

# THEMATIC ANALYSIS

## A PRACTICAL GUIDE

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Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2021934969**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-5323-9

ISBN 978-1-4739-5324-6 (pbk)

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# 4

# FINDING, LOSING, THEN FINDING YOUR WAY AGAIN

## DEVELOPING YOUR THEMES

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Aha, you might think, we're finally about to get to the good stuff – the *real* analysis! This is, indeed, the point at which you shift the scale of your focus, back out from the micro detailed scope of the coding process, towards exploring, at a more macro scale, for connections and alliances that might develop into broader patterns of meaning. Ultimately, your whole dataset will be your focus. We find it useful to conceptualise TA as a process in which your closeness to the dataset needs to shift and change, moving very close in, focusing on the micro, and moving further out, shifting to a wider lens. This isn't a unidirectional movement, but shifts in and out across the analytic phases.

To come back to our adventure analogy. Imagine you'd planned something big, bold and somewhat daunting as a highlight of your travels – what that might be will vary depending on your own circumstances. Starting theme development is like being at the point it's about to begin: what comes ahead is unknown, super exciting, and maybe slightly terrifying. The quality and comprehensiveness of your preparation thus far will be important for how well these next phases go. The analytic work you've already done – the data preparation, the familiarisation, the coding, the reflexive journaling – is akin to adventure preparation, such as ensuring you've got strong hiking boots that are fully worn in (if your adventure involves hiking), or robust new tyres on your all-terrain mobility scooter (if your plan involves an off-road scooter expedition). Unfortunately, there is no simple cause and effect, however – excellent coding doesn't automatically lead to an easy process of theme development; unexpected twists and turns are part of the process. You might hit really bad weather that turns your chosen route into a bog that your scooter cannot navigate. You might sprain an ankle and need to pause progress on your hike for some days to let it heal. Disaster? Not necessarily, if you're prepared for things to not go completely smoothly. The unexpected is part of adventuring, as it is part of reflexive TA. Using a hiking analogy, that means taking enough supplies that a sprained ankle doesn't mean you run out of food.

What is one of the most helpful tools for making your TA adventure as good as it can be? Allowing yourself enough time! The adventure *will* take longer than you anticipate. It'll probably take at least *twice* as long as you expect. Given all that you and others (e.g. any par-

**PRACTICE POINT** Aim to give yourself twice as much time for theme development as you expect you might need.

participants) have invested to get here, you need to make sure you have time to do the experience justice. Such advice isn't to put you off – but to allow you to do justice to the potential offered by the method, and by your data.

For reflexive TA, you need to be psychologically ready for a rich, unexpected, sometimes frustrating, but ultimately achievable adventure. So, let the adventure continue!

## UNDERSTANDING THE KEY CONCEPT: WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED A THEME?

Your analytic focus now shifts from codes to themes. But what is a theme? Simple, we thought, when first writing about TA: a theme captures the *patterning* of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Except it's not quite so simple. Even if you just look across those who

write about and use TA, there are some quite *different* conceptualisations of themes in TA (see Chapter Eight). For reflexive TA, a theme has to capture a wide range of data that are united by, and evidence, a *shared* idea, sometimes quite obviously, and sometimes far less obviously, and sometimes in quite different ways. We have variously called these 'shared meaning', 'conceptual pattern' or 'fully developed' themes; often we have simply called them *themes*, which we will do in this book. Before you get into theme generation and development, the distinction between themes and another conceptualisation of 'themes' – which we call topic summaries – is *fundamental* to understand.

### In reflexive TA, a topic summary is not a theme

A **topic summary** is a summary of everything the participants said about a particular **topic**, presented as a theme. One of the main problems with topic summaries for us, and for reflexive TA, is that they unite around a *topic*, rather than a shared meaning or idea. Topic summary 'themes' from the childfree dataset would be something like *reasons for being childfree* or *perceptions of people who choose not to have children*. The topic summary conceptualisation of a theme is prevalent in practice – especially in some other forms of TA. But they are also presented as themes by people who say they're doing *reflexive* TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). For this reason, we have given an example of what a topic summary *might* look like, to highlight *what not to do* in reflexive TA (see Box 4.6). As topic summaries capture the *range* of responses around a particular issue, they potentially contain quite different and even contradictory data. A topic summary around *reasons for being childfree* might include environmental, psychological, emotional, financial, and many other different reasons (see Box 4.6). What can you conclude from such a 'theme'? Simply that there are varied reasons people have for choosing not to have children, and what some of these are. That might be useful to know, but it's not the analysis that reflexive TA *should* result in!

**ALERT** A topic summary – whereby you report all the different responses or meanings around a topic in the dataset – would not count as a theme for reflexive TA.

### In reflexive TA, a theme captures shared meaning, united by a central organising concept

In reflexive TA, with themes defined by meaning-unity and conceptual coherence, each theme has its own distinct **central organising concept** (Braun, Clarke, & Rance, 2014). Your analytic task is to explore the expression of shared or similar ideas or meanings, across different contexts. Sometimes this united-pattern might be evidenced at a quite semantic or concrete

**ALERT** A theme in reflexive TA is a pattern of shared meaning organised around a central concept.

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<sup>1</sup>The theme *compensatory kids* is an example of a code label being reworked as a theme name. In this case, that code label captured the core idea – central organising concept – of the developed theme, which included more codes than just *compensatory kids*.

**KEY CONCEPT** A central organising concept is the idea or meaning that unites a theme.

meaning, and are united around an idea that isn't necessarily obviously evident in the data. We explain both of these themes further in this chapter, and in Chapters Five and Seven.

As the level at which you're exploring shared meaning can vary dramatically, some themes might contain data extracts that *on the surface* appear quite dissimilar. And indeed,

a contradiction or dichotomisation *might* form the basis for a theme itself, if the theme focuses *on* that dichotomisation; if that contradiction *is* the pattern (see 'But what about contradiction' and Box 4.7 later in this chapter).

Understanding that basic definition and distinction, it's time to move on to the theme development phases. In these phases, you start to build alliances and networks between codes, to explore shared-meaning patterns. In doing so, keep in mind your research question. As a reminder, for our worked example, our research question is – broadly – *what is the nature of contemporary meaning-making around voluntarily not having children?* (as discussed in the section 'What's my purpose here? Settling on a research question' in Chapter Two).

## GENERATING INITIAL THEMES<sup>2</sup> (PHASE THREE)

We've often suggested the idea of a sculptor is a useful analogy for the process of TA – where the sculptor uses their creative thinking and craft skills, and engages with the potential of the 'raw' materials (data), making choices and working to shape a final product. A creative-process analogy usefully evokes the various constraints and possibilities in the analytic process:

- The skills the person has, in working with their material(s);
- The personal positioning, knowledge, and traditions they bring to the process;
- The limits the initial materials place on the possibility for the final product – not *everything* is possible;
- That a *range* of outcomes are, however, possible. There is no single correct end-point, no destination. You might end up somewhere quite different from where you started; and
- That the quality of the end-product can vary, quite considerably.

<sup>2</sup>In our original TA paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we called Phase three *searching for themes*. It's become clear that the word 'searching' – which we imagined as an active engaged process – risks evoking theme development as akin to fishing, where you catch something that's there already (and, in the case of fishing, unlucky enough not to escape), or to archaeology, where you 'uncover' some hidden and pre-existing treasure. Where 'searching' risks suggesting that theme development is a fairly passive, extractive process (Braun & Clarke, 2019a), generating does not.

In terms of thinking about exploring, developing, reviewing and refining themes (this phase, and the next two), we like the sense of ‘finding, losing, and finding your way again’ that an *adventure* evokes. To come back to our earlier example of an off-road scooting adventure: imagine you’re trying to reach a mountain pass, the way is unmarked, and there are different potential routes through, or ways to tackle, the task. No matter where you start, getting to the top involves a whole series of choices, some of which will get you there, but many of which will lead you in impassable directions, or on long side-tracks. There’s no one *right* route to the end; getting there inevitably has some hiccups, and backtracking, as well as some fairly straightforward passages. This scenario evokes not just the messiness, the uncertainty and tentativeness of analysis, but also the freedom, creativity, playfulness (and indeed *excitement*) of analysis. Analysis is a constrained-but-open process in reflexive TA. So when starting theme development, try to hold onto the *possibility* contained in the question *where will this journey take me?* rather than the more pragmatic and destination-orientated *how do I get to my endpoint?*

We call this phase *generating initial themes* to emphasise that it’s generative and part of the theme development *process*, but also that you’re still early on. In this phase, your analysis starts to take a form, as you shift analytic attention from smaller meaning units – codes – to larger meaning patterns – themes. As the form of your analysis will likely change quite a lot as you progress further, it pays not to get too attached to these early themes.

**PRACTICE POINT** In theme generation and development, focus on the process, the journey, not the destination.

**PRACTICE POINT** Don’t get too attached to early-developed themes.

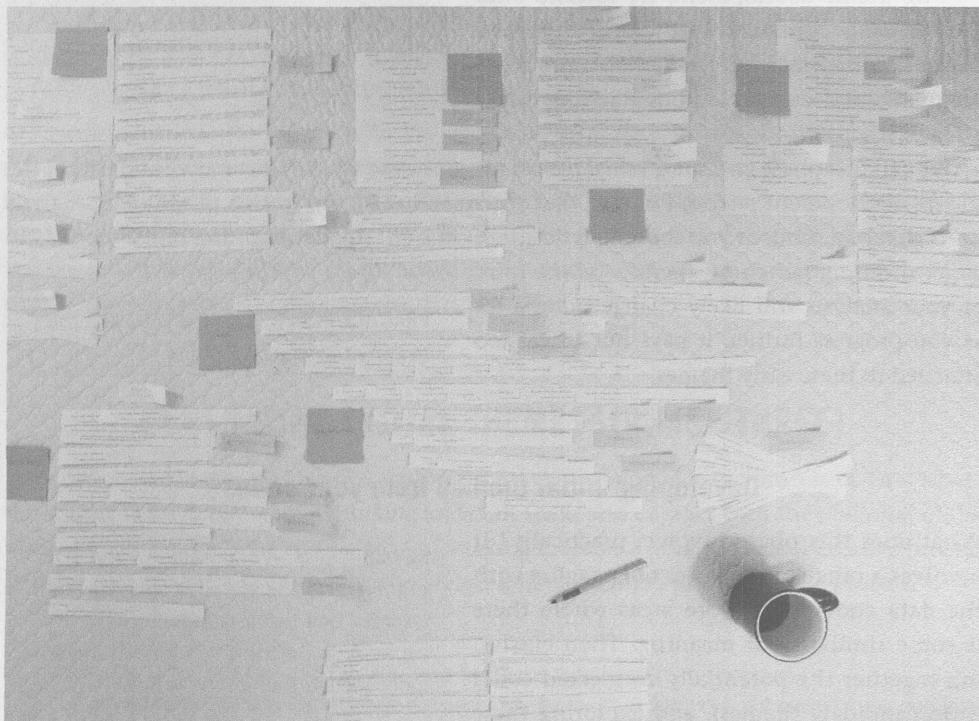
## Developing initial themes from your codes

What does this phase involve, practically? It involves a range of processes of engaging with the data codes to explore areas where there is some similarity of meaning. Then clustering together the potentially connected codes (into candidate themes), and exploring these initial meaning patterns. This exploration considers each cluster: on its own terms; in relation to the research question; and as part of the wider analysis. Key to remember at this stage is that you are exploring clustered patterning *across* your dataset – not just within a *single* data item. So even if you have one data item or participant who expresses an idea repeatedly, if it’s not evident in *any other* data item, it probably isn’t the basis for a *theme* in TA.<sup>3</sup> That’s not to say it’s not interesting, but the point here is to discuss patterned meaning.

**KEY CONCEPT** A candidate theme is an initial clustering of codes and a potential theme – one that requires further exploration before it can be considered a more settled theme.

<sup>3</sup>Reflexive TA calls for *in situ* assessments about the ‘themeyness’ of a potential pattern, and sometimes there *might* be patterned meaning within only one or two data items that, in the context of the dataset, the research question, and the wider context of the research, warrants focus and possibly becomes a theme.

The initial way to explore patterned meaning is to consider all the codes (collated at the end of Phase two, see Table 4.1), and explore whether there are any broad ideas that a number of different codes could be clustered around. For an example of this early clustering, see Figure 4.1. Lisa Trainor, a doctoral student in sport and exercise psychology at the University of British Columbia, posted this on Twitter. We loved it so much as an illustration of her process, we asked if we could share it in the book.<sup>4</sup> In starting to develop candidate themes, remember that themes capture multiple facets of an idea or concept – whereas codes capture a single facet or idea. These multiple facets all need to contribute to the same core idea or central organising concept. This means you're trying to cluster codes into broader patterns that are coherent, and meaningfully tell you something important and relevant in relation to your research question.



**Figure 4.1** Coding and initial theme development with a cup of coffee (photo courtesy Lisa Trainor)

Depending how narrowly or broadly you have coded, the number of codes you combine into potential themes will likely vary. If your coding is more fine-grained, you'll usually be working with more already-identified variation as you develop your themes. But don't conflate overly-fine-grained coding with more conceptual depth; such coding can

<sup>4</sup>This image of coding has since been published in a reflexive methodology paper, with many more useful images of Lisa's reflexive TA process (Trainor & Bundon, 2020).

remain superficial. Sometimes, you may have coded something complex at a quite broad level, and this often happens if an idea is complex, and you're still working out what you want to do with it. It is often the case that trying to *refine* your coding at that point is futile, because the meaning you're interested in becomes *more* apparent as the analytic phases progress. In our experience, codes that we get a bit stuck on often relate to a conceptual idea or something more latent – such as the *good/bad parents* code in the childfree dataset (see Table 4.1; an extended version of this table is on the companion website).

In theme generation and development, you may occasionally decide that one of these broader and nuanced codes seems like it might *actually* be a theme. There is a core idea, but also variation. In such instances, it's perfectly reasonable to 'promote' a rich or complex code to a candidate theme.<sup>5</sup> This reinforces the point we made in our 'Scene setting' opening chapter: that with reflexive TA, we aim to provide practical guidelines for robustly doing what really is a conceptual *process*. Understanding what the process is about provides the foundation for a conceptually coherent practice, rather than rigid rule-following. Repeat after us: these phases are not rules!

As we worked with the codes from our childfree dataset, we started to explore a number of different clusters. We tried to generate ones that might be relevant to our analysis of *the nature of contemporary meaning-making around voluntarily not having children*. We'll illustrate this with four – quite different – code clusters/candidate themes:

1. A cluster around choice was an obvious one – so many codes and extracts either explicitly referenced choice or evoked the concept of choice in some way. In the codes and coded data in Table 4.1, choice is expressed in the code *each to their own*. Similarly, data related to the *absence* of choice seems relevant to understanding choice around parenting and non-parenting, so the code *the 'real' victims are those who can't have kids* was also included in this clustering, alongside other codes connected to choice.
2. We started to feel that there were some interesting meanings clustering around the notion that people are missing out in some way, if they aren't a parent. For this, we started to cluster together a wide range of codes that spoke to quite different elements of missing out. This included the *fur babies* code, as well as *other kids in my life* (see Table 4.1) – such codes seem to evoke a sense of compensations for an absence created by not being a parent. Another code that appeared to relate here was the articulation of *kids as the ultimate* (also in Table 4.1). Such data seemed, to us, to speak to an idea that *nothing* can truly compensate for what people miss, if they don't have children.
3. We were interested in a number of ideas that related to some kind of differentiation between good and bad parents. The code *bad parents* (Table 4.1) was included here, as was the code *good parents*. And, naturally, the code discussed in Chapter Three, *good/bad parents* (see Table 3.3).
4. We felt that there seemed to be a potential pattern around social responsibility – or possibly social *and* environmental responsibility – and having children, or not having children. We clustered a number of different codes together (e.g. *environmental benefit/overpopulation* in Table 4.1) to explore a theme around this aspect of the dataset.

**ALERT** Once you have a sound understanding of the conceptual foundations of the process of reflexive TA, you will have more confidence to bend or break what might feel like 'rules' for good practice.

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<sup>5</sup>The promotion of codes to a theme happens in other analytic processes too, such as grounded theory and IPA (Charmaz, 2014; J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

**Table 4.1** A selection of code labels and collated data extracts

Code	Example data extracts
<i>Each to their own</i>	<p><i>META:</i> People should just respect other's choices, we all choose our own paths.</p> <p><i>FIMA:</i> Why do people think it's selfish not having children? It's no one else's business!!</p> <p><i>SARO:</i> Some people are child orientated, others aren't. Its as simple as that</p> <p><i>JOWI:</i> My husband and I chose not to have children and have never regretted this decision. The majority of our friends have no children and we all have brilliant fulfilled lives. It is a personal choice, respect it!</p> <p><i>GLSH:</i> Isn't it funny how most of the judgemental comments seem to be coming from people with kids. I cannot understand why we cannot all respect each others decisions, each to their own I say.</p> <p><i>ALBR:</i> Good on ya if you have kids and good on ya if you don't!</p> <p><i>ANMA:</i> Not my uterus, not my business!</p>
<i>The 'real' victims are those who can't have kids</i>	<p><i>MIBE:</i> I feel for those men and women who really want children but can't have them.</p> <p><i>JOBR:</i> Um [SUST] some of us would love to have the choice</p> <p><i>BRDU:</i> There are folks who would love to have children but nature is against them. Having science to intervene can be ok if u can afford it but for others just take things in their stride and enjoy the company of nieces and nephews which means a lot. I am ok with this and we just have each other me and my guy.</p> <p><i>GRKO:</i> lets not forget those who would die to have kids of their own, but for one reason or another cant. . .</p> <p><i>WAFL:</i> Some couples can't have kids; no choice involved, it's just fate...</p> <p><i>REMA:</i> Each to there own really, and sometimes you don't have a choice.</p>
<i>Fur babies</i>	<p><i>DEBA:</i> My partner and I have been together 32 years - no children and we both love it! We are not shrivelled up selfish misfits! we have fur babies who we love to bits but who don't limit our enjoyment of the things we love doing.</p> <p><i>RADE:</i> ...I have a kitten called Fanta and she is my furbaby and she adores my partner to pieces also. When he comes over to see me she will run to him and purr.</p> <p><i>MAWA:</i> Didn't like them when i was one. Most people.. i know with them wish they didn't. Fur babies better... will never tell you they hate you then expect you to hand over money.</p> <p><i>MSND:</i> They Probably are dog or cat owners thinking they are parents to them both because that's their children Lols</p>

Code	Example data extracts
<i>Other kids in my life</i>	<p><i>CHCA:</i> Why do people assume that choosing to be childfree automatically means that you won't have children in your life? My partner and I have decided not to have kids for a range of personal, environmental and social reasons. But I am a Godmother, an aunt, an older cousin, and a friend to many children.</p>
	<p><i>ANWH:</i> My partner and I decided long ago we didn't want kids. I have nieces I love to bits but I still don't want my own kids. I've seen people have kids and regret it and others who have them and don't regret it so I say each to their own.</p>
	<p><i>RADE:</i> ... I love children and I volunteer at the YMCA two mornings a week. I also have two wonderful nephews and a niece as well and adoption is out of the question ...</p>
	<p><i>BEJO:</i> At 42 we don't have kids and wouldn't change it. Love my nephews but love I can give them back.</p>
	<p><i>KAHA:</i> My husband and I don't have kids and don't want kids. We're happy being the aunty and uncle who buys the cool gifts.</p>
<i>Kids as the ultimate</i>	<p><i>CALO:</i> By choosing not to have children, you're depriving yourself of the greatest love of all.</p>
	<p><i>TRBA:</i> I think it's absolutely a personal choice . If you choose to have kids that's great. It's the hardest and most wonderful thing I've ever done .</p>
	<p><i>JAFO:</i> I didn't want kids. Didn't like babies. No interest at all. Ended up with 3 gorgeous sons. 2 not exactly planned... All within 4 1/2 years. Am incredibly grateful. Feel for people that don't get to experience that sort of love.</p>
	<p><i>JOAS:</i> I never wanted kids... Then my first was born.. He was so perfect , such a miracle that I made a human wow! I thought I knew love but he showed me what it really felt to love someone with all the love I had. Now I have three and as stressful as it can be it's amazing. I am never lonely , I'm loved everyday, I have a purpose in life. Sure it would be great to be rich but love is worth more than any material object on earth. I didn't want kids but I'm glad I accidentally got pregnant. It's one if those things you don't know what you were missing until you have it :-)</p>
	<p><i>RAIS:</i> As a lot of people said , it's everyone's choice . We have one 4 year old and that's the best gift we ever had. She comes before anyone. We put our life on hold to take care of her needs and absolutely love it. That's what's our parents did for us and theirs for them. We believe in unconditional love and sacrifices and that creates very strong family bond. As for some said kids are waste of money, that saddens me. To my wife and I, the love we get from our daughter is priceless. All the money we make we spend a whole lot of it on our daughter, our parents and family members who have hard lives. Maybe that's why God gives us more and blesses us with happiness.</p>

(Continued)

**Table 4.1** (Continued)

Code	Example data extracts
<i>Bad parents</i>	<p><i>SHHO:</i> Itz a choice, y ave kidz if u cnt aford them. Too many hungry children goin to skool without food.</p> <p><i>MIBE:</i> There are so many amazing parents out there. Sadly there are also some appalling parents out there. My only judgement on the world is that I wish more men and women would give themselves a warrant of fitness before becoming a parent. It's such a huge responsibility, and it's for a very long time.</p> <p><i>JAOB:</i> I love my children, but they have always been loved and cared for, fed, clothed and taught well. This is not always the case</p> <p><i>BRMA:</i> better not to have kids than have trophy kids and dump them in childcare from 7am to 6pm every day and then say I'm too busy to come to special events. Poor sprogs, selfish parents</p> <p><i>NAMI:</i> It's selfish to spread your legs and expect everyone else to pay for your kids through welfare!!! Why should I pay for someone else's kids when I choose not to have any of my own. I'm tired of being taxed and seeing it go to someone who doesn't deserve it ...</p>
<i>Environmental benefit/ overpopulation</i>	<p>* <i>ELBR:</i> I think that there is beauty in children, their innocence, the love of life, and the knowledge that the children are the future of the world. But we also are in a world where we face overpopulation in many countries. It takes a balance of people having children, and people choosing not to have kids to ensure the survival of our planet.</p> <p><i>RITA:</i> 5.3 billion humans on this planet putting it under so much pressure.....so really...who's being selfish</p> <p><i>SIMA:</i> The world has far too many people! Good on those who don't want kids they should be applauded.</p> <p><i>TESI:</i> This planet is far to over populated ADOPT if you feel the need</p>

We really want to emphasise the provisionality here. You're effectively *trying things out*, to ascertain how they feel – kind of like an initial scouting of different routes up to that mountain pass. Our four clusterings could have been made in different ways, even with the same research question. For instance, with our fourth clustering, a narrower cluster might have focused *just* around the environment.

This is still early in the initial theme development process, but it is important to consider the value of your developing analysis at this point in Phase three. Your aim here is to generate a number of working, provisional themes, and consider the story they allow you to tell about your dataset, to address your research question. Good themes are distinctive and, to some extent, stand-alone. This means that, in theme generation, each theme needs to be assessed on its own merit. We discuss this in more depth in the next phase of theme development and review, but note here some useful theme-evaluation questions:

- Does this provisional theme capture something meaningful?
- Is it coherent, with a central idea that meshes the data and codes together?
- Does it have clear boundaries?

As, ultimately, your themes need to work together as a whole to tell a coherent story, you also need to begin to assess themes in relation to the *overall* story the analysis tells.

## Using visual mapping for theme generation, development and review

We find using a visual mapping technique – drawing **thematic maps**, either by hand or electronically – very useful, both as a general analytic practice and in three specific ways: (1) for starting to think about provisional themes in their own right; (2) for exploring how provisional themes might relate to each other; and (3) for starting to consider the overall story of your analysis.

The map in Figure 4.2 presents a way of charting patterned meanings to help identify potential themes and **subthemes**, with interconnections between different recurrent features of the data. You'll note it's slightly *evolved* from the initial four clusterings we just described. In our initial making sense of the data, we kept coming back to a range of quite different aspects. We wanted to explore how all these would work together, or not, in telling a story about the data. In this thematic map, we have three 'core' ideas or provisional themes, captured within central circles: (1) choice rulz ok; (2) you're missing out without kids; and (3) kids and socially responsible actions. Alongside these, two closely connected potential themes were: (1) kids bring personal gains and (2) gains in/for society.<sup>6</sup> You'll notice there's a lot going on – we reproduced Ginny's hand-drawn version to emphasise that messiness is okay!<sup>7</sup> That's pretty much what this phase is about, starting to make sense of a range of different ways of clustering the data.

You should notice in Figure 4.2, that there are what appear to be smaller or more specific patterns of meaning, generally contained within straight-sided shapes (mostly rectangles). These are possible subthemes. In navigating this messiness, mapping provides a tool to start exploring possible *layers* within your analysis. In TA, the primary focus is the theme, and your main task is identifying patterning at the theme level, and telling a rich, interpretative, contextualised story

**KEY CONCEPT** Thematic maps capture visual or figurative representation of potential themes, and relationships between themes.

**KEY CONCEPT** Subthemes share a key concept with the theme of which they are a part.

<sup>6</sup>Just as provisional are the names we've used in Figure 4.2 for these early candidate themes. Theme names are refined in Phase five.

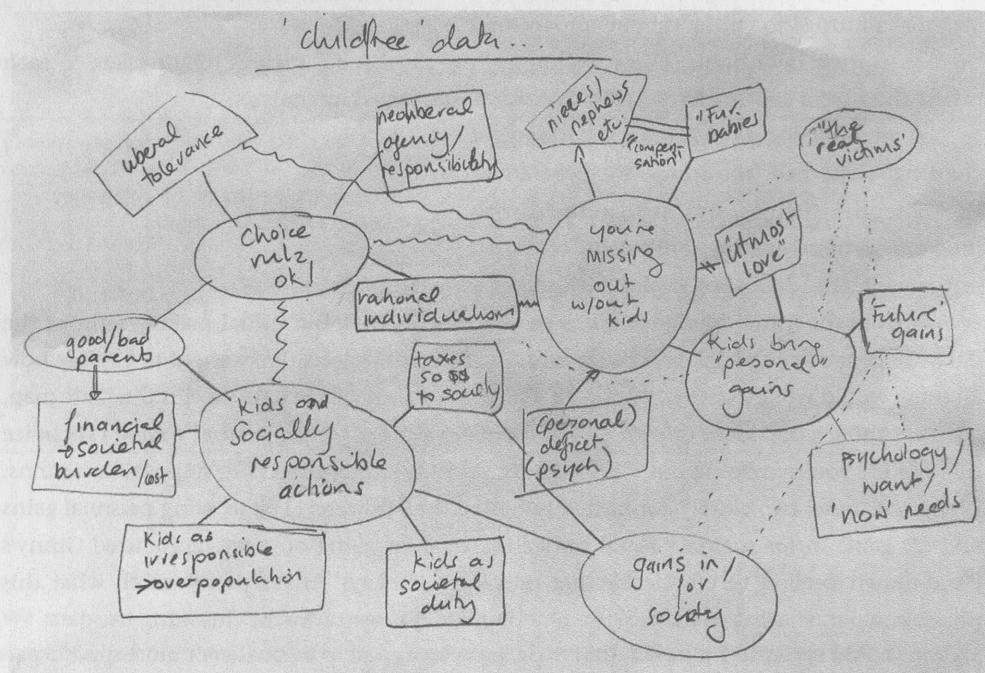
<sup>7</sup>For a *tidier* hand-drawn example of a thematic map, see Trainor and Bundon (2020).

**ALERT** Don't slice your analysis too finely: more layers of theme level do not usually make a better analysis; indeed, they often mean a thinner, poorer and underdeveloped one.

**ALERT** Subthemes should be used judiciously rather than as a matter of course in TA.

TA, we recommend never more than three layers in total, organised *around* the themes; these are described in Box 4.1.

about these patterns. Your aim is not to develop a highly particularised, multi-layered model demarcating meaning, sub-meaning, sub-sub-meaning, and so forth. That said, some judicious use of subthemes might sometimes help to frame and tell your story in the most meaningful way. They might, for instance, help highlight salient elements of a theme – salience being determined in relation to the topic and wider analytic context, rather than simple frequency. For reflexive



**Figure 4.2** An initial mapping of patterns across childfree dataset

Thematic maps are working documents to help *you* figure out patterns of meaning, and possible connections, interconnections, and disconnections. The different lines in Figure 4.2 – wavy, dotted, straight single or occasionally double, straight with arrows, even straight with a two-intersecting-lines mark, akin to a does *not* equal sign – are intended to convey this alive and in-process aspect. The different types of lines are our way of signalling, *to ourselves*, that we feel there are different types of relationships between candidate themes and subthemes.

At this stage, it's all tentative, and we don't have a full sense of what's going on, and whether it matters (or, even, whether much of this will make it into our final analysis). But it's useful to have a visual reminder for ourselves to *think about* relationships, and the different forms of relationship we've started to conceptualise. In the early stages of mapping, you might use few if any lines. There are no rules here. Remember, mapping is a tool for *you* to use to develop your analytic understanding, and so you should do it in the ways that best suit you.

The mapping in Figure 4.2 might give you the impression that we had lots of ideas about potential themes (and subthemes) and indeed what a possible (final) analysis *might* look like. If you're thinking we had started to anticipate and shape the overall final analysis at this point in the process, stop right there! Everything was still *up for grabs* at that point. That said, one aspect we have noted in relation to mapping potential themes (and subthemes) when working with data, is that with more conceptually or theoretically orientated versions of reflexive TA, patternings *might* seem clearer or stronger or just more visible, earlier in the process. With more inductive, descriptive or semantic versions, the shape of the analysis *may* be harder to pin down. With more conceptually-driven analysis, our *story* of the dataset (which we report in our write up; discussed in Chapter Five) can start to take form earlier – as the theoretical 'take' shapes and delimits the analytic possibilities more so than an inductive reading of the data.

### Box 4.1

#### Theme levels in reflexive TA

Themes are the core analytic concept and focus in reflexive TA, but there are times when some additional structuring can add interpretative depth or clarity. Reflexive TA reports patterned meaning at three different levels, which we call **overarching themes**, themes and subthemes.

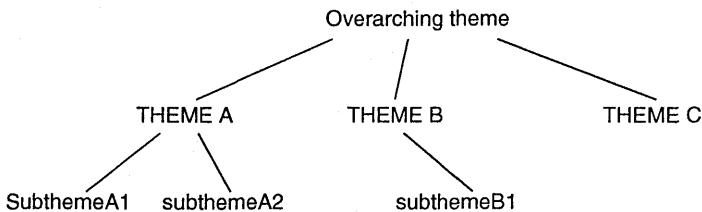
An *overarching theme* is like an umbrella concept or idea that embraces a number of themes. The point of an overarching theme is to demonstrate some broader conceptual idea that you identify as anchoring a number of themes together – in a way that goes *beyond* the central organising concept of each (see Braun & Clarke, 2021e). For instance, as we developed our analysis, we held choice as a potential overarching theme (see Box 4.9), since there seemed to be some different – but potentially related – choice themes. It's not typical for reflexive TA to report overarching themes, and they're not something to *aspire* to, as you develop your TA. We think it's useful to think of them as some extra additional contextual information, where relevant: a footnote, rather than the main text. If you use an overarching theme, you don't necessarily discuss or evidence this in great detail in your analytic narrative; it's more of a structuring or organisational device.

The *theme*, capturing the multi-faceted manifestations of a single, central concept from the dataset, is the key analytic unit in reflexive TA. The central organising concept of each theme demarcates it from other themes in the analysis. There is nothing *wrong* with simply reporting at the level of themes: analysis that only reports themes without other layers is doing precisely what reflexive TA is designed to do.

(Continued)

A subtheme sits ‘under’ a theme. It focuses on *one* particular aspect of that theme; it brings analytic attention and emphasis to *that aspect*. A subtheme needs to share the central organising concept of the theme it is part of.

Within an analysis, the relationship *between* themes is horizontal. The relationship between overarching themes, themes, and subthemes is vertical: subthemes are *subordinate* to a theme (and *only* contained within that individual theme); an overarching theme is *superordinate* to more than one theme. An analytic structure with all three levels of theme might look like this:



Our best advice around the use of overarching themes and subthemes? Watch out for adding structural complexity at the cost of analytic *depth*. If you do use subthemes or an overarching theme, do so sparingly.<sup>8</sup> Too many subthemes, and the analysis will likely start to feel fragmented and thin, and lacking in analytic depth (Trainor & Bundon, 2020). Remember, your task is mapping the rich nuance and complexity of the data, not demarcating a model of the different elements within them.<sup>9</sup> If you do use subthemes, there is no need to have subthemes across every theme, or indeed the same number of subthemes within any theme that has them. This emphasises the point that subthemes should be used *when they serve the purpose* of telling the strongest story about the data. (We focus much more on how you tell your analytic story in Chapter Five.)

## Five key things to keep in mind in the early stages of theme development

**First**, your initial (and indeed final) themes do not have to capture *everything* in the dataset, or indeed all the codes that you have developed. For instance, we developed

lots of codes that didn’t make it into the patterns tentatively sketched in Figure 4.2. Your job in analysing the data, and reporting them, is to tell a *particular* story about the data that addresses your research question. It isn’t to

<sup>8</sup>You might, however, be encouraged by others to use lots of layers in your thematic structure; we have heard this come back from reviewers. Resist! A more layered reflexive TA is not a better reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021c)!

<sup>9</sup>If developing a model is your aim, grounded theory may suit your analytic task better (see Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

represent *everything* that was said in the data – that would be a *different* analytic process. There is, however, value in keeping codes ‘in play’, even if they don’t fit into any initial themes or ideas. Because the analysis will develop, sometimes changing quite radically, they *may* become relevant. You could keep them in play by keeping a record of ‘unallocated’ or ‘miscellaneous’ codes you revisit as the analysis develops. Some or all of these codes can be ‘resuscitated’ into the analysis if relevant further along your theme development.

**Second**, each theme should have a central organising concept. The idea of a central organising concept is a really useful one to work with, as it clarifies your purpose. It can help you determine the ‘essence’ of what a theme is about, and, through that, whether or *not* any particular code fits within it. This is not about discovering the *truth* of each theme, but about gaining clarity around what sense you’re making of the codes and the data. What *is* it that holds this theme together? One useful visual metaphor is of a galaxy or solar system – something at the core unites many connected but disparate and variable elements. We also find the image of a dandelion seed head evocative of this concept (see Figures 4.3a and 4.3b): The fluffy seed head is made up of many *individual* seeds, each with a fluffy ‘umbrella’. All seeds are connected by, and attached to, a central anchoring point – the calyx (visible in the partially dispersed seed head in Figure 4.3b). The partially dispersed seed head also illustrates an important point about themes: a theme does *not* need to be evidenced in every single data item. You can have themes developed from some, many, or all data items.

**Third**, as we keep emphasising, don’t get too attached! The themes you’re exploring at this stage are provisional, tentative; they are *candidate* themes – vying for a position, but not settled. Your analysis will almost certainly change, and that’s good; change shows you’re really engaging with the data and questioning and developing your analytic ‘take’ on the data. Trying to finalise your themes early on is likely to produce a superficial reading of the data. You need to be prepared to let things go throughout the whole theme development and refinement process. Indeed, *even* as you write your report, you may identify elements of the analysis you ultimately decide don’t work as part of the full reported final analysis.

**Fourth**, it’s okay to have a larger number of possible themes that you play around with and explore the potential of, than you will end up with. This raises the very thorny question of *how many themes should I have?* There is no right or wrong answer to this, or indeed a formula that can magic up an answer from the matrix of your dataset, the particulars of your theoretical and analytic approach, and the scope of your output (e.g. a dissertation or journal article) – *sorry!* But from our experience, we generally recommend somewhere between two and six themes (including subthemes) for an 8,000-word report. A longer output – such as a 10,000-word dissertation or an 80,000-word thesis, offers *greater* scope to explore more themes in depth (see some further suggestions in Box 4.2).

**Fifth** and finally, try to avoid a ‘question and answer’ orientation in the way you engage with codes and data. If you generate clusters related to ‘answering’ quite specific or concrete

**ALERT** There is no right answer to the question of ‘how many themes?’ However, in practice it is difficult to do justice to more than six themes (including subthemes) in a roughly 8,000-word report.



**Figure 4.3a & 4.3b** A dandelion head – fully connected seeds (4.3a) and partially dispersed seeds (4.3b) (photos by Virginia Braun)

questions, such as *how is being childfree negative?* or *how is being childfree positive?* or even *why are people childfree?* you can be pulled towards quite surface readings of the data, as well as topic summary-type themes. This type of ‘asking questions and seeking answers’ can stymie theme development by inadvertently: (a) constraining your ability to notice patterned meaning *across* the dataset; (b) preventing you from exploring patterns or clusters that aren’t immediately obvious, but might ultimately offer the most useful and important analytic insights. Although we advise keeping your research question in mind when developing themes, we imagine this quite loosely. It does not mean looking *for a direct answer to* that research question, or developing a series of very specific questions related to the research question. It means instead *generally* keeping in mind what your interest in the topic (dataset) is, and exploring patternings that might illuminate our understanding of the issue.

A crucial thing to realise here is that your task is both to generate themes/interpret patterned meaning *and* to tell the reader *how* it addresses your research question – and what the implications of it are. The themes you develop provide the reader with ‘evidence’ for *your ‘answer’* to the research question; themes themselves do not directly have to address the research question. We illustrate this from Ginny’s analysis exploring how New Zealanders made sense of poor sexual health statistics (Braun, 2008). Her overall analysis claimed that people draw on ideas of a ‘national identity’ or ‘how we are as Kiwis’ to

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**Box 4.2**

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### How many themes? Some guiding considerations for theme development and review

The question of the number of themes is not an abstract one, but relates to broader issues in theme development and quality. The following are important considerations in the theme development phases of reflexive TA:

- Each theme needs the space to be developed fully, its various facets explored, and the richness and complexity of the data captured in the account you write up.
  - If you're wanting to present an overall summary or overview of key patterns in your dataset, you may need more themes; if you're exploring one or two facets of the dataset in depth, fewer themes are likely more appropriate.
  - The richer and more complex the themes, the fewer you'll be able to do full justice to.
  - A large number of themes can produce an incoherent analysis – kind of like a quick once-over that effectively says *hey look at these interesting things I noticed* instead of exploring the richness of each and telling a nuanced story about them.
  - A large number of themes can result in a thin and underdeveloped analysis (e.g. Fornells-Ambrojo et al. [2017] reported 18 themes, organised under seven 'superordinate' themes).
  - If you have a large number of 'themes' and 'subthemes', it's worth reflecting on whether you have codes rather than themes. Are the themes thin? Do they report only one dimension or facet? If so, they're probably codes.
  - It's fine to produce an analysis (e.g. in a journal article) that focuses on just one or two themes, even though there were more to discuss – if there's a good rationale for this, and the analysis is contextualised and not presented as if it were the *full* TA of the dataset. For instance, you might report a few themes within an overarching theme in a single article with a particular focus (e.g. Li & Braun, 2017), or you might report a whole dataset analysis over several articles (e.g. Terry & Braun, 2013a, 2016; Terry, Braun, Jayamaha, & Madden, 2018).
- 

explain these statistics. The four themes collectively provided evidence for this answer to her research question, but each on its own did not. Each theme instead evidenced a *particular* way sexual health statistics were framed; together the themes evidenced the salience of national identity.

It's important also to emphasise here that data do not speak for themselves. Not only do data not speak for themselves; themes do not speak for themselves either. *Your role*, as researcher, is to speak for your themes (and your data), to tell the story *you* have made from and of the dataset.

**PRACTICE POINT** Your role as analyst is to tell the reader what the data and your themes mean and why they matter. A key mantra for analysis is 'data do not speak for themselves' – alongside 'themes don't emerge' of course!

## I quite like it here, should I stay longer? Tackling time management in (initial) theme development

As with coding, don't be tempted to rush through clustering codes and initial theme development, racing towards an imagined finish line. But at the same time, you could cluster codes *ad infinitum*, and a concern that you haven't gotten *everything* can stop you progressing deeper into the analysis.

**ALERT** Don't get stuck in initial theme development, as you are not *finalising* your analysis at this stage. You need to ensure you have plenty of time for the next phase(s).

There is, unfortunately, no easy guidance on how long generating initial themes should take, but don't spend *ages* here – you want to make sure you have quite a bit of time for the next phase. Once you've really engaged with the *codes*, and clustered and re-clustered them into tentative themes, and explored the scope of the developing analysis through some kind of mapping exercise, you're likely ready to move on to the next phase of theme development and review, where deeper theme development takes place through re-engagement with the data themselves.

Two things can help with any anxiety around knowing whether you're moving into Phase four too early (or too late):

1. Recognising the *recursive* nature of TA. You will be moving back and forth in the process, as doing TA is not like a one-stop train journey that once you have started, you cannot get off or change direction!
2. Remembering that no (reflexive) TA analysis is ever *final* or *complete*, because it's a subjective situated engagement with data. There is a point at which we decide to stop our adventuring, but it's not by crossing some actual finish line (Trainor & Bundon, 2020)! It's useful to understand there isn't a *perfect* analysis of your data, waiting in the Cloud, that someone will use to judge *your* analysis against. There are quality criteria (Braun & Clarke, 2021c; see Chapter Nine), and these are useful to guide *good practice* in TA, as is the advice we provide *throughout* the book. But the very nature of the task means that there is no perfect final product to identify. What you have to do is follow a robust and rigorous engaged analytic process to produce a compelling story about your data. But think of your goal as an analysis that's *good enough*, rather than 'perfect'. Phew!

## I'M STRUGGLING A BIT, TO BE HONEST: MANAGING ANXIETY IN THE TA PROCESS

Before we move into the next phase, we want to pause to acknowledge that many people find themselves worried, stressed or anxious about the reflexive TA process. They can find it daunting, overwhelming, can feel stuck through worry or indecision. That's very normal.

And the absence of simple easy-to-apply *rules* for reflexive TA can add to feelings of uncertainty, doubt and worry. If anxiety is something you experience in your everyday life outside analysis, reflexive TA can provide fertile ground for anxiety to take hold. Anxiety can easily *get in the way* of your adventure, adding extra hurdles to navigate, including ones that feel impossible, and reducing the pleasure that might otherwise be involved. But anxiety doesn't make reflexive TA an impossible task. Two of our former students have generously provided reflections on their experiences of doing reflexive TA while experiencing anxiety related to ADHD and OCD (see Boxes 4.3 and 4.4). As well as describing the challenges they faced during the analytic process, they share things that helped them in managing the process and successfully completing their research projects. Anxiety is far more widely experienced than just related to specific diagnosed conditions. Elicia and Gina's experiences and suggestions will hopefully be useful for any and all researchers facing some level of anxiety throughout the research process.

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### Researcher Reflection – Box 4.3

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#### **Facing the battle of anxiety and OCD when undertaking TA for the first time, by Elicia Boulton**

My research for my professional doctorate in counselling psychology used a qualitative survey to explore how obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) shaped women's experiences of sex and sexuality (e.g. Braun et al., 2020). I took a critical realist approach to TA, to capture participants' **lived experiences**, but understand them as contextually located (e.g. social, political, historical). As well as tackling a topic where knowledge is lacking, my research was motivated by my own experiences of living with OCD.

OCD involves trying to reduce harm to self and others, manifesting differently for each person through intrusive thoughts and compulsions, which can cause high anxiety levels. Intrusive thoughts are anxiety provoking due to their frequency and intensity, and are upsetting because of being in stark contrast to the person's values and/or beliefs. In short, they are like your worst nightmare on loop in visual form or through your own internal voice. My experiences of OCD impacted on various aspects of the TA process and here I reflect on some of these challenges and my strategies for managing these.

The most difficult aspect of data analysis was anxiety-related intrusive thoughts (e.g. you don't know what you're doing; what you're doing is rubbish; you're not intelligent enough to do this; you can't remember anything...) that affected my ability to engage and focus. At times when I was trying to analyse the data, it felt like I was in a room full of people all talking at the same time. Hardly the 'ideal' conditions for analysis, so trying to focus could be a battle. Obsessing about doing TA 'perfectly' (although I know logically

(Continued)

there is no such thing as ‘perfect’ TA) involved intrusive thoughts about ‘missing something’ important in the data. This led to my supervisor noting that I seemed to want to comment on every single tiny nuance and detail in the data and was getting pulled away from overall patterning. The intrusive thoughts also resulted in anxiety around my analysis not having depth and not being ‘good enough’ – part of the anxiety being driven by perfectionist thoughts. This led to self-doubt: it can be challenging to develop your own researcher identity and make assertive choices about your research when OCD and anxiety lead you to continually question your academic ability. I was also very anxious that how I wrote my analysis might inadvertently harm participants, through misrepresenting their experience, coming across as judgemental/critical and, to a more extreme level, that a participant may commit suicide because of what I wrote (this links to feeling responsible for keeping everyone safe).

I developed some useful strategies that helped manage these challenges. Perhaps the most important was accepting the value of ‘time out’ and not assuming it meant I was just avoiding analysis and writing. Taking time out meant learning to recognise that analysing data and writing about data while consumed by intrusive thoughts and anxiety is unlikely to be healthy. Time out was also good for the writing process, because when I returned to writing I found I had more space cognitively to think – the critical OCD thoughts had diminished somewhat, and it felt less like trying to write in a room full of people. In hindsight, I needed to find a way to have regular time out – time management when also dealing with anxiety is difficult, and something I am still working on. I found doing exercise extremely important not just as a break from studying but for reducing overall anxiety levels. Finally, conversations in supervision helped pull me out of being lost in worry of what participants may think about my analysis; they enabled me to develop my analysis as grounded in the data, rather than anxiety-related intrusive thoughts.

Self-care included therapy, where I could remind myself of coping strategies and have somebody point out if I had become lost in self-defeating anxious thoughts. Engaging with an OCD support group was also invaluable to recognise ‘the battle with critical internal thoughts’ as anxiety/OCD and to then notice and accept the negative thoughts without engaging in them – allowing better focus for developing my analysis.

Overall, although anxiety can feel like an all-consuming force battling against you during the TA process, I believe it is worth bearing with it. Despite my ‘battle with intrusive thought’ and doubts and anxieties, I made myself do various presentations along the way (and got positive feedback). I also prepared for and passed my doctoral oral exam (viva) with just minor corrections; now I’m working on publications. Hopefully, as I have found, the questions and doubts from anxiety are not just challenges, but bring positives. They can be used to help develop a deeper level of reflection during data analysis, and empathy for participants.

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### Researcher Reflection – Box 4.4

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#### **Doing TA when you've got ADHD and anxiety: reflections and strategies, by Gina Broom**

My Master's research explored the topic of attractions or feelings toward someone other than your partner(s). I was interested in exploring this because it's something that isn't often talked about, and there was very little research on this topic. I was sure I must not be the only person who had found the experience confronting, particularly in a culture where monogamous exclusivity is idealised.

I have ADHD, and I'm not a stranger to anxiety – especially when it comes to producing structured work (like a Master's thesis) in a timely fashion. I had never *done* TA (or even critical/qualitative research) before, which was also challenging, because I was learning this method *and* my subject area simultaneously. I experience various ADHD-related challenges, but also strengths, which can help with the challenges. Likewise, anxiety brings challenges, but these also can bring value (which I've briefly summarised in a table):

Challenges	Strengths
<i>ADHD</i>	
Attention regulation – sometimes lacking focus, sometimes 'hyperfocus' (can get lost on tangents)	Creative thinking – more readily making unique connections between otherwise seemingly abstract concepts
Time management	Hyperfocus can be useful (when directed well)
Becoming overwhelmed	
<i>Anxiety</i>	
'Analysis paralysis'	You care about your project
Avoidance – of both work and communication about work	When managed, can be a great motivator

#### **Time-management and 'analysis paralysis' – how to avoid leaving things till the last minute**

One of the worst things for me was when my plan for the day was simply 'work on X' (e.g. work on coding today). I would carry the *whole* task in my head, and it would be overwhelming; I would procrastinate and feel lost before I had begun. My main strategy for managing this was *chunking*. I would break tasks down into smaller and smaller chunks till they all fit evenly within my timeframe with a buffer at the end. This was particularly useful with structured/methodical tasks like transcription or coding, but a good strategy throughout the process overall. If the first chunk – and the first chunk *alone* – felt overwhelming, I realised I needed to break it down further, until it felt manageable. On a particularly anxious day for me, this may have been something like an hour set aside to just look at the data and think. This would allow me to focus on just one small thing at a time (instead of holding it all in my mind) *and* know that it would all get done – I could almost physically feel the psychological weight lift! So to apply this strategy more broadly, if say you had three weeks to code 10 interviews, coding one interview per day (in a 5-day week) will have it done in two weeks, with a one-week buffer in case some take longer than you expect (which they almost always do!). The buffer also allows you to move on from

*(Continued)*

parts that you are tempted to spend too long on, because you can return to add detail at the end *if there's time*. Breaking each day into four time slots gives you a quarter of an interview per slot – I found this is a good way to check my progress throughout the day.

## Communication

Developing a relationship with my supervisor where I felt I could talk openly was very important to me, as well as actively remembering that she was there to help me. They *want you to succeed*. It's easy to feel intimidated (it certainly was for me, due to a prior harsh work environment), but a lack of communication can really hold you back. Sometimes I would feel afraid to talk to my supervisor if I felt like I was falling behind, or I didn't feel like I knew what I was doing. In hindsight, my anxiety would build, I'd have no new information to help me, and I would find myself in a deeper and deeper paralysis. After talking to my supervisor, I *always* had a clearer idea of how to proceed, and I *always* felt better. Throughout the course of my thesis, I found it easier and easier to be upfront and get the help that I needed sooner rather than later.

Regular meetings and deadlines also don't allow for anxiety-driven perfectionism – you *have* to get something in. Sometimes feedback would take me in a different direction, and I'd be glad I hadn't wasted too much time going in one direction. I had to embrace the feeling that I may get something wrong, because I was uncertain through most of the process – but that was okay. Whenever I dropped the ball, I would try not to be hard on myself. I would just make a new plan and try again (however much that is easier said than done!).

## Extra tips on things that helped me

- Don't think in circles – talk it out or jot down thoughts if you get stuck. Talk to an inanimate object if you have to! (I had a stuffed bear who learned a lot about epistemology and ontology.)
- Get out of the house – go into your office space (if you have one) or find a quiet space on campus (or even in a café) to work in. Working at home may allow for pyjamas, but it also makes it hard to avoid procrastination and to get into a working headspace.
- If there is software that can help you, try it out – or plan in some time to let yourself experiment with your options:
  - I know some prefer to handwrite codes on hard copy, but I preferred to use the comment function in Word because typing was faster than writing for me, and I was lucky in that someone I knew could write a macro in Microsoft Excel for me to organise my coded excerpts into themes and subthemes (see also Box 3.4 in Chapter Three).
  - I also discovered and really liked using MindMup ([www.mindmup.com](http://www.mindmup.com)) to visually map my themes and subthemes, because I could move things around and edit more easily than on paper.
- Give yourself time to figure out what works for you.
- If your university has support services for mental health or study support, *try them out*. I found these services helped me with planning, managing anxiety, and they supported my need for an extension, which allowed me to finish the project when I otherwise wouldn't have been able to.

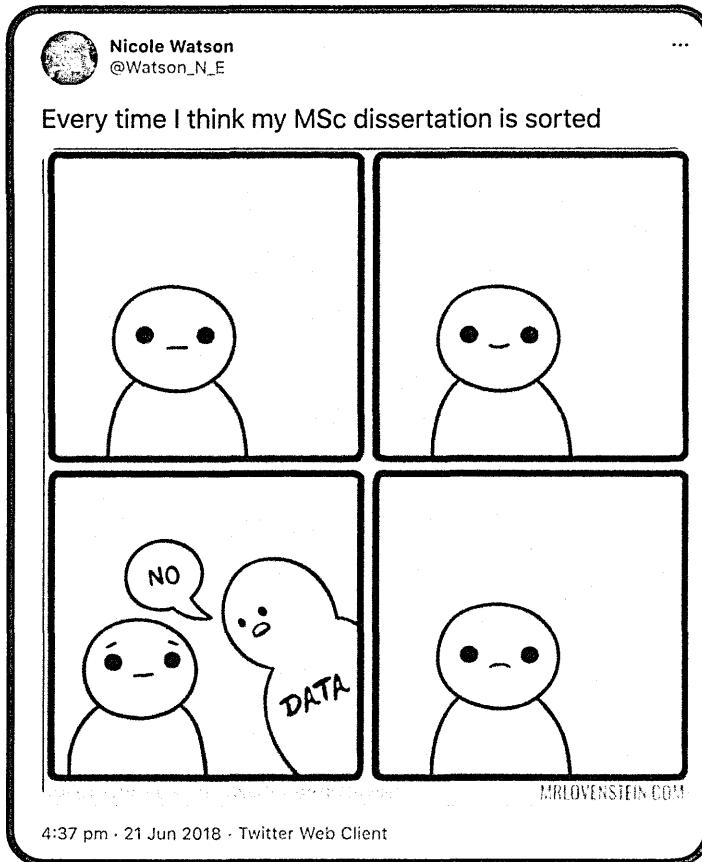
## DEVELOPING AND REVIEWING THEMES<sup>10</sup> (PHASE FOUR)

For the initial theme generation and development (Phase three), you've worked mostly with codes to explore possible clusters of meaning and generate tentative themes. Getting a good **thematic mapping** by the end of that phase relies on the quality of your coding, because it's usually not possible to hold your entire dataset, and all the nuance within it, in your head as you work with the codes to explore patterning – even with a small dataset, like the childfree dataset. Phase four extends, and offers a vital check on, the initial theme development in Phase three, through a process of re-engagement with: (1) all the coded data extracts; and (2) the entire dataset. The purpose here is to review the viability of the initial clusterings, and explore whether there is any scope for *better* pattern development. This phase is *partly* about providing a validity check on the quality and scope of your candidate themes. But it's importantly *also* about developing the richness of your themes; you're aiming to develop a rich, nuanced analysis that addresses your research question. For us, a good TA is evidenced by themes that: are built around a *singular* central idea or argument, and do not try to be *all things to all people* (i.e. they are *not* topic summaries); illustrate richness and diversity in the manifestation of that idea within the dataset; are not too fragmented or multi-layered; are distinctive – each theme has its own focus, its own boundaries, and themes do not merge into each other and weave together to tell an *overall* story that addresses the research question.

We have emphasised TA as a recursive process – like following a hose that loops randomly across a long grass lawn, back and forth and round and round in every direction, rather than an escalator or a train sending you inevitably in one direction. This phase is *particularly* recursive. You move backwards and forwards between the data and developing analysis, to check that you haven't taken your developing analysis in a direction that either: (a) doesn't tell a compelling story to address your research question; or (b) takes you too far away from the data. This latter can happen if you get too attached to the story *you* have been developing through code labels, one step removed from the data. The *Mr Lovenstein* cartoon in Figure 4.4, posted by student Nicole Watson on Twitter (Watson, 2018), captures this last point nicely.

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<sup>10</sup>We've renamed Phase four from our original *reviewing themes*, because, like Phase three, we felt it risked evoking something other than what we mean here. The original name risked *suggesting* that by this time, you're not still actively *developing* themes, but are rather just checking to make sure they fit. That isn't the case, and imagining it is, makes it harder to fully engage in the spirit of what you're trying to do with this phase.



**Figure 4.4** “Data says no”<sup>11</sup>

### Theme development and revision with coded extracts

The initial part of this phase involves reviewing your tentatively developed themes against all the data that have been tagged with any of the codes clustered for each theme. Does *each* candidate theme *work* when it is read in relation to all the data that are supposed to evidence it? Keeping your (broad, potentially shifting) research question in mind: does each theme capture a (different) core point, and some rich diversity and nuance (multiple facets), about the dataset, that *you* want to convey in addressing your question?

The most useful basic question to guide this development and review process (both now, and in relation to the full dataset) is:

- Is this pattern a viable *theme* – a pattern that has an identifiable central organising concept, as well as different manifestations of that idea?

<sup>11</sup>However, within reflexive analysis, interpretation happens at the intersection of the data, the subjectivity of the researcher, and the scholarly and societal context of the research, so the data are not the final or only arbiter of the ‘truth’ of the analysis.

If your candidate themes meet that basic criterion, then useful review and development questions for each theme include:

- *Can I identify boundaries of this theme?* Am I clear about what it includes and excludes? Understanding each theme's central organising concept is vital for determining this. The dandelion seed head images (Figures 4.3a and 4.3b) are useful to revisit here: there is a clear boundary for what is, and what is not, part of the dandelion. If a bug had landed on the exposed calyx in Figure 4.3b, you would be clear that it was *not* part of a 'dandelion seed theme'.
- *Are there enough (meaningful) data to evidence this theme?* Are there multiple articulations around the core idea, and are they nuanced, complex, and diverse? Does the theme feel *rich*? A useful heuristic here is to ask yourself, do I have quite a bit I could say about this theme? If not, perhaps it is too *thin*? It may just be a code, an important and interesting, yet ultimately single-faceted, meaning.
- *Are the data contained within each theme too diverse and wide-ranging?* Does the theme lack coherence? If you go back to your imagined dandelion, are you trying to scrape together all the blown-away seeds (those missing from Figure 4.3b)? Instead of a connected, coherent and delineated seed head (Figure 4.3a), you now not only have a range of dandelion seeds (which may actually come from some different plants), but also a few bugs and other flowers and plants and seeds that you've accidentally gathered as you've tried to capture the seeds as they floated and landed in different directions. That is what a theme without coherence is like.
- *Does this theme convey something important?* It can be useful to reflect on whether each theme conveys information and interpretation that you judge to be *important* in relation to the dataset, your research question, and the wider context (which we discuss more in Chapters Five and Seven). This can be where you grapple with the question of importance versus prevalence. Some meanings might be common, but nonetheless pretty *meh* in terms of the insight or interest they offer. Your analysis does *not* have to report the *most common* meanings in the dataset but rather clearly tell a compelling story to address your research question.

Sometimes, initial themes work well, but that's rare. Often, they don't work that well, and they need considerable (re)development. It may be that the themes don't work against the coded data – consider whether you need to rework the code-clusters, or even go back to Phase two and recode. Or the themes might not work because they aren't coherent, distinct and/or comprehensive enough. Or they might not work because you realise you've inadvertently over-emphasised particular aspects of the dataset you found personally interesting or intriguing but that aren't hugely relevant for your research question. Or they might not work for some reason you can't quite pin down or articulate. If you're a student, you may feel like you've done a good (enough) job at this point, but your supervisor may have a different take on it.<sup>12</sup> If that happens, it's not because what you've done is necessarily wrong, but that more development work is needed around theme conceptualisation, focus and scope.

So, you should expect some revision to the candidate themes at this stage. This could be at the level of tweaking – refining boundaries, clarifying central organising concepts, or slightly expanding or narrowing a theme. Often, it will be more substantive. You might combine two potential candidate themes into one broader theme. You might realise part of

<sup>12</sup>We imagine our students heaving a collective sigh of empathy right now!

one theme doesn't fit, so you pull it out and redraw the theme boundary. You might split a theme into two, or even three themes. And, sometimes, you might just reject one or more of your initial themes completely.

At this stage, you really need to prepare yourself psychologically to discard the initial themes you generated in Phase three and start over. That may send shudders down your spine, but good reflexive TA involves being provisional about your developing analysis, and being prepared to ask yourself tricky questions like: *am I trying to massage the data into a pattern that isn't really there?* and *what am I missing or not noticing here?* You shouldn't try to force your analysis into coherence, if it isn't working. We loved the idea, expressed on Twitter by UK-based occupational health psychologist Elaine Wainwright (2020), that the process of theme development felt like wrestling a sea-monster (see Figure 4.5). The vivid imagery evoked reflexive TA so well for us: a process of meaning-making that shifts and changes form, and sometimes feels slippery, tricky to grasp hold of. Such moments are ones where taking a break, and just letting the analytic ideas ferment in your head, can be really helpful in shifting how you're making sense of the data.

Elaine Wainwright @dr\_wainwright · Mar 28

I know #themesdonotmerge but is it OK to feel that analysis has been like wrestling with a sea-monster? Things have broken the crest of an analytic wave, receded, then perspectives have changed...some much-needed fun at work this week. #themematicanalysis @ginnybraun @drvicclarke

1 3 22

**Figure 4.5** Theme development as wrestling a sea-monster?

Given the recursive nature of reflexive TA, this part of Phase four can blur into Phase three – for experienced qualitative researchers, especially if working with a smaller dataset.

**ALERT** Don't treat phases as rigid entities that have to be followed precisely to give you the right analysis. Remember this is a 'recipe for your adventure' – where reflexive engagement leads to the most compelling outcomes.

We really want to emphasise this combination of robust processes and flexibility. It is *your* process with TA, *your* reflexivity and thoughtful engagement, that offer the most important tools in developing your analysis, not 'following the (perceived) rules'.

### Theme development and revision with the full dataset

Once you feel you have a set of themes that work in relation to the coded data extracts, that tell a good story, with each theme offering something distinctive, you then expand the focus of revision and development by going back to the entire dataset. All the processes and caveats just outlined apply here, including still being prepared to let things go.

Why do we regard this stage as so important? As noted, coding moves you *away from* your dataset, and in initial theme generation you effectively work at two steps removed from the dataset: one step from the full dataset to the coded dataset; another from the coded dataset to your list of code labels. With theme generation, you're initially just looking at the code labels themselves. When you move to development and revision with the coded data, you get closer to the dataset again, but you're still a step removed, as you're only working with pre-selected segments of the dataset – the data you have tagged with code labels. Each step of removal allows greater scope for misremembering, decontextualisation, or just plain forgetting the full scope of the dataset, and thus an analysis that potentially misrepresents the data content.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as we go deeper and deeper into analysis, there's a good likelihood that we'll *notice* different (relevant) things in the data. This is especially the case if our analysis is more latent, conceptual or theoretical. So full, thorough, and open engagement with the whole dataset at this stage is important. This is a quite a different point from developing an analysis from *part of* the dataset – see Box 4.5.

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**Box 4.5**

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### Can my analysis be based on *part* of the dataset?

If you're working with a very large dataset, you may develop analyses based solely on part of the dataset. It's entirely acceptable within qualitative frameworks to reanalyse the same dataset with different foci or to address different research questions, and sometimes with different methods (e.g. Spiers & Riley, 2019). That is *not* the same as the 'cherry-picking' critique noted in Chapter Three, where a researcher either selectively presents only the data that support their argument, or misrepresents their dataset (Morse, 2010). In some cases, you might do this across a subset of the dataset (for instance, participants with a particular experience); in other cases, you will home in on a particular data domain. Victoria, for instance, with her colleagues Carol Burgoyne and Maree Burns, collected interview data from same-sex couples for a project initially on money management, that evolved to encompass views on civil partnership and same-sex marriage as the government introduced legislation to recognise civil partnership for same-sex couples as the project started. Victoria led on several thematic analyses relating to discussions of civil partnership and marriage in the interviews – including on naming practices (Clarke, Burns, & Burgoyne, 2008) and weddings (Clarke, Burgoyne, & Burns, 2013). She first extracted *all* data relevant to the topic, and the extracted dataset became her new working dataset. Such partial dataset analysis is fine to do in reflexive TA – but it needs a clear rationale for dataset selection.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>The likelihood of misrepresenting your dataset is diminished greatly by a thorough coding process (as discussed in Chapter Three).

<sup>14</sup>A dataset is not a thing that we can develop (or extract) only one analysis from. Indeed, we like the argument that US nursing researcher and qualitative methodologist Margarete Sandelowski (2011) made, that each time we consider our dataset in relation to a different question, the data become a somewhat *different* dataset, through responding to different research questions and reading through different interpretative lenses.

## What's the point of this part of my adventure?

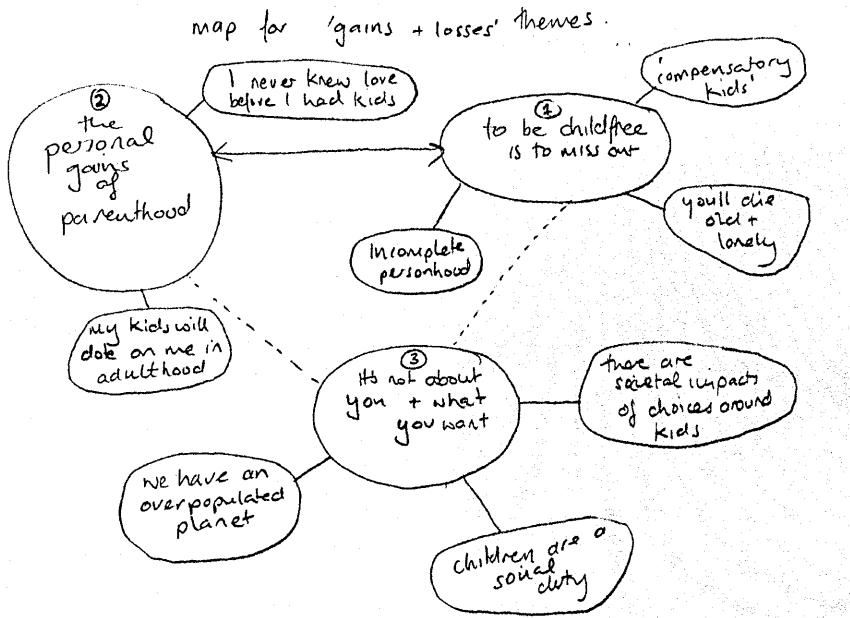
Where are you aiming to get to by the end of this revision and development phase? Having produced a set of well-worked-up (but still provisional) themes – along with any sub- or overarching themes – that capture the most important and relevant elements of the data, *in relation to your research question*. It's your job as analyst to determine the most relevant and important patterned meaning that 'speaks' both about the data, and into the existing field of scholarship and the wider context. As noted earlier, sometimes the most common patterns are not particularly relevant or salient. Whether the *pervasiveness* of meaning is a key important factor in deciding on themes, depends on your research question. If your research question seeks to understand something experience-based or concrete, like Black experiences of driving–policing in the US (see Bell, Hopson, Craig, & Robinson, 2014) – check out #DrivingWhileBlack – then commonality may be a key aspect to consider, especially if you want to be able to make claims around frequency of experiences. But often the types of questions we have with qualitative research mean frequency is not the most important element – if it were, we would probably use quantitative measures (see Terry &

**ALERT** Theme importance is NOT determined by (numerical) frequency so much as salience and importance to addressing the research question.

Braun, 2013a). Sometimes, a minor theme (in terms of frequency) may offer a *vitally* important meaning to capture and report. It all depends on the research question, data and context.

Thematic mapping is again your friend in this part of the process, providing a tool to visualise the overall story the analysis tells, identifying boundaries around themes and connections across themes, as well as the overall structure of the analysis. Mapping can be a useful technique for identifying if there's something interesting, but that doesn't fit with the overall story. Or if the overall story appears disconnected, like a series of unrelated anecdotes vying for attention, instead of having a logical, connected narrative. Our initial clustering (seen in Figure 4.2) presented a mass of patterned and intersecting ideas, but didn't map an *overall* story. We soon shifted our analytic focus in two separate directions, exploring two quite different topics or ideas from the dataset; each seemed like it would provide rich, nuanced and important understanding in relation to our research question – *contemporary meaning-making around voluntarily not having children*. We show revised thematic maps for these developing analyses in Figure 4.6 (related to: *the gains and losses of (non)parenthood*) and Figure 4.7 (related to: *choice*). At this point, each topic effectively seemed to be working as an overarching theme (see Box 4.1) for a number of candidate themes. But note: even after this revision and development phase, each map is still reflecting somewhat provisional themes.

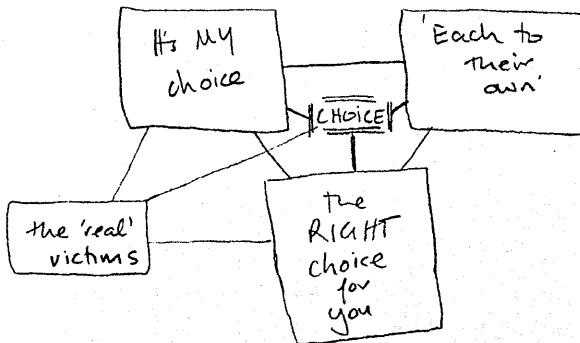
The first mapping, in Figure 4.6, captures three themes we were *starting* to develop and review related to an idea of *gains and losses* – an overarching theme which evolved around the idea of parenthood as beneficial and non-parenthood as lacking. It's still not finalised, but has more clarity than the earlier stages of mapping (Figure 4.2), and a sense of the likely scope of themes within the umbrella of the overarching theme.



**Figure 4.6** Refined thematic map for 'gains and losses' analysis

The second thematic map (Figure 4.7) starts to map out what we anticipate will be a *final* analysis within an overarching theme of *choice* – three distinctive patterns, clustered around choice. This map shows a considerable shift from the initial mapping in Figure 4.2. Notable in Figure 4.7 is a potential 'satellite' idea (floating in the periphery, like a satellite around earth) – here called the '*real*' victims (connected to the code in Table 4.1 *the 'real' victims are those who can't have kids*). This was articulated in the data as people who want to have children but who cannot, and who deserve empathy; this **category** of people was often used as a contrast with people who *choose* not to have children. Although it didn't seem *directly* connected to how our main 'choice' themes were developing, it still *seemed* like it might be an important meaning to consider in our understanding of how choice operates in this dataset – and hence we retained it in mapping our developing analysis. Further refinement around this choice analysis can be seen in Box 4.7.

After the two layers of review and theme development, you need to decide if you feel your analysis fulfils the criteria we described at the start of this section. If so, great! Move on to the next phase. If not, you may need to proceed 'backwards' for a while. You may need to revisit your coding, re-coding some or all of the dataset; you may even discard some coding if the scope of analysis has shifted. A common reason for going backwards to go forwards is realising you have inadvertently developed topic summaries, rather than themes. We now consider the distinction between topic summaries and themes in a bit



**Figure 4.7** Refined (finalised) thematic map for 'choice matters' analysis

more detail, to guide you in assessing the 'themeyness' of your developing themes. Before that, we want to re-emphasise that a step or two 'backwards' in TA should *not* be framed

**PRACTICE POINT** Going 'backwards' to develop TA is an important part of the process. Instead of representing 'failure' it represents the researcher's commitment to producing a quality analysis.

as failure, but instead as having the courage to reverse on your adventure, recognising that the path you've gone down has proved too dull, or too complex, or is just a plain dead end, and reassess the path forwards. The best adventures are rarely linear.

### Okay, so how would a topic summary be different from a shared meaning theme?

In teaching around TA, as we wrote this book, we have sometimes used part of the 'childfree' dataset for practical exercises – some readers may even recognise it from those contexts! In those classes, we found people sometimes struggled to differentiate between *shared meaning* themes and topic summaries, in the context of the dataset. For this reason, we thought it would be really useful to include an example of a topic summary, something that would *not* count as a theme in *reflexive* TA (but might in other versions, see 'What is a theme?' in Chapter Eight). We use the topic *reasons for being childfree* to demonstrate what a topic summary might look like (see Box 4.6; Table 8.2 in Chapter Eight provides another comparison from published research). There were lots of places in the dataset where people described or hinted at their own reasons for being childfree, and/or others' potential or actual reasons for not having children. A topic summary is what would result if we were to cluster all these reasons in one place – kind of like an overview of what's in the data on the topic. It's the sort of 'theme' you get when you base it around answers to a particular question. You can tell that there is no central organising concept, no dandelion calyx, no sun at the centre of the solar system.

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**Box 4.6**

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**Illustrative ‘topic summary’: Reasons for being childfree**

Why are people childfree? Within the dataset, and in the context of a wider framing of childfree as a choice that people make – “Children AREN’T for everyone... never have been. It’s purely a personal choice” (JAOB) – lots of explanations were given for childfree status. People were commonly characterised as having a *reason* for being childfree:

Before you judge anyone on not wanting children maybe just listen to their story of why they don't want children or just can't have them (RADE)

Those who dont have kids might have other goals they want to achieve good for them (SHHA)

Commonly, participants who spoke of their own context simply framed their reason in terms of individual psychology – of ‘not wanting’ children:

My husband and i dont have kids and dont want kids (KAHA)

I have no children and that was by choice. Never wanted any, never will. (JATH)

The most common *reasons* could be described as reflecting personal (including psychology), lifestyle, environmental or societal elements. When the reasons given for being childfree were identified as *personal*, this was sometimes simply described in generic terms:

Some people are child orientated, others aren't. Its as simple as that (SARO)

Others referred more specifically to particular traits that made them unsuitable for parenting or not desiring of parenting. For some this was psychological; for others, physiological:

I personally like the idea of being a parent but recognised very early on that I had too much of a temper, and that my moods were too up and down. I seriously looked at myself like giving myself a warrant of fitness for parenting, and declined the warrant (MIBE)

I wish I could have children but I can't because I have a rare syndrome [...] I can pass on my syndrome to my children and I have seen first hand what my syndrome can do and I don't want that for my children (RADE)

More lifestyle-type reasons were evident where participants simply described the reason around the type of life they wanted to live:

I'm so sick of people saying, “You'll change your mind” when I say I don't want kids. I want to travel, have a career and have nice things so no kids for me (CLGR)

Such descriptions evoked the *cost* of children, either indirectly through reference to things one could otherwise afford – like travel – or directly:

(Continued)

I cant afford them (LIPO)

No i wouldnt because children cost too much money to cloth feed, educate. Why have babies when we have a rich kid hating goverment. (MEMI)

In these reasons, costs are a barrier, whether it is in recognising the inherent cost of raising a child (Hamilton-Chadwick, 2017), as in "I can't afford them" or through restricting the person's ability to spend their (always limited) money – or indeed time – on other things. In some instances, these personal reasons were characterised in familiar selfishness terms around "lifestyle":

Its also a lifestyle choice people make, more money and luxury, or the ups and downs a family brings along with different social skills needed (SARO)

Comments related to reasons tended to be quite brief – and hint at or provide a summary of a more complex reason – SARO's quotation here, for instance, evokes a range of reasons. These brief reasons seemed often to operate as a shorthand of something wider the readers should understand. For example:

the worlds overpopulated as it is lol (ALRO)

Reasons appeared sometimes blended together, suggesting there is not necessarily a *single* motivation – though whether that is the case cannot be determined precisely:

My partner and I have decided not to have kids for a range of personal, environmental and social reasons (CHCA)

As the data excerpts have illustrated, discussion of reasons around being childfree sometimes appeared when people described their own personal reasons for choosing not to have children, or reasons within the context of a relationship. Other times, people described the real or imagined reasons of *other* people. In the latter, the rationale or logic was not always framed in terms of what might motivate the choice, but as a framework for understanding the choice. As noted above, and as many of the excerpts hinted at, the reasons supplied often worked, in a context where being childfree is often framed as selfish (Morison et al., 2016), to explain the decision as a *reasonable* choice, and not a *selfish* one. These appeared perhaps most explicitly when having children or not having children was framed in terms of *environmental* impact:

The world is so over populated already, so if people choose not to have kids, they are not being selfish at all (PAMA)

5.3billion humans on this planet putting it under so much pressure.....so really...who's being selfish (RITA)

People's reasons for being childfree, or understanding why others might be childfree, covered a wide range of different motivations that were, in the dataset, rarely fully articulated. Given the nature of the dataset – Facebook comments – this is not surprising.

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The topic summary in Box 4.6 evidences a wide range of reasons for choosing to be childfree, and so the analysis does tell the reader something potentially useful. But it has no *core* meaning that these reasons cohere around. We think it's worth pointing out that the topic summary contains many micro patterns, such as *personal reasons* or *environmental reasons*, but they are thin and unidimensional – they are more like codes. Within the dataset, there is simply not enough rich and diverse data to form a number of *different* meaning-based themes related to the topic of reasons for being childfree. Looking beyond the semantic responses in the data, we do notice some patterning, across the reasons given – such as something related to *selfishness*. But this patterning is *not* related to the type of *reason* people give to explain being childfree. For a reflexive TA, we might explore whether topic-connected patterns like *selfishness* might be developed into a theme (or themes) that addresses our research question. However, were we to do that, we wouldn't limit our data instances where reasons for being childfree are discussed explicitly; we'd look across the entire dataset for anywhere ideas related to *selfishness* appeared.

### But what about contradiction?

Often your dataset will contain contradictory meanings or tensions; sometimes, individual data items will themselves contain contradictions or tensions; sometimes, the contradiction will be between different data items. How should we make sense of contradictory meaning within a reflexive TA? There are three main points to make around this:

**First**, each individual theme should not contain meanings or interpretations that are contradictory to the central organising concept of the theme. Let's go back to the topic summary versus shared-meaning theme distinction: a topic summary, which overviews the diversity of responses in relation to a topic, potentially *contains* contradiction. For instance, if you developed a topic summary on *views of childfree women*, it would likely contain points like *childfree women are viewed as selfish*, and *childfree women are viewed as generous and loving towards others' children*. These views are in tension. In reflexive TA, if there were enough complex data related to *selfishness*, you might develop a shared meaning theme around *the selfishness of childfree women*. That theme could capture data that didn't just express overt views of childfree women (e.g. *childfree women put themselves first*), but articulated the idea in less obvious ways (e.g. *I like to travel* – which subtly evokes a curtailment of personal options when having children). Likewise, if there were enough complex data related to generosity, you might develop a separate theme called something like *childfree women make the best aunties*, which, again, would develop a distinctively different – and in this case somewhat contradictory – meaning evident across the dataset.

These examples evoke our **second** key point – that your *overall* TA can contain themes developed around contradictory meanings. Different themes can *be* contradictory to *each other*, just not *internally* contradictory. Such contradictory-to-each-other themes *might* be contained within one overarching theme. For instance, the idea that *childfree people are missing out* and that *children ruin your life* – contradictory meanings sometimes articulated by the same participant or within the same data item, as noted – might co-exist within an overarching theme around children as core to organising life. Life and meaning-making are often messy. Your task with reflexive TA is not to tell a uniform, singular story (see Nadar, 2014), but to convey the key patterned meaning evident from your engagement with the data, related to your research question.

**Finally**, there is one other way that contradiction *can* appear in reflexive TA, and that is when the tension or contradiction is what the theme is *about* – where the central organising concept itself focuses on that tension. What do we mean? Let's go back to the childfree dataset, and the potential theme we discussed called *good/bad parents* (see Box 2.4 in Chapter Two; Table 4.1; Figure 4.2 above). Often, as noted in Chapters Two and Three, commenters evoked a hierarchy – or, more usually a dichotomy – between right and wrong ways of being parents. What constituted *good* or *bad* parenting was less of interest to us, analytically, than the way that parenting was effectively described in one *or* the other terms: you're either a good parent *or* a bad parent. What constituted good or bad differed greatly across the accounts; what did *not* was the sense of *splitting* parents into two distinct and dichotomised *types*. Where childfree people sat in this good/bad parent dichotomy varied – so this dichotomy was used to make sense of being child-free, but in lots of *different* ways. Hence, the central organising concept of our theme became *the dichotomisation* – this separation of parents into *either* good *or* bad. The theme did not focus on *what* constituted good parents or bad parents, but rather how this dichotomy was made, and what the implications of it were. See Box 4.7 for an extract from the write-up of this theme.

## PRECISION MATTERS: REFINING, DEFINING AND NAMING THEMES (PHASE FIVE)

This phase involves further development around your themes, as well as more precise analytic work refining your analysis. As analytic refinement involves writing, it necessarily blends into the final phase of TA – *writing up* – so we will discuss refining your analytic argument *primarily* in Chapter Five. In Phase five, you also do the refining work of figuring out the structure and flow of your analysis; you effectively *map* the way you will report on your adventure, once you're home.

**KEY CONCEPT** A theme definition can be thought of as an abstract for your theme – outlining the scope, boundaries and core concept of the theme.

take-away point of the theme, as well as the particular manifestations (and *sometimes* question) of the theme, and any subthemes.

**PRACTICE POINT** Writing theme definitions is a good way to test the 'themeyness' of a theme. If you can't sum up the gist of a theme, and its core concept, in a few sentences, further review and refinement may be necessary.

*and losses*, was first identified as '(1) to be childfree is to miss out' (see Figure 4.6). Through development and review, we concluded the scope of this theme was wider than just missing out through not having children, but encapsulated an impossibility of experiencing full humanity, and so ultimately called this theme *deficient personhood*.

The disciplined task of writing a **theme definition** – effectively an abstract for your theme – is a good test of the quality of your themes. A definition, in a few sentences, clarifies and illustrates what each theme is about – the central organising concept or key

In addition to checking for internal theme clarity, theme definitions can be useful for thinking about the organisation and flow, the overall story your analysis builds towards. The theme definition for *deficient personhood* from the childfree dataset exemplifies this (see Box 4.8). The theme *deficient personhood*, from within the overarching theme of *gains*

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**Box 4.7**

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**The ‘contradictory’ theme *Good and Bad Parents* [extract]**

A pattern evident within the dataset related to a dichotomisation that commenters regularly made, both explicitly and implicitly. This evoked two separate groups: good parents and bad parents. *Good* parents are people who do parenting appropriately – and is embodied in concepts like ‘respectable motherhood’ (Mannay, 2015). *Bad* parents are people who do parenting inappropriately – for instance in ways that regularly leads them to be characterised as ‘unfit’ parents, a label which has been applied to everyone from lesbian and gay parents, to single women, to those with mental health challenges and physical disabilities (e.g. Clarke, 2001; Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004; Van Brunt, Zedginidze, & Light, 2016):

The pity is there's no shortage of people who shouldn't have kids. Should almost have to take a pill TO have a kid. (DARE)

Itz a choice, y ave kidz if u cnt aford them. Too many hungry children goin to skool without food. (SHHO)

I love my children, but they have always been loved and cared for, fed, clothed and taught well. This is not always the case (JAOB)

Sometimes this characterisation was explicit, such as through reference to “bad parenting” or “people who shouldn’t have had kids”. Other times it was more subtle, such as in evocations of a beneficiary parent who either cannot support their children without state assistance, or the resilient trope of the beneficiary mother, who has children to access more state money, so she selfishly does not have to work (Matthews, 2014): “Plenty of people out there having kids who have never payed a cent towards society but feel free to bleed it dry” (RALA). Or through often-implicit contrasts with one’s own parenting, such as: “I have 3 well rounded kids” (HATU), implying that children in the world who aren’t “well rounded” are simply a consequence of poor parenting. There was considerable variation in *what* people claimed as good or bad parenting – related to domains like financial or emotional support, or child-centred or ‘present’ (at home) parenting. Sometimes these connected to some inherent quality of the person, sometimes to (potentially) more changeable behaviours or circumstances.

We do not focus on the content of these characterisations, so much as on the pattern of dichotomisation, and consider what impacts it has. Effectively, two different groups of people were constructed: good parents or would-be parents, and bad parents (and sometimes would-be parents). These categorisations tended to be fixed and absolute – by which we mean someone was either a good or a bad parent, rather than being a mix of good and bad, which might vary with circumstance. In this, parenting was simultaneously naturalised and denaturalised – if people have the potential to be bad parents (or good parents), then parenting cannot simply be a ‘natural’ instinct. This dichotomisation potentially achieves two different things in relation to people who choose to be childfree. First, it could be seen as serving a *positive* social justice purpose in debates, shifting parenting from the domain of the natural, by deconstructing the idea that parenting is natural and (should be) an automatic part of the life trajectory for everyone. In this way, parenting becomes something one should reflect on, and evaluate the self in relation to:

some people who choose to become parents should have thought far more about WHY they had their children. (JAOB)

(Continued)

I personally like the idea of being a parent but recognised very early on that I had too much of a temper, and that my moods were too up and down. I seriously looked at myself like giving myself a warrant of fitness for parenting, and declined the warrant. [...] I make an awesome part time, respite care mum, but I know my limits. There are so many amazing parents out there. Sadly there are also some appalling parents out there. My only judgement on the world is that I wish more men and women would give themselves a warrant of fitness before becoming a parent. It's such a huge responsibility, and it's for a very long time. (MIBE)

In MIBE's quotation, the decision to parent or not is characterised around a "warrant of fitness" to parent, akin to a test for road-worthiness that most nations require of motorised vehicles – *Warrant of Fitness* is the term for this certification in New Zealand. Unfitness is a familiar trope in 'bad parenting' discourse (e.g. Clarke, 2001), and people who made the wrong choice were described in fairly judgemental terms:

You're clear evidence that the ability to breed doesn't mean it should happen (DARE)

better not to have kids than have trophy kids and dump them in childcare from 7am to 6pm every day and then say I'm too busy to come to special events. Poor sprogs, selfish parents (BRMA)

However, although a dichotomisation into good and bad parents potentially disrupts an (often gendered) naturalisation of parenthood – through suggesting not everyone is naturally fit to parent – it also echoes a long history of discourse, policy and practice that has policed the fitness of parents, and especially mothers. This policing has occurred through legislation that prohibited same-sex adoption (Clarke, 2001), societal condemnation of the (particularly non-White, working class, teenage) single mother (Duncan, Edwards, & Song, 2002), and the removal of children from homes where their welfare is deemed under threat (Choate & Engstrom, 2014). Ironically, it also echoes recurrent concerns and debates about the risk to children of mothers *who work* (McGinn, Ruiz Castro, & Lingo, 2019).

At the same time, it does not necessarily disrupt a latent pronatalism, and alongside it the idea that those deemed fit *should* be parents. Or that those who choose not to parent should have a (valid) reason, of which 'I would not be a good parent' is key. Although it appears to situate childfree as a choice, it risks echoing a kind of voluntary eugenics, where one determines one's *unfitness* to parent and takes oneself out of the gene pool through being child-free, as MIBE effectively positions herself as having done. In this way, being childfree is not constructed as a positive and equally-valid-to-having-children life-choice that people might select, but more a service to society (and in some cases a personal sacrifice in so doing). Given a wider association of having children as a social good, this construction allows those who are childfree to position themselves as not renegeing on their social contract. Yet it retains a stain of pathology and stigma, and potentially shores up the existing moral order, in which to be a childfree person (and particularly woman) is an invalid or negatively judged life choice (Morison et al., 2016).

By utilising existing (moral) discourse in relation to good and bad parents, this pattern of meaning-making around being childfree, then, effectively, works against equality for those who are childfree.

**Box 4.8****Definition of the theme 'deficient personhood'**

The theme *deficient personhood* explores a core idea expressed in various ways throughout the dataset – that those without children are missing out through not having children, and specifically in ways that construct them as somehow less fully human. One aspect of this idea was relational, that without our own children, we have some kind of relational deficit. We notice this articulated within the dataset when people describe relationships they have with pets ("fur babies") and also with other people's children – which we broadly characterise as a *subtheme* of this theme, which we called *compensatory kids*. The other main expression of a deficient or incomplete personhood was captured by the repeated idea that you cannot really know love until you have a child – often expressed in the form of an unexpected revelation once someone had had children. This situates the emotional landscape of anyone without children as, therefore, somehow lacking. Alongside the idea of a *gap* filled by compensatory kids or pets, the childfree person is never able to achieve the full emotional and relational personhood of the parent. Moreover, because such insight was often positioned as only coming from *being* a parent (sometimes willingly, sometimes not), the person without children is positioned as eternally unable to *really* know themselves, their desires, or indeed *really* make informed choices; they are positioned ironically as somehow childlike, not *fully* adult.

In writing a definition for each theme, it's useful to ask yourself whether you can clearly state:

- What the theme is about (central organising concept).
- What the boundary of the theme is.
- What is unique and specific to each theme.
- What each theme contributes to the *overall* analysis.

If you cannot clearly answer these, your analysis will probably need some reworking. Here we come back to our 'broken record' point about *still* being prepared to let things go.

A final aspect of this refinement is, if you're working with data that have been transcribed, that you go back to the recordings to do a check on the data segments you quote. Although the validity of a theme should *not* hang on any one individual extract, taking care that you have not inadvertently misrepresented what or how something was said through the data translation process is important. For example, that obvious sarcasm was not captured in the transcript, and a response was analysed as genuine.

**Naming themes**

Another important aspect of this phase is to think about the name you will give each theme. A good theme name will be informative, concise, and catchy. If you're like us, you'll find

**PRACTICE POINT** A good theme name is a short phrase, or perhaps a heading and subheading, that captures the essence of the theme and engages the reader.

offers space for more than just theme names to be reported. You're trying to 'sell' your analysis in advance; you want to entice, but not mislead! Theme names operate a bit like an advertising tag-line – try for something as memorable as some of those.

**Second**, sometimes a poorly named theme not only misrepresents the analysis, it suggests that you've actually developed topic summaries instead of themes. *Quelle horreur!* If a theme name doesn't signal its *meaning* and *analytic direction*, but rather just names a *topic*,

there's no way to tell what exactly the analysis will say *about* that topic. Consider the difference between *stigma* and *the subtle stigma of being childfree*. The former names a topic; the latter captures *your analysis* in relation to that topic *within the dataset*. Single word theme names typically don't work well for reflexive TA.

Using brief data quotations in theme names can provide an immediate and vivid sense of what a theme is about, while staying close to the data language and concepts. Such quotations usually require an explanatory subheading. If using a quotation for a theme name, make sure it captures the *essence* and *scope* of the theme, and don't use quotations as names just for the sake of it (as tempting as it can be). A risk here is that a catchy quote doesn't *really* capture the central organising concept for the theme, or

**ALERT** If publishing your TA, you may encounter the notorious 'Reviewer 2' – a particularly negative reviewer, often sandwiched in between more positive reviews (hence Reviewer 2). One such reviewer recently derided theme names based on data quotations in one of our co-authored papers as "cutesy" and unscholarly.

the scope, and has been used because it's catchy. If you do use quotations, it's good to be aware that not everyone likes this, but it's your analysis, not theirs!

Naming themes might feel stressful – a need to get it *right* somehow. Or that there is a perfect name if only you can find it. Not only is that *not* the case, but naming things can be fun. The discussion in Box 4.9 highlights *our* process around choosing theme names, and also the interconnection between theme definitions and names. Our discussion relates to our analysis around *choice* in the childfree dataset, which we had mapped out around a possible overarching theme of *choice matters* in Figure 4.7. We reference popular culture often in

how we name themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2013). Popular culture can be a great source of inspiration for theme naming, which can quickly and richly evoke the theme concept. But in referencing popular culture texts or tropes, do be wary

**PRACTICE POINT** You can use pop cultural references to name things, but be wary of using anything too obscure.

and make sure it's not so particular, subcultural, or narrowly time-based that the theme focus is obscured rather than revealed by the use of the reference.

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**Box 4.9**

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### Naming themes related to 'choice' in the childfree dataset

*Choice* was evident to us as a broad pattern of meaning, and likely overarching theme, early on in the analytic process (as discussed throughout Chapters Two and Three). *Choice* would be a poor name for a theme, or even an overarching theme, because it simply captures the topic or concept, without telling us *anything* analytically useful about it – what exactly *about* choice?

Looking across the instances of *choice* – both latent and semantic – within the dataset, what appeared key was that having or making a choice was important. The right to have and/or enact a personal choice seemed to be pervasive. As children of the 1970s and 1980s, we were tempted to call this provisional theme *choice rulz ok* – in reference to a popular slogan from our youth! But that name would only make sense to those who got the reference, so it was probably too obscure. We kept it as a working title as the theme developed, to amuse ourselves.

This candidate theme was quite a theoretical and latent one, where the idea of choice was expressed in quite subtle ways. We drew on our theoretical knowledge of the wider sociocultural logics of choice, and how choice operates (something we have written about, e.g. Braun, 2009), to interrogate the data. Our development of the theme helped us clarify two things: (1) that choice *per se* wasn't *really* a theme, but functioned more as an *overarching* theme (see Box 4.1); and (2) that there were three *distinct* ways the idea of choice appeared across the dataset – three themes in their own right, each with their own central organising concept. Each theme was developed around a different kind of logic or rationality around choice within the dataset. Each theme contained a somewhat different idea of choice, the choosing person, and the act and responsibility of choice – and although distinct, they interconnected with each other. Our three themes became:

**Each to their own.** This pervasive notion of choice appeared widely across the dataset. It is based within the notion of liberal tolerance, and the idea that we must not judge the free choices of others, as long as no harm is done. It carries echoes of Christian morality and biblical dictates such as 'judge not lest ye be judged'. This articulation of choice focuses on not *who* the choosing subject is, or *what* their choice is, but on *ourselves*, our relationships with others. It offers a morality for living with others. The theme name captures that this articulation of choice is located in sociality, and not judging other people for their choices.

**It's my choice.** Another pervasive articulation of choice appeared based in neoliberal ideas of individual agency, where the individual is expected to make choices about their life and how they live it (Gill, 2008; Gill & Orgad, 2018). Within neoliberal logic, choosing is the right thing to do, and being a choosing subject is a strong and powerful responsibility – hence this theme name identified 'my choice' as the key element. This theme focuses on choice in relation to the person who is *doing* the choosing. We situate choice within ideas about how to live a proper life and be a proper person within the contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand context.

(Continued)

**Making the right choice.** This third theme closely connects to *It's my choice* but focuses particularly on the *process* of choice. This theme is conceptually connected to rational individualism and evokes a strong articulation of the right way of choosing. Although there were some instances where choice was framed as *right* or *wrong* in terms of outcome, the primary focus of this theme was on the foundation and process of choosing. To us, it evoked echoes of Descartes' declaration 'I think therefore I am', or Rodin's sculpture, *The thinker*, in valorising a rational, thinking, choosing subject. Choice needs to be thought out, rational, and reasonable, rather than emotional or spontaneous, and thus there are right and wrong ways to make choices. We fluctuated between calling this theme *making the right choice* and *the right way to choose* – and decided on *making the right choice*, as this name emphasised process, but still allowed us to discuss the outcome of those choices.

These three themes and names very closely resemble what we mapped in Figure 4.7. The theme names here are somewhat ambiguous however, and in fully writing up and developing an analysis (which we discuss next, in Chapter Five) we refined them further with subheadings, to become: (a) *Each to their own: liberal tolerance*; (b) *It's my choice: neoliberal agency*; and (c) *Making the right choice: rational individualism*.

In addition, we developed a fourth theme – related to the 'satellite' candidate theme in Figure 4.7. Although this theme wasn't about who and how we choose, it focused on those who cannot choose, and the articulations demonstrated the value placed on ability to choose. In this, it illuminated the power and value given to choice. We called this theme *the 'real' victims*, because commenters often expressed a deep sense of empathy or sympathy for those for whom biological parenting is desired but not (easily) possible, often without any comment around those who are childfree by choice. Here, having one's choice removed effectively victimises, and so this fits within the logic of what we realised was an overarching theme around the importance of choice.

Developing these theme definitions and names helped us to clarify the distinctive patterning around choice within the dataset and reinforced our earlier perception that it could not be captured by a single theme of *choice rulz ok*. There were too many distinct facets. But an overarching theme worked perfectly to encompass these distinctive themes, as each theme was related to and connected by an overall conceptual pattern. A trope of choice was central in making sense of the actions of the individual or couple who do not have children, and indeed, often those who do. Choice did, indeed, 'rule ok' in the logic of the dataset. For this reason, we wanted to retain the idea of the importance of choice, and we settled on the name *choice matters* for the overarching theme. *Choice matters* can be interpreted in two ways, which works well for an overarching theme:

1. It signals the scope of the analysis is about choice, as the matter at hand is choice. But it doesn't signal a particular focus. This is fitting for an *overarching* theme, but would not work so well for a theme, where you want to indicate the direction of the analysis. Compare *choice matters* with our individual theme names.
2. It can also be read as a statement of importance: choice is something that *matters*. This second reading resonated well with the emphasis on the importance of choice within the dataset.

So *choice matters* is a clever overarching theme name (if not quite as fun as *choice rulz ok*), but also one which works well to indicate the scope and focus of what is contained within it. The theme names within this overarching theme signal far more clearly the dimension and direction of particular ways choice played out.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

With this chapter, you have gotten to the heart of your adventure. You have gone deep into the analysis phases of TA, from the early moments in theme generation, where you start to cluster codes, through development, revision and refinement, to precise questions of language in theme names. To guide you through the process, we: discussed the structure and different theme levels of a reflexive TA; emphasised the importance of clear theme boundaries and a core idea, captured by a central organising concept for each theme; and discussed and illustrated some of the challenges and missteps that can take place. We provided an example of what a topic summary ‘theme’ might look like and discussed why such themes don’t fit with reflexive TA – don’t try this at home! We explored the complex challenge of contradiction in relation to themes, and illustrated how contradictory meaning *might* be incorporated into reflexive TA. We discussed various tools and techniques you can use to facilitate your TA: the value of visual mapping; the usefulness of theme definitions. We finished by emphasising the importance of well-crafted and thoughtful theme names.

### WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT...?

For a worked example of **coding and theme development** related to sport and exercise, that also illustrates the analysis of focus group data and an orientation that is both **semantic and latent**, see: Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 191–205). London: Routledge.

For a worked example related to health and clinical areas, that also illustrates the analysis of interview data and a more **latent orientation**, see: Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Terry, G. (2014). Thematic analysis. In P. Rohleder & A. Lyons (Eds.), *Qualitative research in clinical and health psychology* (pp. 95–113). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

For a worked example related to counselling and psychotherapy, that also illustrates the analysis of interview data and a more **experiential approach**, see: Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Rance, N. (2014). How to use thematic analysis with interview data. In A. Vossler & N. Moller (Eds.), *The counselling & psychotherapy research handbook* (pp. 183–197). London: SAGE.

For a worked example related to social research, that also illustrates the analysis of interview data and a more **experiential approach** (but one firmly embedded in the wider social context), see: Clarke, V., Braun, V., & Hayfield, N. (2015). Thematic analysis. In J. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (3rd ed., pp. 222–248). London: SAGE.

For an example of a paper that **reports just two themes** – each richly developed and presenting contradictory meanings – related to the topic of the worked example study, see: Hayfield, N., Terry, G., Clarke, V., & Ellis, S. (2019). “Never say never?” Heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian women’s accounts of being childfree. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 43(4), 526–538.

## ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENT READERS

**Initial theme development and revision:** Using the men and healthy eating dataset you've already worked with in Chapters Two and Three (on the companion website), start to explore potential broader patterns of meaning – you may have already started to think about these through coding, but try not to be too limited by that. Cluster codes together in *different* ways to explore what potential patterns you can make. Draw rough maps of possible meaning clusters to help develop your thinking for ways you can combine and divide the dataset.

Working with the same research question 'how is healthy eating for men represented online?', reflect on questions like:

- Does this pattern tell us something important and interesting in relation to my research question?
- What assumptions might I be making in clustering meaning in the ways I am?
- Is there a clear central organising concept for this potential theme?

Once you're fairly certain you have some distinct candidate themes, go back and review your candidate themes against the previously coded data. Then re-read the entire dataset. Ask yourself:

- How well do these patterns capture key meaning?
- How internally coherent and yet distinct from each other are they?
- What, if anything, am I missing?
- Is more refined coding needed?

Revisit your theme development and/or coding as necessary.

**Write a theme definition:** Select one of your candidate themes and write a definition for that theme (recognising that if you were actually doing this with your own dataset, this would involve skipping a few parts of the process). Try to describe the central organising concept of the theme, and the different manifestations or dimensions of the theme – its scope and boundaries. Discuss how it addresses the research question.

Reflect on this exercise. If you found this tricky, think about why, and what analytic work might be needed to develop the theme further.

If you're teaching content related to this chapter...

Don't forget to check the companion website for a range of teaching resources.