonpositivist
• How do we conceptualise analysis?
  • Contextual, situated knowledge?
• What do we make of subjectivity?
  • Threat
  • Resource (integral)
Disciplinary training
Scholarly knowledge

Values...

Sociocultural meanings

Reflexive TA – conceptualization of analysis
Family differences

- Research practice differences
  - Conceptual (discovery <> production)
  - Practical (identifying themes <> developing analysis; themes inputs or outputs)
  - Directed/linear or open/exploratory?
Family *differences*

- What is a theme?
  - United by focus/topic?
  - United by shared core concept?
What’s particular about reflexive TA?

- Big Q/artfully interpretative
- Research subjectivity valued > reflexivity essential!
- Coding open and organic (codes as analytic ‘entity’)
- Themes as analytic ‘output’
- Multiple ways to do reflexive TA (theoretical alignments etc)
Take home: Know your TA!
DOING (REFLEXIVE) TA: A SIX PHASE PROCESS

1. Familiarisation
2. Coding
3. Searching for Generating/constructing (initial) themes
4. Theme development and review
5. Refining, defining and naming themes
6. Writing/Stopping

• NB: The process is *not the purpose*, nor a guarantor of quality...
Common problems in published TA

• Misunderstanding/misrepresenting (lack of diversity)

• Mismatches:
  • Conceptual
  • Methodological (practice based)
  • Reporting
  • Quality criteria

**Example: 10 areas of problematic practice in published health psychology**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Broad category</strong></th>
<th><strong>Specific area of problematic practice</strong></th>
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| Conceptual and methodological (mis)understanding | • Undifferentiated TA  
• Mischaracterising TA  
• Inadequate rationalisation for the use of TA  
• Failing to theoretically locate TA or swimming (unknowingly) in the waters of positivism |
| **The use and/or reporting of use of TA** | • Misadventures with reflexivity  
• Inadequate description around analytic approach and process  
• Confusion around a deductive orientation  
• Conceptual incoherence around themes  
• Too many themes? Thinness, fragmentation and missed opportunities.  
• Deploying theoretically incoherent quality standards |
Avoid problems by becoming a *knowing* practitioner...

- Don’t treat thematic analysis as a singular method
- Talk about *which* version of TA you used...
- Make ‘choices’ (thoughtfully, *appropriately*) and *show* you made choices.
- Engage in conceptual and design thinking

What do we mean by conceptual and design thinking?

• **Conceptual** thinking:
  • Research values (awareness)
  • Ontological assumptions
  • Epistemological assumptions

• **Design** thinking:
  • Design coherence /methodological integrity (Levitt et al. 2017)

10 fundamentals of reflexive TA (for conceptual & design coherence)

1. Researcher subjectivity is the primary “tool” for reflexive TA
2. Analysis cannot be accurate or objective, but can be weaker/stronger
3. Good quality coding/themes come from combining depth of engagement and distancing (the value of time!)
4. Coding quality is not dependent on multiple coders; a single coder is typical
5. Themes are analytic outputs; are developed after coding and from codes
6. Themes are patterns of meaning anchored by a shared idea or concept
7. Themes are produced by the researcher through systematic analytic engagement with the dataset
8. Assumptions underpinning analysis need to be acknowledged
   - Why don’t we like “saturation”?
9. Data analysis is conceptualized an art not a science
10. Reflexivity is key to good quality analysis

Five key challenges...

• Fitting method to purpose... (claims and practice)
• Working in a team, and using reflexive TA coherently
• Time (tensions & pressures)
• Reporting (challenges in style, length, and from reviewers, editors)
• Choosing appropriate quality criteria...

Quality and being a reflexive (TA) practitioner...

• You are not a robot
• You are not a mechanic
• What are you then?
• An adventurer...
  • Values-led
  • Reflexive
  • Active
  • Positioned
  = ThoughtFULL (aka, don’t just think of this as ‘rules to follow’)

Thank you!
Any questions?