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THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

VIRGINIA BRAUN AND VICTORIA CLARKE

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7

SO *WHAT*?

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPRETATION IN REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Chapter Seven overview

Time to tackle interpretation! Interpretation, or more specifically *doing data interpretation*, is something people can find daunting. Although this chapter is located in Section Two, interpretation is something that is – or should be – embedded into the analytic process in reflexive TA (Section One), rather than being a separate optional add-on. Interpretation is not some *mystical* process, but instead involves "doing what human beings do"[1] (J. A. Smith, 2019, p. 171). At the most basic, interpretation is simply the act of making sense of something. That said, it is sometimes (incorrectly) assumed to be a process that people *implicitly* understand, or it is just not explained well. Our aim in this chapter is to discuss what interpretation involves, the different ways it can be *done*, and demonstrate *how* it is done, and done *well*, building on our discussion of (big) theory in Chapter Six, as theory always grounds and delimits data interpretation. Because interpretation, like theory, is important throughout the reflexive TA process, we have located this chapter in Section Two to avoid suggesting it's a compartmentalised practice that only informs certain phases of reflexive TA.

Reflexive TA has sometimes been *misinterpreted*[2] – potentially through our not being clear enough in our initial writing – as a purely descriptive method, as if it offered a way of simply conveying information from point A (data collection) to point B (report), like a delivery drone who picks up an order from an Amazon warehouse, and drops it at your home. Far from it! Even more-descriptive accounts of data, which stay close to participant or text meanings, both *require* and *reflect* interpretative work. Qualitative analysis is *always* an interpretative activity. You are *not* a magician; meaning is not self-evident or just sitting in data, waiting for your flourishing reveal. If you start to think about interpretation *as* integral to doing (thematic) analysis as breathing is to living – and that's how we believe it is useful to conceptualise it – then you start to appreciate how hard it is to talk about interpretation as a *separate* process and practice (though we are doing so pragmatically, here). For us, the language of *analysis* already includes interpretation built-in, as a taken-for-granted aspect.[3]

ALERT All forms of reflexive TA require interpretative work on the part of the researcher – making meaning of data is an interpretative activity.

[1]This quotation about interpretation as an essentially human practice comes from the developer of **interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)**, Jonathan Smith, talking about IPA processes, but it aligns with our point here.

[2]Reflexive TA has also been used as a descriptive method, despite our intention, which Janice Morse recently described as a form of "incomplete inquiry" (2020, p. 4). Morse warned against (such) "weak research that 'signifies nothing', simply theming for the purpose of theming" (2020, p. 4).

[3]Language might also contribute to confusion about the role of interpretation in qualitative research, as there are many different ways words like 'analysis' and 'interpretation' get used. Although early qualitative scholars framed a qualitative paradigm – in contrast to the empiricist tradition – as an *interpretative* one (for instance, in discussing quality, Yvonna Lincoln [1995] described "the entire field of interpretative or qualitative inquiry", p. 275), this isn't necessarily reflected in language used in qualitative reporting. Carla Willig (2017) suggested that qualitative researchers may have taken up the term analysis in preference to interpretation to describe what we do, to better align *with* the empiricist orientation that dominates the social sciences, as a way of rhetorically claiming validity. Within a quantitative positivist-empiricist tradition, a differentiation *between* doing statistical analyses and then interpreting the meaning of the results of those probably makes sense. But, in qualitative analysis, we feel analysis and interpretation are better understood as felted together, as impossible-to-separate strands.

Interpretation in reflexive TA is both part of the analytic process, and embedded in its outcome ('the analysis'), and we focus on both aspects in this chapter. There are different *forms* of interpretation that represent different *outcomes* connected to different approaches to reflexive TA (introduced in Table 1.2 in Chapter One) – from more descriptive to more interpretative modes, and from more experiential through to more critical takes on data. We discuss and illustrate both of these continua. Interpretation should always be tied to *context*, and we also discuss what it means to do interpretative work informed or directed by theory, as well as locating analysis within wider contexts. This connects to the ethics and politics of representational practice, or how we do interpretative work with integrity. We end this chapter with a discussion of the ethics and **politics of representation**.

DOING INTERPRETATION DURING THEME DEVELOPMENT

It's easy to conceptualise research and analysis as *revealing the truth* about something. Even if you understand truth-telling as your *purpose* with qualitative analysis (which it is for some approaches), we find a truth-telling framing unhelpful in developing an *interpretative* orientation for analysis. Our task is *not* to stand up in court and 'tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. Instead, we like Michael Quinn Patton's (1999, p. 1205) description that the analytic "task is to do one's best to make sense out of things". Instead of conceptualising your analytic task as one of discovering, distilling and revealing the essence of the data, we suggest it's better to imagine you're *telling a story* in a way that aims to *make sense of* what's going on. A story that gives the audience (a reader, a listener) a clear *take-home message* – one that includes an indication of *why they should care* about the story you've just told them. This means you have to be clear what the take-home messages you want the audience to leave with *are*, and you have to be clear on *why* you think those particular take-home messages, those *interpretations*, are valid *and* important. This is why analysis cannot simply be a compilation of quotations of data, the meaning of which is treated as self-evident (we discuss processes for quality TA in Chapter Nine). Analysis needs a strong *authorial* narrative, which takes the reader *beyond* the data (as discussed in 'Telling your analytic story' in Chapter Five). Data extracts provide the reader with the tools to *evaluate* your analytic narrative and interpretative claims.

PRACTICE POINT Conceptualise your analytic task as one of storytelling rather than truth-telling – to acknowledge the role of interpretation in making sense of data.

ALERT Your analysis needs to give the audience a take-home message: what does this mean and why does it matter?

Interpretation starts during *familiarisation* (Chapter Two) – though it's quite likely you will have already started interpreting the data, if you've been engaged in data collection. During familiarisation, or data collection, you often make observations or have ideas about things that are going on – the sorts of things you record in your familiarisation notes. Interpretation at that stage is tentative and should be recognised as such – don't cling tightly to early interpretations, assuming you've noticed everything and made sense of the data in the best way.

In general, the interpretative process for TA operates most strongly as you move from coding into theme generation, development and refinement (Phases three to five), and is honed in and through writing (including final writing up in Phase six). Interpretation needs to operate in concert with your research question – even if the particulars of that question aren't yet refined (as we discussed in 'What's my purpose here? Settling on a research question' in Chapter Two). Just as there are endless patterns we *could* focus on, it is the ones that *matter* most in addressing our research question that become part of our developing analysis, so interpretation needs to be anchored to the research question(s) and purpose of a project. Our research question(s) and purpose, alongside our dataset, provide the foundation for our interpretation; wider contextual elements provide the scope for it (discussed later in this chapter). A key practice point is to stay orientated to your research question – orientated, but not shackled, as it is not fixed.

PRACTICE POINT Stay orientated to your research question during the interpretative analytic process to avoid losing sight of your analytic focus and purpose.

Asking questions in relation to the patterns you're developing, and the implications of them, can be useful in helping to develop an *interpretative* analytic orientation, one that moves beyond describing semantic content. During phases three to five, examples of the questions *we* might ask include:

- What assumptions are part of this pattern of meaning?
    - Assumptions on the part of participants or expressed within the dataset?
    - Assumptions that *I* might be making as I make sense of the data?
- What wider meanings or ideas does this pattern rely on?[4]
- *Why* might this pattern of meaning matter?
    - Might it matter more, or less, to certain people?
- What are the implications of this pattern?
    - For any participants?
    - For the issue at hand?
    - For the academic knowledge of the field?
    - For society? Both overall or for particular groups within a society?

PRACTICE POINT Asking questions of yourself and your analysis is a useful tool for 'going deeper' into interpretation.

This isn't an exhaustive list of questions you could ask, so much as starting suggestions for how you might orientate to thinking about patterns in the dataset, and why those patterns might matter. Such questions are useful to think about for *each* potential developing theme, and for your overall analysis – the *story* that addresses your research question.

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[4]This idea – that patterns rely on other meanings or ideas to make sense – might be hard to grasp. Let's briefly explore this with the themes of 'choice' from the childfree dataset (see Box 4.9 in Chapter Four for the summary of 'choice' themes). For parenting to be imagined and framed by the logic of *choice*, and thus be the strongly patterned meaning in the dataset it was, certain other meanings related to how we think about individual people and their lives have to exist. An example of this could be that people can and should make life-choices based in *individual* (or couple) wants or needs, rather than wider family or community wants and needs. In asking this question about what wider meanings a pattern relies on, we are trying to 'denaturalise' some of the ideas that are normalised and embedded in our worlds.

WHAT IS INTERPRETATION?

Interpretation is one of the most obvious *and* the most opaque ideas in analysis, vital to the task, but hard to describe, and even harder to codify as a practice. In general, we try to avoid loose, glossy meme-like phrases such as *to be human is to interpret*, and yet interpretation is something deeply embedded in human psychological activity. Interpretation, at its most basic, is sense-making activity, and we engage in it all the time. It's what we do when we encounter the stimuli in our worlds. We try to make sense of what each stimulus represents, what it means, often without any conscious effort or intent. Interpretation is the 'so what' process that accompanies our identification of what something *is*; it might even shape our identification of *what* that something actually is. Interpretation, then, is essentially a process of making sense of what is going on – in data, in the case of qualitative analysis – why that might matter and what the implications might be.

ALERT Interpretation is the essentially human activity of working out what is going on.

Already this is sounding more cryptic than it needs to, so let's translate this into a concrete example from our everyday lives. Imagine you receive a text-based message. For most of us, text-based communications (e.g. SMS, DM) have become mundane and commonplace, perhaps our most common form of non-face-to-face communication. We recognise the stimulus for what it is easily and without thought. We read the brief message: "Sorry I can't meet later". Brief, yes. But far from simple, when it comes to interpretation! Those five words (without emoji or punctuation) could be interpreted in so many different ways. Depending on how we make sense of the message, our reaction might be anything from an affectively neutral response, to relief, or frustration, happiness, sadness, or concern. Our making sense will be shaped by what we bring to this process and the wider context of the message.

Interpretation is the meaning-making we engage in, and it does not occur in a vacuum, it's not fixed, and it's not self-evident from a stimulus itself. Some general key points about interpretation:

- *Interpretation depends on us* – on our psychology, our affect, our values and politics, and the assumptions and ideals that permeate our take on the world (the sorts of things we interrogate with reflexivity; do go back to Chapter One if you need a refresher). Some of these are temporal and shifting – for instance, our mood in the moment (imagine you're feeling misanthropic when you get the message, after witnessing a good friend experiencing some threats and abuse online) or the immediate context of our lives (imagine you're feeling overstretched and have more on your plate than you can manage). Some are more deeply embedded. For instance, as (White, middle-class) feminists, we both have a tendency to immediately notice things and explore meaning through gendered lenses. We identify gender in descriptions of events or encounters, where others might not, and it feels 'natural' to do so. We note our Whiteness and class privilege specifically, as it allows a particular (seemingly neutral, but far from it; DiAngelo, 2018) *gendered* lens in contexts of White dominance and privilege.
- *Interpretation depends on context.* What meanings or implications we make about a stimulus inevitably reflect context, both the immediate and wider context. Imagine that text is from your boss, and your immediate work context is one of precarity. You'd planned to meet to talk about your getting further work for the company. Or the message is from

an old and dear friend, but who nonetheless has a history of making plans and then cancelling on you at the last minute. Perhaps it's from a colleague you know has a chronic health condition, that impacts them in variable ways. Each of these contexts would steer your interpretation (combined with your psychology) in a different way. In relation to *analysis*, Rachel Graham's reflections in Box 1.3 (in Chapter One) highlighted that how you might read and make sense of British-based African Caribbean women's accounts of their lives depends not only on your positioning, but also on an understanding of the sociohistorical and contemporary context of racism in (and beyond) the UK (Akala, 2018; Eddo-Lodge, 2018).

ALERT The wider context of data shapes our interpretation of their meaning.

- *Interpretation brings together all our knowledge related to the subject or object at hand.* For a text message, that would include any previous communication we've had with the sender, and the thought and preparation that went into whatever was planned. Interpretation becomes our *best guess* at what is going on in relation to these aspects. In relation to *analysis*, our own experiences combined with our academic substantive and theoretical knowledge can help us go beyond a semantic reading of our data, especially if it gives us a *different* reading of what is going on than the explanations offered by participants or in the text. We discuss an example of this in Box 7.1, related to our student Sophie Sill's work on heterosexism and homophobia in women's competitive team sport in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- *Not all interpretation holds up to scrutiny.* This is not an 'anything goes' situation. Interpretation needs to be *defensible*. A worried conclusion that your boss is going to fire you would need more contextualised justification than just the message. A concerned conclusion that your colleague might be going through a bad patch would be justified through your contextualised historical understanding of the impact of their condition on their health, and how it constrains their life. In relation to *analysis*, your interpretation is never just based on the dataset. While the dataset grounds it, scholarly knowledge, theory, ideology, politics and all sorts of other factors can come together in how you make sense of meaning – and even the meaning patterns you notice.[5] Your argument for what those patterns *mean* needs to be discussed in relation to the aspects that lead you to a certain interpretation. To give a scholarly example: we have done quite a bit of work on body hair meanings and practices (Braun et al., 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2019b; Jennings et al., 2019; Li & Braun, 2017; Terry & Braun, 2013a, 2016; Terry et al., 2018). In that work, we theorise and understand body hair removal as a *gendered practice* rather than simply individual choice – yet the latter is often the predominant explanation for body hair removal by participants or in the data. We frame hair removal as gendered for several reasons – including that this is an interpretation supported by existing research and theory, and the feminist lens we bring

ALERT Not all interpretation is created equal. Interpretation needs justification. Some interpretation is justifiable; other interpretation is unwarranted.

[5]Some refer to this form of interpretative practice, informed by theory, ideology and politics etc., as *strong* interpretation (Chamberlain, 2011).

> to interpreting the data and the wider sociocultural context of body hair and embodiment. We also interrogate why participants predominantly frame hair removal in terms of individual choice – not to 'argue with' participants and show why they are *wrong*, but to explore why such an interpretation of hair removal makes sense in our contemporary context and what implications it has. Good analytic practice requires that we explain our interpretative tools and contexts for understandings to convince the reader of *our* interpretation. The question is, *why* should we be believed. More on all this in a moment.

ALERT Interpretation is inherently subjective; and this is okay! There is no 'correct' or singular interpretation of data.

The key take-away is that for us as qualitative researchers, interpretation is *inevitably* subjective (we reiterate, this *isn't* a problem), and there is no absolute, singular, correct interpretation. (Conversely, we *will* argue that interpretation can be wrong in various ways.) Our framework for reflexive TA – with phases and processes for rigour, including revisiting the whole dataset, and the requirement for being an active thinking researcher who *makes choices* – provides tools to facilitate a thorough and data-connected interpretation. When it comes to interpretation, try not to be guided by the question 'am I doing this *right*?' so much as by the questions 'are there good *grounds* for what I'm claiming?' and 'am I ignoring some inconvenient "truths"?' If you can answer yes to the second, and no to the last, you're well on your way to a defensible interpretation.

PRACTICE POINT Try to let go of anxiety about doing interpretation 'correctly' and instead ask yourself whether there are good grounds for the claims you're making about your data.

INTERPRETATION NEEDS TO BE DEFENSIBLE!

As interpretation goes beyond the data, the challenge, or balancing act, nicely captured by UK-based critical psychology scholars Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton Rogers, is:

> to go beyond what presents itself, to reveal dimensions of a phenomenon which are concealed or hidden, whilst at the same time taking care not to impose meaning upon the phenomenon, not to squeeze it into pre-conceived categories or theoretical formulations, not to reduce it to an underlying cause. (2008, p. 9)

PRACTICE POINT Ask yourself whether your developing analysis has moved too far beyond the data.

As qualitative researchers, we need to keep asking whether our interpretation has moved *too far* from the data. *Too far* is of course one of those vague concepts that can produce an instant sense of anxiety: how do I know if I've gone too far? Sorry! As we've already noted, finality, permanence and correctness are not hallmarks of reflexive TA, nor of the entire field of Big Q qualitative researching. So you do have to try to settle in to some degree of uncertainty to conduct qualitative research

effectively (the challenges and some strategies around this were discussed in Boxes 4.3 and 4.4 in Chapter Four). Practically, this question is about making sure that you're not shaping the data to tell *your* story, or smoothing over complexity to (mis)represent the stories in the data. In writing this, we get a mental image of the 'ugly stepsister' in the fairy-tale *Cinderella*, trying to force her foot into the glass slipper. Despite the very questionable gender politics of Cinderella, the image evokes well the idea of (mis)using data to tell *your* story, rather than telling *your* story *of the data*. Don't try to make the data fit your narrative; don't be the 'ugly stepsister'!

PRACTICE POINT Don't force the data into the story you want to tell.

We've put this section early in this chapter, because it signals what you're aiming for with interpretation. We as researchers need to do the work to show how our interpretation is *defensible*, in light of the intersection of: (a) our topic, existing knowledge and the wider context that surrounds it; (b) the dataset that we're working with; (c) the theoretical frameworks we're working with; (d) our individual position(s); and (e) the processes we've engaged in to develop that interpretation – sometimes individually, sometimes in a research team, sometimes with the community the research connects with. In doing so, we have to convince our audience that we haven't come to the data with our interpretation preformed, and that it has developed *through* our analytic process. This is the case no matter whether our analysis is more inductive or deductive, more developed through a hermeneutics of 'empathy' or 'suspicion' (see Willig, 2017). It's tempting to think 'suspicious' or deductive interpretation needs more care, because such interpretation more obviously goes *beyond* the voices of participants. But, as we will argue and show later in the chapter, it applies to *all* interpretation (see Fine & Torre, 2004). Let's come back to our tendency for a *gendered* analysis: as tempting as it is, we don't stomp around shouting 'that's gendered!' at everything we encounter,[6] without giving it deeper thought. Without asking ourselves what that might mean, and if, and how, gender plays out, and plays out in particularly classed, and/or raced ways.[7] Instead, we use our gendered *lenses* as a kind of signal to look at and think about something, more deeply and critically, in a *particular* way; to ask questions that locate gender as a key component to consider. We strive to use it to open up, rather than close down, meaning-making.

What is defensible depends on context, and your task as analyst is to show how and why you believe your interpretation has validity. To come back to our text message example: imagine

[6]Well, maybe we *sometimes* do this, and with lots of swearing, but only in the privacy of our own homes. It's not analysis like we're talking about in reflexive TA.

[7]Coming back to our point earlier about the intersections of gender, race and class, it would be easy for us as White middle-class feminists to simply stop at gender in our analysis, and not consider how race and class are also key elements in how we view and understand the world. Over the last few years in the westernised world, the *failure* of White feminists to acknowledge that their feminism reflects their situated *and* privileged positioning *as White* has been a cause of tensions within feminism (e.g. Cargle, 2018). Such critique is *not* new; what is new(ish) is the ways it has become more key to 'everyday feminism'.

it is from your unreliable friend, and your reaction is to shout, swear, and be tempted to throw your phone across the room. Someone who witnesses your response tells you that you're overreacting (which annoys you more!), but your response, in context, seems justifiable to you. It reflects the history that precedes the text, the rich context that grounds your response. The person judging your reaction doesn't know that, unless you explain to them. To make your reaction *defensible* to the person you are with, you have to explain to them *why* that particular reading makes the most sense to you, and why it matters, effectively providing a rationale for your reaction. If you explained that to the person with you, and they then agreed your reaction *wasn't* an overreaction, you've shown your interpretation is defensible. That's not to say that your reaction is the only one possible! It is *not* about saying you are *right* or no other reading is possible. It is about convincing someone else that the reading you've offered makes sense and matters.

DIFFERENT MODES OF INTERPRETATION FOR REFLEXIVE TA

But what does *interpretation* actually *look like* in practice? In the next sections, we discuss interpretation across different forms of reflexive TA. These different forms of TA serve quite different purposes – so although interpretation is a somewhat universal practice, the outcomes of interpretative analytic work can look quite different, depending on what it is you're aiming to do. What mode of interpretation is appropriate comes back to your research purpose, research question, and the audience(s) you're addressing with your analysis.

From more descriptive to more interpretative modes of analysis

As we've noted, all reflexive TA needs to involve interpretation. But your analyses can be situated somewhere along a continuum from primarily offering description (e.g. of an experience, such as of what it is *like* to be childfree, or of a concept, such as pronatalism) to interrogating, unpacking, and even theorising (e.g. the assumptions underpinning the ways people describe being childfree); the more interpretative end of the continuum. Even within a more descriptive mode of interpretation, we'd still characterise the interpretation involved as "com[ing] from the researcher and [. . .] informed by insights from theory and other related research" (Chamberlain, 2011, p. 50), and an understanding of the wider context.

ALERT Analysis always involves interpretation but it can be primarily descriptive, in the sense of 'staying close' to the data, to participants' sense-making, or primarily interpretative, in the sense of bringing in the researcher's conceptually informed lenses to interrogate the ideas expressed.

In the worked example analysis of the childfree dataset, the contradictory theme *good and bad parents* (see Box 4.7 in Chapter Four) offers an example that is fairly *descriptive* but also deeply interpretative. The theme describes a pattern that is evident at a quite semantic level (even *if* the idea of a contradictory theme is somewhat conceptual). In so doing, it provides a descriptive account, and one that would be easily recognisable

to someone reading the dataset for themselves. However, our analysis is interpretative, because we don't stop at the point of identification of this pattern – instead, we ask *what are the implications of this pattern?* We also located our analytic interpretation of this pattern within the wider societal context to consider such implications (see 'Locating data within the wider context', below). Similarly, our student Louisa Davey's critical realist TA around alopecia areata (hair loss; see Box 5.2 in Chapter Five) not only reported a range of meanings associated with hair and hair loss *for* the participants, but asked what these meaning patterns then meant in terms of people's lives, and also healthcare interactions and practice (Davey et al., 2019).

Our worked example analysis developed within an overarching theme of *choice matters* (see Box 4.9 in Chapter Four) offers an example from the interpretative end of the 'more descriptive to more conceptually interpretative' spectrum. This end of the spectrum often aligns with more critical, constructionist and latent approaches within reflexive TA. Our analysis was developed through our interrogation of the *logics* of choice within the dataset. Instead of stopping at reporting that 'choice' was important in how people made sense of being childfree, our analysis brought a range of conceptual/theoretical tools to the interpretative process, as we sought to parse out the different *logics* of choice within the dataset. In doing so, we identified that there were quite different frameworks or understandings of choice at play, associated with bigger Anglo-western systems of meaning. Our analysis went far *beyond* a direct reporting on recognisable patterned dataset content, to ask question about what might be at stake when we talk about parenting within choice frameworks. Why might this meaning and interpretation matter?

More interpretative analyses can *matter* in a range of ways. They can matter through the contribution they make to theoretical discussions or understandings (see commentary by Beres & Farvid, 2010, on the companion website). They can matter through providing deeper or more complex understandings of what is *at stake* for some kind of practice or policy development. For example, Ginny's analysis of 'national identity' explanations of sexual health risk in Aotearoa New Zealand provided access to meaning-making with direct consequences for how sexual health promotion should be framed, to increase uptake of the message (Braun, 2008). They can matter through providing a nuanced explanation for what might be going on, when more descriptive accounts just don't *quite* feel like they're getting to the heart of things (see Box 7.1, p. 206).

Experiential to critical orientations in interpretation of data patterns

The more descriptive to more interpretative modes overlap with broad takes on the data – whether your analysis is based in a more experiential or critical framework for qualitative researching (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As we discussed in Chapter Six, an experiential orientation to TA grounds it within the meanings and life-worlds of the participants or within the meanings of the data. Critical orientations to TA tend to take more researcher-directed interpretative frames, or an interrogative approach, where interpretation is not entirely determined by data-based meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2017). Each position

is based in different epistemological and ontological frameworks and allows us to make quite different claims, different *types* of interpretation.

Often, interpretation based around *participant* meaning might seem obvious or straightforward, and that focus might continue to be the basis on which your analysis develops and is 'completed'. Or it might prove to be a step in the journey towards a quite different take on things. To come back to our adventure analogy, imagine you've now returned home and are starting to write a story of your trip. You have loads of photos, social media posts, as well as a journal and other bits and pieces you picked up along the way. You start to write and find that as well as a description of what you did, you can identify and describe some key patterns across the diverse experiences. You're pretty happy with this first attempt, and people are interested in it – you get it published in an online magazine you admire. But your curiosity has also been piqued, and you start to read other stories, and consider different information. In doing so, your position shifts... You read a critique of the colonial gaze and neocolonialism in and through travel (S. E. Smith, 2014), and although it's a bit uncomfortable, you wonder if you might inadvertently have reproduced these ideas in how you've written up your experience. You read around gender politics in the region, and reflect on how your sex/gender may have shaped not only how you've told your story, but the very experiences you had in the first place (Kugel, 2013). You start to reflect and ask *different* questions about the ways you have understood your journey. Going back to all the evidence of your trip, you read and make sense again with new questions at the forefront of your mind. Questions such as: what sorts of things need to be in place for me to have this experience, and to interpret it in this way? What sorts of assumptions does it rest on? What (problematic or not) ideas am I inadvertently reproducing in how I've told this story? These sorts of questions – and others – help you to develop a differently nuanced and more complex understanding, including an interrogation of how you are making meaning about your journey. And, as a result of this, your account of the trip may change.

PRACTICE POINT Your analytic orientation can shift from more experiential to more critical through your engagement with the data, resulting in your settling on one analysis. Or you can offer multiple interpretative 'takes' on the data.

This is analogous to what can happen in reflexive TA, as a researcher shifts from a more experiential to a more critical orientation within the scope of a developing analysis. Sometimes, you might develop one more experientially-orientated analysis, and then move on to a *new*, more critically-orientated one (as our former student Louise Davey did, see Box 5.2 in Chapter Five). Instead of a worked example from the childfree dataset to demonstrate this, we use the analysis of one of our students, Sophie Sills, developed for her Master's project, as it nicely illustrates this shift and change. Sophie's initial *experiential* interpretation left her feeling that *more* needed to be said, to make sense of the data. This feeling was based on her experiences and scholarly knowledge. So she shifted her interpretative lens to a *critical* one, to address the nagging questions. Box 7.1 briefly summarises this project, Sophie's research question(s) and her developing analysis.

Box 7.1

Shifting from an experiential to critical orientation to build analytic depth

The analytic development of themes within the Master's research project[8] of one of our students, Sophie Sills illustrates key points in this book:

- Not getting too attached to themes early on, as your analysis might radically change (as emphasised in Chapters Three and Four);
- Shifting across more inductive/experiential and more theoretically-informed approaches to TA (discussed in Chapters Three and Six);
- The value of reflexivity in analysis (a key concept, see Chapter One).

Sophie's research explored the experiences of queer participants in competitive women's team sports. Having played competitive team sports herself for many years, and identifying as queer, Sophie was an *insider* in the research area in several ways (see 'Minimising harm in interpretation', below). Her experience suggested there were many ways that implicit norms, assumptions and expectations of heterosexuality (heteronormativity) and more explicit forms of discrimination and marginalisation (heterosexism, homophobia and biphobia) played out in this area. The research literature also indicates sports as a site in which these operate (e.g. Carless, 2012; Gough, 2007; Lenskyj, 2013; Norman, 2012; Willis, 2015; Wright & Clarke, 1999), despite a wider sociocultural context in which *liberal tolerance* has come to dominate discussion around sexuality (e.g. Clarke, 2005; Ellis, 2001; Gough, 2002). Sophie was interested in exploring the experiences of players, including around discrimination and marginalisation, in order to improve the situation, such as by developing resources and guidelines for clubs and coaches.

Sophie interviewed 31 people (most face-to-face, some via *Skype*) who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, asexual, aromantic, and unsure, who played across a wide range of sports, and at levels from international to local competition. Some were interviewed individually, and others in small groups or pairs, giving her a very large participant group for a research Master's project (see Braun & Clarke, 2013). Following transcription, Sophie embarked on reflexive TA, and her process through different thematic iterations illustrates the twists and turns the analytic path can take. Sophie's participants' stories – her data – could be read multiple ways, and indeed, this is how Sophie's analysis developed.

The first iteration produced robust patterns that spoke to participants' views and experiences around inclusion and marginalisation. Participants identified incidences of heterosexism or homophobia, but also suggested these weren't that bad, and that they can or did put them aside, that it didn't affect them. Or, that it was their own responsibility 'to deal' – to *not* be affected by it. A simple reporting of such 'results' suggests that queer participants in women's competitive team sports don't really experience much homophobia or heterosexism, and it doesn't affect them *too much*. And that reading isn't *wrong*.

But Sophie wasn't satisfied with that reading – in a way that aligns with the notion of *naturalistic generalisability* (which we discussed in Chapter Five; see B. Smith, 2018), it didn't ring true enough. She then had to grapple with questions of *why not?* and *what was missing?* from that analysis. Switching to a more suspicious hermeneutic, and going deeper into a

[8]Sophie's Master's project involved one calendar year of full-time, research-only study.

more theoretically- and contextually-informed analytic mode, she asked questions about *how can these data make sense?* and *how can I make sense of these data?* Her focus shifted from capturing experiential truth, to asking how and why might truth be made – and made in certain ways. Sophie's final analysis examined how participants talked about and accounted for their experiences in women's team sport. She particularly focused on experiences that could be described as heterosexism or homophobia, in contexts of apparent liberal tolerance, a neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility, and an emphasis on the value of 'the team' as an effective *single unit* within sports culture.

Sophie generated five key themes: *It's not so bad*; *I can take it*; *No I in team*; *Each to their own*; and *It's my own making*. These theme names have echoes of some of the key patterns captured in the first analytic iteration, but the analysis went far beyond reporting and interpreting experience. *It's not so bad* captured an overall tone in which experiences that *could* be described as heterosexism were often downplayed, dismissed, or not framed as such. Through rejecting common portrayals of queer people as victims, and drawing on ideas of the tough athlete, participants' talk framed themselves as strong and able to *take* any heterosexism. Participants often framed themselves as good *teammates* by suggesting they put others before themselves; in this context, questioning heterosexism becomes almost selfish, and disruptive to a *team* environment. Participants regularly drew on a discourse of *liberal tolerance* to describe their experiences in sport. Connecting to neoliberal individualism, some participants implicitly framed (avoiding) heterosexism as the individual's responsibility, and positioned themselves as making the correct choices, or acting in the right ways, to avoid being targeted by heterosexism (this latter theme resonates strongly with the worked example of TA we offered in Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The more 'empathetic' or surface analysis, which took the participants' accounts at face value, suggested there wasn't much that's problematic for queer participants in women's team sports; the more interpretative, contextualised, and theoretically-informed 'suspicious' analysis told a different story. This critical analysis was not intended to negate the stories participants told, but rather to use them as a starting point for a deeper understanding of what might be at stake when people say heterosexism doesn't really affect them. The participants' talk, which Sophie read in relation to, and resisting, a narrative of heterosexist victimhood, makes sense if we consider the broader sociocultural contexts of the participants' lives and experiences, and the context of team sports.

This example highlights the value of TA in producing analyses that illuminate our understanding of a particular issue, but which, instead of *revealing the truth*, can be regarded as critical interpretations arising from a context and a relationship. Between ourselves as researchers, our participants (if we have them), the data and our engagement with them, our theories around analysis, existing scholarship in the area, and any communities we might be working in/with.

As this example shows, the interpretative focus for experiential and critical TA is *quite different* (see Willig, 2017). We want to be *very clear* that we are not claiming that critical analyses are *better*, in some decontextualised way, than experiential analyses. This is not the case – both critically- and experientially-orientated work can be done poorly, or it can be done well, and again, it also comes back to fit with purpose. Part of doing analysis well is being clear you understand what it is you're doing.

ALERT Critical TA is not inherently better – more sophisticated and cleverer – than experiential TA! You should select the approach that best fits your purpose and not worry about trying to do something 'clever'. Seriously! ☺

A DEDUCTIVE ORIENTATION: WORKING WITH EXISTING THEORETICAL CONCEPTS IN DOING INTERPRETATION

Theory is one of those words that garners reactions that range from delight to fear and loathing. Theory is often misunderstood, and maybe because of that often simply ignored, in doing TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). But, as discussed in Chapter Six, theory is everywhere, and "even without great theoretical awareness, underlying theories will always be present, leading the researcher's gaze" (Malterud, 2016, p. 121). To do *good* interpretative reflexive TA, you need to understand this, and be explicit around theory, and where and how theory informs the analysis.

ALERT To really get to grips with interpretation in reflexive TA, you need some understanding of the meta-theoretical positions – the 'ologies – that underpin and give validity to your interpretative practice.

In Chapter Six, we discussed Big Theory, theory at a philosophical or meta level – the ontological and epistemological positions we're working with. We can understand data in quite different ways, and the ways we theorise them determine which sorts of interpretations hold validity, and which don't. For instance, we can treat text as simply a conveyance for experience or opinion – in the childfree comments, we'd treat the views expressed as *reflecting* the opinions of the people who posted them. Alternatively, we can theorise our data as constructing rather than simply reporting realities and truths, and we might explore how the very concept of 'being childfree' is *constructed* in the dataset – what particular nature is ascribed to it.

ALERT In reflexive TA, a deductive orientation involves using existing theory and concepts to develop your interpretation of the data.

Another way theory comes into play in doing TA is through theory-driven analysis, where interpretation utilises existing theory to guide the developing analysis. This captures analysis that is strongly informed by existing theoretical constructs (e.g. heterosexism and heteronormativity) or a wholesale theory (e.g. Foucault's theory of sexual ethics or identity process theory). In such strongly *deductive* or *theory driven* reflexive TA, you, as researcher, deliberately seek to explore, or develop your analysis in relation to, one or more pre-existing ideas or frameworks. You do not have to know this in advance! As was the case with Sophie Sills' analytic process (which we discussed in Box 7.1), sometimes early in the interpretative development, it may become clear that a more theoretically-informed analysis can tell a richer, more complex, and more useful story.[9] Box 7.2 offers a quick overview of some of the forms of theory that might inform your interpretative analytic process.

[9]This use of theory for analytic interpretation is not simply a process of bringing literature in as you tell a rich, connected analytic story (discussed in Chapter Five).

Box 7.2

Explanatory theory in reflexive TA

The whole process of interpretation – sense-making – *relies* on enmeshed layers of theory. When working in a theoretically-driven way in TA, when working with explanatory theory, Big- or meta-theoretical positions provide the all-encompassing theoretical framework for interpretation. Big Theory (which we discussed in Chapter Six) is not *separate* from the sorts of theory we discuss in *this* box and *this* section. Rather, Big Theory permeates it all, like the air we breathe: mostly we don't notice it, and we're often unaware of it, but it's constantly there.

Other types or levels of theory include:

- The theory that informs our interpretation practices in *broad conceptual* ways, such as theories related to phenomenology (Langdridge, 2017), discourse (Wiggins, 2017), or affect (Moreno-Gabriel & Johnson, 2020; Wetherell, 2015).
- Explicitly *socio-politically inflected* theories that you draw on to make sense of the possibilities and boundaries for understanding and experience within the material, symbolic, and power organisation of our worlds – our immediate and broader contexts. Such frameworks include various feminisms (Collins & Bilge, 2016; McCann & Kim, 2013), postcolonial (Said, 1994) and decolonisation theories (G. Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017; L. T. Smith, 2013), crip theory (McRuer, 2006), queer theory (Sullivan, 2013), and many more.
- Theories that are more specific – you might call them *lower-level theories* – theories that focus on exploring or explaining a specific topic, mechanism or process. Within the mainstream of our discipline of psychology, this includes popular theoretical frameworks like social cognition (Carlston, 2013), and identity process theory (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014). In mainstream psychology, this level of theory is often equated *with* theory, full stop; ontological and epistemological assumptions are rarely discussed.[10]

Theory is harder to notice if our explanatory frameworks are effectively the common-sense ones, the dominant or normative ones, because they are then shared or assumed by many, and frequently are invisible to us – just like the air we breathe. The trick is to recognise that theory is *operating* in all sorts of ways, even if it's not explicated. Our best practice guidance is to try to be as clear as we can about the assumptions that inform, and validate, the interpretation we do in reflexive TA – and to use reflexivity as a tool for striving to recognise *and interrogate* these.

Sometimes you will have a sense *in advance* (or early on) that you want to develop a theory-directed analysis. What you want to do with your interpretative work might be predominantly located and framed – at least *initially* – by ideas derived *not* from the data themselves, but from ideas already at play in the wider social or scholarly context. These ideas will direct your interpretative engagement with your data. One of the papers we reproduce with reflective commentary on the companion website provides an example of

[10]As we've noted, absence of *discussion of theory* should not be equated with absence of theory. Even if theory is not discussed at other levels, it's still there (Malterud, 2016).

this sort of TA. The authors, Melanie Beres and Panteá Farvid, who had separately worked on projects related to heterosexual casual sex in Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand, recognised their datasets provided a rich context to explore their joint interest in a theorical and practical construct called sexual ethics, connected to how people develop ethical and non-harmful (physical) intimacies (e.g. Carmody, 2008). Beres and Farvid (2010) sought to explore and understand sexual ethics meaning-making in and through their datasets related to casual heterosex. In this sort of theory-directed interpretation, your conceptual and theoretical ideas, then, explicitly guide the sorts of ways you engage with the data (sometimes even how you collect the data), and the interpretations you develop in relation to this.

ALERT Theoretically-driven or deductive reflexive TA is not about testing hypotheses.

There are two important points to note here. First, this is *not* the same as quantitative hypothesis testing. Theory-directed reflexive TA is not aiming to prove (or disprove) a theory or hypothesis. You don't *apply* a theory to the data to *test* if the data evidence it. 'Deductive' reflexive TA offers a theoretical *exploration* of qualitative data, and remains embedded within a framework of openness and situated meaning connected to Big Q research values (discussed in Chapter One). This approach is *not* about massaging your data to fit into your preconceived notions, or telling a partial story of the data that fits with a pre-existing theory or concept. Rather, this analytic orientation recognises and acknowledges the conceptual ideas we (always) come to data and a project with, and gives them greater analytic priority in our interpretative processes than in inductive-orientated analyses.

ALERT Theoretically-driven or deductive reflexive TA is not about massaging or selecting the data to fit a pre-existing theory.

When working with data in this more theoretically-informed or directed way, the following guidelines will help you to avoid (inadvertently) shoe-horning the data to fit an existing idea, and to demonstrate how you have avoided this pitfall:

- *Work from a curious, open and questioning position when engaging with data more theoretically.* For instance, understand your task as exploring *how* a theory or concept is evidenced – and *not* evidenced – within the dataset, rather than one of merely *identifying* it in the dataset.
- *Always keep your interpretations tentative.* Don't only seek affirming evidence, solidifying your analysis early on.
- *Keep asking which data aren't fitting with the developing interpretation, and, importantly, in what ways they aren't fitting.* This is about ensuring that the interpretative frames you're bringing to the data aren't obscuring a different story, a fuller story, or one that may be more important to the topic. Is your conceptual framework *limiting* what you are able to say about the data, in ways that provide either an impoverished analysis, or one that only gives a partial view? Reflect on the gains and losses connected to your particular theoretical lens.
- *Always be wary of imagining your reading as the right or the only one possible from the data.* Because interpretation is inherently subjective there is always potential – in theory at least – for multiple readings of data.

Our take-home message is that theory is unavoidable, when it comes to interpretation and analysis in TA, and it need not be scary (see Chapter Six). Recognising that theory informs the whole endeavour is a useful starting point for being explicit *and reflexive* about how theory informs the analysis – at all levels. Knowing to avoid simply laying theoretical constructs over the top of the data patterns, and always, always being tentative in taking a deductive orientation, will set you up well for doing more theoretically-driven TA.

LOCATING DATA WITHIN THE WIDER CONTEXT

It is good practice in reflexive TA to locate your interpretation within the wider context. This is not about providing a factual summary of the context of data collection, so much as treating your data and your participants (if you have them) as embedded in contexts that have inflected the data. Much as your interpretation is similarly inflected by *your* positions. Too often we read analyses that describe a topic as if it happened in Anycountry – a mythical place, but all too often, actually the US or the UK. Similarly, we read about experiences of a participant group as if they were Anypeople – again, a mythical people, but all too often actually White people from high consumption westernised countries. These experiences or perspectives are written about as if they're universal and don't need to be situated, don't need to be considered as partial and contextual – but they inevitably are that. If you speak from a position of societal or cultural dominance, from a position that is *the norm*, you are not *automatically* treated as 'speaking from a position' and thus having a requirement to name or particularise the issue or perspective you're capturing in your analysis. This connects with politics and representation (which we discuss next) but also ties to an *important* analytic practice of locating your interpretation in the wider context. By that, we mean that the particulars of the participant group/dataset, and the context of the research, are described or considered in interpreting the data, and making claims about them. Not to do so is to produce not only a poorer analysis, but to also reduce the reader's ability to consider and evaluate things like the *transferability* of your study, the applicability of your analysis to *their* context (see Yardley, 2015).

ALERT In reflexive TA it is good interpretative practice to locate your data in their wider context. This acknowledges that the sense we make of data is shaped by the contexts of its production, both immediate/local and wider.

ALERT Situating data within the wider context is part and parcel of doing quality reflexive TA, and of facilitating transferability and demonstrating sensitivity to context (Yardley, 2015) – two quality markers.

Interpretation can *locate* the data at different levels, and orientate to various aspects of the wider context. These various aspects, none of which is entirely separable from each other, include, but are not limited to:

- *Ideological aspects* – such analysis would interpret the data in light of prevailing broad meaning-making frameworks – ideologies – that form the dominant common-sense of society. An example of an ideologically-located analysis would be consideration of neoliberal

ideology, and how it shapes what is experienced, what is desired, and what is imagined (e.g. Chen, 2013; Gill, 2008; Scharff, 2016). In relation to the childfree dataset, we have noted that the idea of *individual choice* was prevalent. An analysis that just treated choice as an obvious explanation – common-sense! – would fail to locate the analysis in ideological context, where individual choice and responsibility have become core neoliberal logics about how individuals, and indeed society, operate. Another level of ideological locating could be to discuss your analysis in light of gendered or racial politics around the topic at hand. In relation to parenting, for instance, the experience of non/parenthood is deeply enmeshed with race, gender and sexuality (Clarke et al., 2018; Le Grice, 2014); it is not separable from them. For example, in a context where motherhood is expected and normative for straight women, but not-expected and less common for lesbian women, the experiences of childfree lesbians will be shaped by this differing societal context (see Clarke et al., 2018). Again, an analysis around being childfree that failed to explore how meaning connected to such ideologies would leave big gaps.

- *Political aspects* – such analysis would interpret the data in light of contemporary and/or historical political arrangements and governance. Political here could be big-P, formal government-related politics and practice. Or it could encompass small-p politics, related to the structuring, organisation, and operation of power within society, leading to differently-organised potentialities and marginalisations for different groups. An analysis around *being childfree* that located interpretation in relation to politics might interrogate how different viewpoints or meanings contrasted with, or reflected, the current political governance of parenthood and non-parenthood. The possibility to be childfree, and the sense-making around those who are, is likely vastly different in countries characterised by pronatalist politics than in those with more ambivalent or even restrictive politics (e.g. Sweden's pronatalist versus China's strict population planning laws),[11] or in a context where abortion is relatively accessible compared to tightly circumscribed or illegal, or deeply contested,[12] like it is in the US. In a different way, reference in the childfree dataset to concepts like taxation and to the future of society provide entry-points ripe for a politically-located analysis, where having children is framed as a political rather than just personal act. For instance, countries like Sweden have utilised political policy related to parenting and childcare as part of a pronatalist position, to encourage increased childbirth and parenting (Kramer, 2014).
- *Historical aspects* – such analysis would interpret the data with a longer-term view of meaning, politics and ideology in society. Such analyses seek to recognise continuances from the past in terms of available meaning, as well as departures and disjunctures. Around a topic like being

[11]The differences between pronatalist and more permissive political contexts and the possibilities and sense-making these allow for around being childfree, were starkly illustrated for Ginny one time, when she used the childfree dataset to teach TA in Iceland. The idea of 'parenthood as choice', which was prevalent in the dataset, was surprising to the students. This led to an unexpected – for Ginny – discussion of the rarity of not having children, for women especially, in Iceland, and a possibility for deeper interrogation and reflexivity around this in developing an analysis, for the students.

[12]Given potential shifts and changes in policy, data and interpretation need to be considered in relation to the *timeframe* for data collection. Meaning and possibility might vary quite considerably from decade to decade, or even year to year, especially in places where politics or policies can change rapidly.

childfree, an analysis might explore how an idea like selfishness seems to be *less* prevalent in the dataset than we might have expected, based on older analyses, and speculate as to why this might be. Or in a context like Aotearoa New Zealand, how is the historical and ongoing impact of colonisation a crucial interpretative context for making sense of the differential meaning-making around parenting, connected to race and Indigeneity. Māori parenthood, for example, has a long history of negative representation and being deemed *a problem* (Le Grice, 2014; Ware et al., 2017), that would likely inflect data related to discussions of (non)parenthood, in both obvious and subtle ways.

- *Material aspects* – such analysis would interpret the data in light of material conditions in which people's lives are embedded. For a topic like the choice to be childfree, how might affluence/poverty be part of sense-making around this? Or an analysis might explore whether the *material* possibilities around parenting, such as through a wage-related *motherhood penalty* and *fatherhood premium*, shape the choice to be childfree (Cooke, 2014). Or it might ask how the material possibilities for reproductive autonomy in a local context intersect with the options or choices that individuals articulate as available to them? For instance, in a context absent of reproductive control for women, such as where access to contraceptives is limited, is being childfree even imaginable as a *choice*?
- *Policy aspects* – such analysis would bring policy, contemporary and/or historical, to bear in the interpretation of data. For instance, policy and legislation related to reproductive autonomy and decision-making, including abortion, potentially provide important contexts for interpreting data related to the childfree choice. Policy concerns around promoting child-welfare might provide an important context from which to interrogate questions of how people make sense of those who are childfree. In the childfree dataset, for instance, the notion of *good versus bad parents* played out in multiple ways. Such concepts don't arise from nowhere; they are deeply embedded within, and both challenged and reinforced by, policy and practice related to parenting and child welfare. This sort of contextualising is particularly important for analyses that seek to speak to policy development. Note that it is particularly important to watch out for the trap of 'arguing with the data' (see Table 9.2 in Chapter Nine) when doing policy-inflected interpretation, because you might easily be drawn into comparing policy and data, and reporting on ignorance of policy or 'facts' (such as demographic data about rates of childlessness), or misunderstandings of these.
- *Discourse aspects* – such analysis might explore the discursive 'conditions of possibility' (Gavey, 2018) in and through which the data need to be interpreted, to make sense. Discursive locating means exploring what discursive formulations of the topic, and of society more generally, are at play in the dataset, and how understanding these might add to our analysis. For instance, useful questions might be – how are raced, gendered, classed, ableist, heteronormative discourses of motherhood evidenced in discussions about those who are childfree (Hayfield et al., 2019)? How might such discourses delimit attempts to create social change towards equality of possibility to be childfree? What fractures in, and resistances to, dominant discourses are also evident in the dataset?

As noted, these levels are, in practice, often deeply connected. In separating these different aspects out, we're seeking to draw attention to various options for locating the analysis in relation to the wider context, rather than suggesting these should be undertaken either discretely or sequentially. Nor are we suggesting that all of these are important always. Definitely not! What the specific mesh of contextualising will look like depends

PRACTICE POINT Which contexts are relevant to a specific analysis will be shaped by the purpose of the research.

on the particulars of each project. At the risk of sounding like the proverbial broken record, the locating that is relevant depends on your research question!

MINIMISING HARM IN INTERPRETATION: ETHICS, POLITICS AND REPRESENTATION

Discussing interpretation, Carla Willig noted that "the process of interpretation poses significant ethical challenges because it involves a process of transformation" (2017, p. 282).

ALERT Interpretation is never neutral or objective, it always happens from a position and therefore the power structures in the wider society always contextualise our interpretative practice.

There is no simple or pure description; we always interpret from a position – or, perhaps more accurately, an aggregate of positions. This means interpretation is inevitably a *political* act. We hope that by now it does not seem *surprising* that we end a chapter on interpretation with a discussion related to the politics and ethics of representation. A "concern for representing participants" has been described as "perhaps the most significant ethical dilemma we face" as qualitative researchers (Swauger, 2011, p. 500). Ethical codes highlight our professional obligation to protect people from harm through the misuse or misrepresentation of our research (e.g. British Psychological Society, 2018). As ethical qualitative researchers, we need to think about the **representational ethics** and politics of our analyses.

KEY CONCEPT Representational ethics relates to the potential for our analyses to harm our participants/the social groups represented in our data.

As we've discussed, reflexive TA research is a process of meaning-*making* and meaning-*telling* – not just summing up the things people said. Simply put, representational ethics is a question of how we tell a story that does *not do harm*.[13] But – no surprise! – there are different layers to thinking about representation, ethics, politics and harm. Two interconnected strands of the ethics and politics of representation relate to:

- *Participants in our research*: how do we tell a research story that remains *true* to participants' stories, without simply repeating what they say? We don't have to tell a story that our participants would *agree* with, however. Telling that kind of story can feel ethically troubling,[14] especially if you are doing more *critical* versions of TA (Weatherall, Gavey, & Potts, 2002), but remember these two elements:

[13]Telling a story that does not do harm in the ethical sense; we have an ethical obligation as researchers to protect research participants from harm.

[14]To some extent, feeling ethically troubled by telling a story our participants might disagree with relies on the idea that telling participants' stories would not reproduce *harmful* accounts – for instance of fat-phobia, heterosexism, transphobia, misogyny, or racism. This feeling rests on an assumption that our participants' experiences are somehow good and right. It also seems to rest on an assumption that we will be doing *experiential* research, reporting our participants' experiences and perspectives (discussed in Chapter Six). *Critical* qualitative research is very different – for example, interrogating the political operation of (harmful) discourse is vastly different from seeking to 'honour lived experience' (for some interesting discussions, see Billig, 1978; Blee, 1998; Flood, 2008; Scully, 1994; Throsby & Evans, 2013).

- First, our purpose in doing reflexive TA is to tell a story of patterned meaning, based on a *range* of data and participants. It is not to provide a case-study of a single person's experience. This means there will be elements of the analyses we present that are both familiar *and* unfamiliar in different places, to different participants, that sometimes resonate with their own views and experiences, and sometimes don't. Second, our task is one of *interpretation*, of *making sense of* what our *dataset* (not just an individual participant) tells us, based on the skills and wider knowledge we bring to the process (Chamberlain, 2011; Willig, 2017). We are not simply a *refining sieve* that the data pass through on their way from the participants to the report. Depending on the form of reflexive TA we undertake, our analysis will be closer to, or further away from, data meanings as expressed by participants.
- Regardless, we have an important ethical responsibility to ensure, first, that participants understand the *purpose* of the research and the *broad* form of the *likely* analysis we will undertake (*likely*, because sometimes this changes *a lot*). For example, you might tell participants that you intend to report the reoccurring patterns in people's experiences across all of the data and offering some observations about what these experiences might mean in the wider context. (Note we do not mean you need to tell the participants exactly what the analysis will be before you've done it; that would be impossible!) Second, that we don't undertake interpretation in a way which patronises or somehow belittles participants. For example, in doing a critical analysis related to *compensatory kids* in the childfree dataset, we would have to take care that we did not inadvertently position participants who articulated this idea as somehow misguided, or ignorant. Our focus instead should be on *the idea* and what it can tell us about the wider meanings of being childfree.
- This concern for negative impacts on *individual* participants relates to the wider communities that participants are members of, and how the stories we tell about participants might be harmful or beneficial to these wider communities. For instance, in a project Ginny contributed to examining sexual coercion among men who have sex with men – members of a marginalised community – the research team were concerned about the potential for negative impacts on both the participants *and* the wider community (Braun, Schmidt, Gavey, & Fenaughty, 2009; Braun, Terry, Gavey, & Fenaughty, 2009; Fenaughty et al., 2006; Gavey, Schmidt, Braun, Fenaughty, & Eremin, 2009).
- *The wider society.* This considers the implications for members of the community or communities that participants are part of, just noted, but also how our representational practices might work for – or against – a more socially-just society. At the broadest level, this is about taking care that our research does not reinforce existing negative stereotypes of communities or groups.[15] For instance, making sure that your interpretation does not uncritically reinforce the idea that women who do not have children *are* selfish – even if the women you interview reiterate that idea! Or perpetuate racist stereotypes that frame Māori mothers as irresponsible and even dangerous as parents (Le Grice, 2014). This is about recognising that in our societal contexts, different interpretations have different consequences, depending on who the participants are, and indeed who *you* are, as the researcher. Researcher identity is part of the issue of representation and ethics and connects to various positions of social marginality and privilege (see Box 7.3).

[15]The potential for negative impacts on the participants and the wider community of men who have sex with men was something Ginny and her co-authors explicitly tackled in their reporting from the men and sexual coercion project (e.g. see Braun, Terry, et al., 2009).

Box 7.3

Interpretation across difference: Power, privilege and positioning

Here we introduce three useful concepts related to interpretation and analysis – though they also connect more broadly to research design and research practice before, and after, analysis. These concepts are insider/outsider positions, the Other, and **intersectionality**. Each is relevant and important to consider in relation to interpretation, ethics and politics, but frames or approaches these in slightly different ways.

The concept of insider and outsider is the most straightforward. We are an *insider* researcher if we are a member of the group we are studying, and an *outsider* researcher if we are not a member of the group we are studying. But identity is messy, and we are often a complex mix of *both* insider and outsider (e.g. Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Hellawell, 2006; Obasi, 2014; Paechter, 1998, 2013; L. T. Smith, 2013), and sometimes insider or outsider identities shift and change. It's often assumed that being an insider researcher is simply better (inviting trust or bringing an insider advantage; Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010), and that it confers a more ethical position. But any position raises challenges and complexities (e.g. Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013).[16] From the point of view of *interpretation*, it is important to recognise the position(s) we speak from in relation to insiderness and outsiderness, and engage in reflexivity in relation to understanding, interrogating and acknowledging how this has shaped our research processes (see Hellawell, 2006). But it's not so simple...

A framework of insider/outsider risks obscuring the social reality that not all identities are created equal – and that although there is considerable variation in the privilege afforded to any individual member of a certain social group, social *groupings* overall vary in their level of privilege or marginalisation within society. How much insider and outsider positions matter can vary along these lines of privilege and marginalisation. For instance, when researching Māori reproduction and parenting for her PhD, book contributor and Aotearoa New Zealand Indigenous psychologist Jade le Grice was an *insider* in working with a marginalised Indigenous population in a settler-colonial country.[17] On another important dimension of the project, Jade occupied a *partial outsider* position, as she was *not* a biological parent, although had atawhai children (a partner's children she temporarily nurtured as her own during a relationship) while writing her PhD (this evokes an insider/outsider position that can – sometimes quickly – change).

In relation to Jade's project, her insider and outsider positions were ones of different significance to society. Another useful concept to make sense of the ways power is inflected through

[16]If you are an outsider considering conducting research with a socially marginalised group, look for discussion and guidance on conducting appropriate and sensitive research with your participant group. See, for example, guidance for conducting research with trans participants (N. Adams et al., 2017; Vincent, 2018) or discussion related to the *possibility* of non-Indigenous researchers being involved in research with Indigenous populations (e.g. Came, 2013; V. M. Carpenter & McMurchy-Pilkington, 2008).

[17]This designation of Jade as an insider researcher is, however, too simplistic, as insider and outsider positions are more complex than just being members or not of broad social groups, especially where marginalised and oppressed populations are concerned (L. T. Smith, 2013). As Jade reflected on in her PhD (Le Grice, 2014), a simplistic notion of insider-as-Māori was complicated by her own experiences, in a colonial context where Indigenous access to community and identity has been suppressed in all sorts of ways. In such oppressive colonial contexts, being able to feel you have an 'authentic' Indigenous identity can be challenging (e.g. Borell, 2005).

societally-significant differences is 'Otherness' or 'The Other'. A concept of *the Other* has been theorised and described within various scholarly traditions, from western philosophy to postcolonial studies to feminism. Typically, the term the Other is used to describe a person or persons who belong to a social *group* that is marginalised or otherwise outside the dominant norms (e.g. who, in westernised nations, is female, Indigenous/a Person of Colour, working class/poor, LGB+, disabled, trans or nonbinary). It captures privilege and disenfranchisement and does so through theorising the individual *within* current and historical societal organisation and structures of power.

Theorising Otherness is not *just* about insider or outsider status, but about power. Issues relating to **representing the Other** capture, in the words of British feminist psychologists Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson, "whether, and how, we researchers should represent members of groups to which we do not ourselves belong – in particular, members of groups oppressed in ways we are not" (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996, p. 1; see also Rice, 2009). For reflexive TA researchers focused on participant lived experiences and/or sense-making, the politics and ethics of representing the *Other* is an important consideration. Simply *avoiding* research that might involve representing the Other is not the simple solution. As the majority of academic researchers come from positions of some social privilege, just researching as insiders would perpetuate inequity, where knowledges and experiences of those socially marginalised or invisiblised remain hidden. At the same time, the notion of typically relatively privileged, White, middle-class researchers benignly 'giving voice' to participants from social marginalised groups – and neglecting to interrogate Whiteness and the lives of the privileged – has rightly been problematised (e.g. Clarke & Braun, 2019a; Fine, 1992).[18]

The concept of **epistemological violence** has been developed to capture the way *interpretation* of data from or related to, and subsequent *representations of*, the Other, can do harm (L. T. Smith, 2013; Teo, 2010, 2011). The closely related concept of **epistemic violence** evokes *harm* related to *knowledge* and discourse, connected to systems of power and oppression (see Spivak, 1988), and epistemic *exclusions* through who gets to be a legitimised knower (e.g. Ahmed, 2000; Ymous et al., 2020). Any research involving representing the Other needs to be undertaken with great care, *without* assumptions of entitlement to ask any questions and make *any* interpretations with *any* populations, and *with* reflexivity.[19]

In talking about representing the Other there is a risk that a singular dimension of identity is decontextualised and treated in a *simplified* way. Although there is value in focusing on broad

(Continued)

[18]Although we've already also unpacked the idea of simply 'giving voice' from a research practice point of view, this discussion relates more to the ethics and politics of the notion. Despite criticisms, there remains a qualitative tradition orientated to giving voice (e.g. MacKenzie, Huntington, & Gilmour, 2009). The ethics and politics of this are different depending on how 'consciously' and 'reflexively' such research is undertaken, from what positions the researchers speak, and whether the research is informed by community-based or **participatory research** principles and practices.

[19]See Norris (2015), for an example of a reflective engagement with the complexities of Otherness in research using TA; for still-thought-provoking discussions of the politics of representing women's experiences, see classic texts from Fine (1992) and Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996).

categories – such as women, or disabled people – there is *much* variation between people within social categories (as our brief discussion of Jade's positioning noted). Some frameworks theorise discrimination or privilege in 'additive' terms – with concepts like 'double discrimination' (e.g. Fairchild, 2002). Within an additive framework, bisexual Black men, for example, would experience 'double' discrimination – as bisexual *and* as Black. Each form of marginality a person experiences can be conceptualised as a box, and like a box each is separate and self-contained. If a person has more than one box, these are stacked on top of each other – theoretically, the person with the highest stack is the *most* marginalised. But this model oversimplifies how systems of marginalisation work as these often cannot be simply parsed out. How might we theorise these differently to capture the way different systems intersect and shape each other, and to capture social privilege? Intersectionality can offer a valuable approach for tackling this challenge. A concept with a long history in US Black feminist thought and activism dating back to anti-slavery campaigns (e.g. Combahee River Collective, 1995; Truth, 1851), intersectionality came to prominence through the work of US Black feminists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), who coined the term (see also Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2014; Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Marfelt, 2016; Overstreet et al., 2020).

Intersectionality theorises discrimination and social marginalisation outside of simple additive models and instead captures both experiences of social disadvantage (e.g. Black and bisexual disadvantage) and *privilege* (e.g. male, abled, and thin privilege), and theorising these as almost two sides of the same coin (e.g. racism and White normativity don't just disadvantage people of colour, they also privilege White people). It particularly captures the ways in which different forms of privilege and disadvantage intersect. For example, different systems of marginality and privilege – around race and gender say – are not separable, instead they *inextricably* shape the meaning and experience of each other. The Black anti-slavery and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth's (1851) famous 'Ain't I a woman?' speech, delivered in 1851 at the second annual Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, is often used to powerfully highlight the racialisation of dominant constructions of femininity in the US at the time:

> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?

In this popularised version of Truth's speech,[20] womanhood is not some universal category that applies to all, and Blackness cannot simply be 'added' to it, to provide a fuller definition of some generic category of woman. Instead, this account reveals Whiteness and femininity as felted together so they cannot be disentangled from each other.

Intersectionality has been widely taken up within certain disciplines – though not as much in our discipline, psychology, as one might expect (Phoenix, 2006). But we should note: the uptake of intersectionality in social sciences has been critiqued, with the concept being transformed into a way of 'capturing complexity' – at the level of the individual – rather than

[20]The popular – claimed 'true' – version of her speech appears to be anything but. Instead, it's been described as a revised version of a (problematic) account of her original speech (see Overstreet et al., 2020). Two versions of the speech can be compared on the website: www.thesojournertruthproject.com/.

addressing oppression and power at the sociostructural level (e.g. Cole, 2020; Overstreet *et al.*, 2020).[21] In terms of interpretation within reflexive TA, what might intersectionality offer or mandate? At the most basic, a way of engaging with participant data that is nuanced and contextualised, and incorporates privilege and marginalisation into our sense-making. That recognises the locatedness and partiality of what we claim. Coming back to questions of ethics, politics and practice, it requires reflexivity to recognise our interpretative work is always going to be partial and imperfect and reflects *our* situatedness. Some useful reflections on the challenges of implementing intersectionality theory in empirical research include Bowleg (2008, 2017), Cole (2009) and Phoenix (2006).

ALERT Language matters! Think carefully about the language you use to describe social groups, especially marginalised groups, and groups to which you do not belong.

Part of the wider context for research is language, and the way it can often unintentionally marginalise. Therefore, it is important to consider the language you use, and how it might convey stigma, or might marginalise. A good *starting* guideline is to work with the language people themselves use.[22] For instance, if someone uses a gender-neutral personal pronoun *they*, do not misgender them by using she or he when referring to them in any publication. Mainstream psychology's publication 'bible' – the American Psychological Association's (2020) *Publication manual* – includes useful guidance around avoiding bias through language, related to a wide range of marginalised social identities. But beware: language shifts as context changes, and sometimes *quite* rapidly. The types of terminology that make it into publishing guides – like the *Publication manual* – might become out of date before the guide is updated. They also likely represent a more mainstream take on language and its consequences than those working at the forefront of social justice might prefer. For instance, in the UK, BME/BAME – Black and minority ethnic/Black, Asian and minority ethnic – is currently the dominant *mainstream* language for people and communities of colour, but there are numerous critiques of the problematic assumptions embedded in

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[21]A focus on complexity rather than oppression in using intersectionality has also been argued as a way Black women or Women of Colour – the original focus of the theory – have been marginalised or 'erased' in the application and development of intersectionality studies (e.g. Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Cole, 2020).

[22]However, even the notion that you should start from the language people use themselves is more complicated, and needs to be approached cautiously. If you're not an insider to a community, it's important to be mindful and reflexive around a sense of entitlement to use insider terms (as illustrated by debates about the appropriateness and/or appropriation of slang terms like *woke* and *bae* – coming from African-American cultures – or *yas kween* and *throwing shade* – coming from US Black and Latinx, queer, drag cultures – being adopted by liberal straight White people (Tremeer, 2019). Even what terms are valued or used can be contested *within* communities.

such mainstream terminology (Gabriel, n.d.). What might be *best practice* isn't always easy to identify, especially if you're not connected to a community or activist context. For instance, around disability, you can find advice to use 'person first' language – such as 'person with a disability' – with the intent of not defining someone by their disability. You can also find advice to use 'disabled person' to capture the way people are disabled *by society* rather than being inherently disabled themselves (which person first language arguably implies). Our advice: look for recent advice around best practice, and especially from respected scholars or activist organisations. But, if you're working with a marginalised population, educate yourself around what is at stake with language, and reflect on your positionality in the project (see Box 7.3).

Being reflexive, asking questions about the social locations we're reading our data from, what values might be embedded in that reading, what we might be noticing and *not noticing*, and how our readings might impact those affected by our project (e.g. our participants, or social groups represented in the data) is crucial for engaging in the interpretative process in an ethical way.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has focused on *interpretation* – one of the key elements of the analytic process in reflexive TA, and in qualitative analysis more widely. We described what interpretation is and explored different ways interpretation can be approached in reflexive TA. We discussed modes of analysis that are *more* descriptive through to modes that are *more* interpretative, as well as more *experientially* orientated to more *critically* orientated analysis. We considered the different ways theory can provide a framework for, and even guide, the interpretative process. We emphasised the need for interpretation to be *defensible*. To be defensible, interpretation needs to be grounded in the dataset, but also located, and we explained a number of different ways such locating can be achieved. We finished up by discussing ethics, reminding ourselves that analysis is a political act, and therefore important for ethical consideration. Our interpretation needs to consider how we represent participants in the stories we tell.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT...?

For a really excellent discussion of ***interpretation***, located within but applicable beyond psychology, we recommend: Willig, C. (2017). Interpretation in qualitative research. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 274–288). London: SAGE.

As a starting point for reading around ***ethics*** and qualitative research, including ***representation***, see: Swauger, M. (2011). Afterword: The ethics of risk, power, and representation. *Qualitative Sociology, 34*(3), 497–502.

For a broader discussion of the complex issues around ***ethics***, particularly related to critical research, see: Macleod, C. I., Marx, J., Mnyaka, P., & Treharne, G. J. (Eds.). (2018). *The Palgrave handbook of ethics in critical research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

For an introduction to ***intersectionality theory and practice***, this book offers a rich discussion: Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Malden, MA: Polity.

For a longer discussion of the ***politics of research and knowledge, including Indigenous research and decolonisation***, we recommend this excellent book: Smith, L. T. (2013). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Dunedin: University of Otago Press.

For a paper which nicely illustrates ***the value of time and distance for developing richer interpretative insights***, see: Ho, K. H., Chiang, V. C., & Leung, D. (2017). Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis: The 'possibility' beyond 'actuality' in thematic analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 73*(7), 1757–1766.

We reflected on ***time in qualitative research and analysis*** in a recent chapter: Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). The ebbs and flows of qualitative research: Time, change and the slow wheel of interpretation. In B. C. Clift, J. Gore, S. Gustafsson, S. Bekker, I. C. Batlle & J. Hatchard (Eds.), *Temporality in qualitative inquiry: Theories, methods and practices* (pp. 22–38). London: Routledge.

For an example of ***interpretation at the more descriptive/experiential end of the reflexive TA spectra***, focused around the topic of 'childfree', see: Bimha, P. Z. J., & Chadwick, R. (2016). Making the childfree choice: Perspectives of women living in South Africa. *Journal of Psychology in Africa, 26*(4), 449–456.

For an example of interpretation at the ***more theoretical/critical end of the reflexive TA spectra***, focused around the topic of 'childfree', see: Graham, M., & Rich, S. (2014). Representations of childless women in the Australian print media. *Feminist Media Studies, 14*(3), 500–518.

ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENT READERS

Located interpretation activity: Use the healthy eating and men dataset you worked with in Chapters Two to Five, and select one of the themes you developed. With this theme, try to develop an interpretation that is located within the wider context. Select *one* of the contextual elements we discussed (i.e. policy, ideology, etc.). Do some research to gain more understanding of the wider context relevant to the theme. For instance, if you were to choose *policy*, you might both Google healthy eating policy from the UK (where the dataset comes from), *and* search for academic studies on healthy eating policy. Then, further develop

your analysis of the theme related to what you have learned. Use this information to contextualise and rationalise the claims you're making about the data in the theme, and to discuss why the theme you've identified matters. For example, your reading around policy might have helped you to notice different ideas or assumptions related to your theme, which have implications for how and why you understand this theme as important. In doing this task, you will be (re)writing the story of the theme developed so far – focusing on the *so what* in your interpretative story.

Reflect on representation: Reflexively consider your identities and practices in relation to the healthy eating dataset you've compiled (e.g. are you a man? Do you come from the same social and cultural location as the stories? Do you consider yourself a healthy eater?). Ask yourself in what ways what you're noticing in the data, and the interpretations you're making, might be inflected – strongly or partially – from these positions? Ask yourself what you might be missing. If you're doing this as a classroom activity, the next step would be to discuss your reflections and developing analysis with a classmate, and explore whether you can use the different perspectives you each bring to develop the analysis and/or your insight further.

If you're teaching content related to this chapter...
Don't forget to check the companion website for a range of teaching resources.