DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This influential paper by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke provides a comprehensive guide to **thematic analysis** as a foundational method for qualitative research in psychology. The authors argue that despite its widespread use, **thematic analysis** has been poorly demarcated and often unacknowledged. The article offers a clear, step-by-step process for conducting **thematic analysis**, discusses its theoretical flexibility, and distinguishes it from other qualitative methods like grounded theory and discourse analysis.

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FORMATTED CONTENT

Using thematic analysis in psychology

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Abstract

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.

Keywords: thematic analysis, **qualitative psychology**, **patterns**, **epistemology**, **flexibility**

Using thematic analysis in psychology

Thematic analysis is a poorly demarcated and rarely-acknowledged, yet widely-used qualitative analytic method (see Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001) within and beyond psychology. In this paper, we aim to fill what we, as researchers and teachers in

qualitative psychology, have experienced 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 which 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 the similarities and differences between different approaches that share features in common with a thematic approach.

Qualitative approaches are incredibly diverse, complex and nuanced (Holloway & Todres, 2003), and **thematic analysis** should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis. It is the first qualitative method of analysis that researchers should learn, as it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis. Indeed, Holloway and Todres (2003: 347) identify “thematizing meanings" as one of a few shared generic skills across qualitative analysis. For this reason, Boyatzis (1998) characterises it not as a specific method but as a tool to use across different methods. Similarly, Ryan and Bernard (2000) locate thematic coding as a process performed within ‘major' analytic traditions (such as **grounded theory**), rather than a specific approach in its own right. We argue **thematic analysis** should be considered a method in its own right.

One of the benefits of **thematic analysis** is its flexibility. Qualitative analytic methods can be roughly divided into two camps. Within the first, there are those tied to, or stemming from, a particular theoretical or epistemological position. For some of these - such as **conversation analysis ([CA]** e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) and **interpretative phenomenological analysis ([IPA]** e.g., Smith & Osborn, 2003) - there is (as yet) relatively limited variability in how the method is applied, within that framework. In essence, one recipe guides analysis. For others of these - such as **grounded theory** (e.g., Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), **discourse analysis ([DA]** e.g., Burman & Parker, 1993; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2003) or **narrative analysis** (e.g., Murray, 2003; Riessman, 1993) - there are different manifestations of the method, from within the broad theoretical framework. Second, there are methods that are essentially independent of theory and epistemology, and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. Although often (implicitly) framed as a realist/experiential method (e.g., Aronson, 1994; Roulston, 2001), **thematic analysis** is actually firmly in the second camp, and is compatible with both **essentialist** and **constructionist** paradigms within psychology (we discuss this later). Through its theoretical freedom, **thematic analysis** provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data.

Given the advantages of the flexibility of **thematic analysis**, it is important that we are clear that we are not trying to limit this flexibility. However, an absence of clear and concise guidelines around **thematic analysis** means that the 'anything goes' critique of qualitative research (Antaki, Billig, Edwards, & Potter, 2002) may well apply in some instances. With this paper, we hope to strike a balance between demarcating **thematic analysis** clearly - i.e., explaining what it is, and how you do it and ensuring flexibility in relation to how it is used, so that it does not become limited and constrained, and lose

one of its key advantages. Indeed, a clear demarcation of this method will be useful to ensure that those who use **thematic analysis** can make active choices about the particular form of analysis they are engaged in. Therefore, this paper seeks to celebrate the flexibility of the method, and provide a vocabulary and 'recipe' for people to start doing **thematic analysis** in a way that is theoretically and methodologically sound. As we will show, what is important is that as well as applying a method to data, researchers make their (epistemological and other) assumptions explicit (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Qualitative psychologists need to be clear about what they are doing and why, and include the often-omitted 'how' they did their analysis in their reports (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

In this paper we outline: what **thematic analysis** is; a 6-phase guide to doing **thematic analysis**; potential pitfalls to avoid when doing **thematic analysis**; what makes good **thematic analysis**; and advantages and disadvantages of **thematic analysis**. Throughout, we provide examples from the research literature, and our own research. By providing examples we show the types of research questions and topics that **thematic analysis** can be used to study.

Before we begin, we need to define a few of the terms used throughout the paper. **Data corpus** refers to all data collected for a particular research project, while **data set** refers to all the data from the corpus that is being used for a particular analysis. **Data item** is used to refer to each individual piece of data collected, which together make up the data set or corpus. Finally, **data extract** refers to an individual coded chunk of data, which has been identified within, and extracted from, a data item.

What is thematic analysis?

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (**themes**) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic analysis is widely used, but there is no clear agreement about what **thematic analysis** is and how you go about doing it. It can be seen as a very poorly ‘branded' method, in that it does not appear to exist as a 'named' analysis in the same way that other methods do. In this sense, it is often not explicitly claimed as the method of analysis, when, in actuality, we argue that a lot of analysis is essentially thematic - but is either claimed as something else (such as **discourse analysis**, or even **content analysis**) or not identified as any particular method at all. If we do not know how people went about analysing their data, or what assumptions informed their analysis, it is difficult to evaluate their research.

Relatedly, insufficient detail is often given to reporting the process and detail of analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). It is not uncommon to read of themes 'emerging' from the data. An account of themes 'emerging' or being 'discovered' is a passive account of the process of analysis, and it denies the active role the researcher always plays in

identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). The language of ‘themes emerging’:

> Can be misinterpreted to mean that themes 'reside' in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will 'emerge' like Venus on the half shell. If themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them. (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997: 205-6)

Thematic analysis differs from other analytic methods that seek to describe patterns across qualitative data - such as 'thematic' **discourse analysis**, thematic decomposition analysis, **IPA** and **grounded theory**. Both **IPA** and **grounded theory** seek patterns in the data, but are theoretically bounded. **IPA** is wed to a phenomenological epistemology, which gives experience primacy (Holloway & Todres, 2003), and is about understanding people's everyday experience of reality, in great detail. The goal of a **grounded theory** analysis is to generate a plausible - and useful - theory of the phenomena that is grounded in the data (McLeod, 2001). We argue, therefore, that a 'named and claimed' **thematic analysis** means researchers need not subscribe to the implicit theoretical commitments of **grounded theory** if they do not wish to produce a fully worked-up grounded-theory analysis.

In contrast to **IPA** or **grounded theory**, **thematic analysis** is not wed to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and so it can be used within different theoretical frameworks (although not all), and can be used to do different things within them. **Thematic analysis** can be an **essentialist** or **realist** method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or it can be a **constructionist** method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. It can also be a '**contextualist**' method, sitting between the two poles of **essentialism** and **constructionism**, and characterised by theories such as **critical realism**.

A number of decisions

Thematic analysis involves a number of choices which are often not made explicit, but which need explicitly to be considered and discussed.

What counts as a theme? A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. An important question to address in terms of coding is what counts as a pattern/theme, or what 'size' does a theme need to be? This is a question of prevalence. As this is qualitative analysis, there is no hard-and-fast answer. The 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures - but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question.

A rich description of the data set, or a detailed account of one particular aspect. It is important to determine the type of analysis you want to do. You might wish to provide

a rich thematic description of your entire data set, so that the reader gets a sense of the predominant or important themes. An alternative use of **thematic analysis** is to provide a more detailed and nuanced account of one particular theme, or group of themes, within the data.

Inductive vs theoretical thematic analysis. Themes or patterns within data can be identified in one of two primary ways in **thematic analysis**: in an **inductive** or 'bottom up' way, or in a **theoretical** or **deductive** or 'top down' way. An **inductive** approach means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves. In contrast, a '**theoretical**' **thematic analysis** would tend to be driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven.

Semantic or latent themes. Another decision revolves around the 'level' at which themes are to be identified: at a **semantic** or explicit level, or at a **latent** or interpretative level (Boyatzis, 1998). With a **semantic** approach, the themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data. In contrast, a **thematic analysis** at the **latent** level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations - and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.

Epistemology: essentialist/realist vs constructionist thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can be conducted within both **realist/essentialist** and **constructionist** paradigms. The research epistemology guides what you can say about your data, and informs how you theorise meaning. With an **essentialist/realist** approach, you can theorise motivations, experience, and meaning in a straight-forward way. In contrast, from a **constructionist** perspective, meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced, rather than inhering within individuals.

Doing thematic analysis: a step-by-step guide

Analysis involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing. Writing is an integral part of analysis, not something that takes place at the end. We provide an outline to guide you through the six phases of analysis.

Phase 1: familiarising yourself with your data

It is vital that you immerse yourself in the data to the extent that you are familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. Immersion usually involves 'repeated reading' of the data, and reading the data in an active way - searching for meanings, patterns and so on. During this phase, it is a good idea to start taking notes or marking ideas for coding.

Phase 2: generating initial codes

This phase involves the production of initial codes from the data. Codes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analyst. Work systematically through the entire data set, giving full and equal attention to each data item, and identify interesting aspects in the data items that may form the basis of repeated patterns (themes) across the data set.

Phase 3: searching for themes

This phase involves sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes. You are starting to analyse your codes, and consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme. It may be helpful at this phase to use visual representations like tables or mind-maps.

Phase 4: reviewing themes

This phase involves the refinement of those themes. It will become evident that some candidate themes are not really themes, while others might collapse into each other. Other themes might need to be broken down into separate themes. This phase involves two levels of reviewing: at the level of the coded data extracts and in relation to the entire data set.

Phase 5: defining and naming themes

At this point, you then define and further refine the themes that you will present for your analysis, and analyse the data within them. By 'define and refine' we mean identifying the ‘essence' of what each theme is about, and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures. For each individual theme, you need to conduct and write a detailed analysis.

Phase 6: producing the report

This phase involves the final analysis and write-up of the report. The task is to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis. Your write-up must provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data, using data extracts to illustrate and support an analysis that goes beyond mere description to make an argument in relation to your research question.

Potential pitfalls to avoid when doing thematic analysis

There are a number of things which can result in a poor analysis:

1. A failure to actually analyse the data at all. **Thematic analysis** is not just a collection of extracts strung together with little or no analytic narrative.
2. The using of the data collection questions (such as from an interview schedule) as the 'themes' that are reported.
3. A weak or unconvincing analysis, where the themes do not appear to work, where there is too much overlap between themes, or where the themes are not internally coherent and consistent.
4. A mismatch between the data and the analytic claims that are made about it. The claims cannot be supported by the data.
5. A mismatch between theory and analytic claims, or between the research questions and the form of **thematic analysis** used.

What makes good thematic analysis?

Qualitative research provides methods of analysis that should be applied rigorously to the data. Criteria for conducting good qualitative research do exist. As **thematic analysis** is a flexible method, you also need to be clear and explicit about what you are doing, and what you say you are doing needs to match up with what you actually do.

> Rigour lies in devising a systematic method whose assumptions are congruent with the way one conceptualises the subject matter. (Reicher & Taylor, 2005: 549)

So what does thematic analysis offer psychologists?

Thematic analysis is not a complex method. Its advantages are many. However, it is not without some disadvantages. Many of the disadvantages depend more on poorly conducted analyses or inappropriate research question, than on the method itself. The flexibility of the method can be a disadvantage in that it makes developing specific guidelines for higher-phase analysis difficult. Another issue is that a **thematic analysis** has limited interpretative power beyond mere description if it is not used within an existing theoretical framework that anchors the analytic claims that are made.

Finally, it is worth noting that **thematic analysis** currently has no particular kudos as an analytic method - this, we argue, stems from the very fact that it is poorly demarcated and claimed, yet widely used. We hope this paper will change this view, as, as we have argued, a rigorous thematic approach can produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions. What is important is choosing a method that is appropriate to your research question, rather than falling victim to '**methodolatry**', where you are committed to method rather than topic/content or research questions (Holloway & Todres, 2003).