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Thematic Analysis

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Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves searching for recurring ideas (referred to as *themes*) in a data set. This chapter discusses the value of thematic analysis for community psychologists and describes, as an application of this method, a study of how a domestic violence court addressed substance abuse problems among both defendants and victims. In this study, we used an open-ended, inductive style of interviewing, typical of qualitative methods, that allowed us to capture the perspective of various actors in the court system, including judges, probation officers, victim advocates, and court administrators, as well as those who work in agencies that serve clients with a record of substance abuse and domestic violence. Thematic analysis enabled us to identify ideas common across these interviews.

INTRODUCTION TO THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Theoretical Basis of Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative method. The APA PsychNET defines a qualitative study primarily as one that does not emphasize quantification: "a type of research methodology that produces descriptive data, with little emphasis given to numerical quantification" (Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms, 2007). However, this defines qualitative research by what it is not, namely quantitative. Those who take a strictly methodological approach define qualitative research by the tools used to generate nonquantified data, such as case studies or focus groups, but that hardly captures the essence of interpretive qualitative methods, which involve a search for the meaning of phenomena to participants (Banyard & Miller, 1998). A basic assumption of this approach is that what is real is socially constructed. In other words, people attribute meaning to particular phenomena in interaction with those around them in context-specific settings. How people make sense of their experience is the focus of the research. Because various people may differ in their understandings, there is no single, fixed reality apart from people's interpretations. Researchers working from a critical theory perspective add a focus on the importance of power in shaping people's viewpoints, emphasizing the issues of dominance and control (Schensul, 2012). Thus, people's interpretations of phenomena may differ, perhaps as a function of their location in a social system's hierarchy, and multiple versions of reality may coexist.

The constructionist perspective conflicts with the postpositivist approach dominant in psychology today, which assumes that there is a measurable reality independent of our perceptions. The postpositivist perspective emphasizes hypothesis testing and a search for causal relationships among variables, while the constructionist approach seeks to understand the subjective meaning people put on their experience (Eagly & Riger, 2014). However, qualitative data may be used in a postpositive, deductive manner to test hypotheses. For example, qualitative data may be coded, counted, and then treated quantitatively in statistical analyses. Alternatively, qualitative data may be used as an adjunct to quantitative data, either to develop hypotheses then tested quantitatively or to expand on quantitative findings. In contrast, our focus here is on the interpretive, inductive process of identifying themes in a textual data set. In studying the domestic violence court, we sought to understand how actors in a specific context viewed the co-occurrence of domestic violence and substance abuse; we did not quantify the data or test

preexisting theories. This approach to qualitative research is uncommon in many areas of psychology. Examination of psychology journal articles coded in PsycINFO as empirical found that only 8.7% were classified as qualitative-only, while that percentage shrank to 1.8% in the 30 journals considered most influential in psychology as identified by their 5-year impact factor scores (Eagly & Riger, 2014). There are signs, though, of increasing interest among psychologists in qualitative methods, including the establishment of a new journal, *Qualitative Methods*; the formation of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology; and chapters on qualitative methods in psychology research methods handbooks.

Stages in Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis involves proceeding through a series of steps that focus on the identification of recurring themes or ideas in a textual data set. Organizing information into themes is a process that forms the core of many qualitative approaches. For example, content analysis similarly may involve coding data but then treats the codes statistically, for example, looking at the frequency with which certain codes are present. In contrast, thematic analysis does not involve statistical analysis. Grounded theory also seeks to identify patterns in qualitative material, but ongoing analyses while data are being collected guide further data collection. In thematic analysis, data analysis does not begin until all data are collected. However, similar to grounded theory, thematic analysis seeks to develop theories that are based on the data.

Typically, a researcher conducting thematic analysis will work with interview data and inductively attempt to derive themes that are present (Pistrang & Barker, 2013). All themes in a given data set may be identified, or the focus may be on a specific theme, which allows examination in more detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes could be either implicit or explicit ideas that are present in the data set. They usually emerge multiple times within each interview as well as between interviews with different people. A theme also needs to capture something important in relation to the research question and something salient to participants. How exactly this is done depends on the purpose and theoretical framework of the study, but it is important to be consistent in identifying and developing themes.

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) described the process of analyzing qualitative data as moving up a staircase, starting with raw text, then identifying relevant text, then finding repeating ideas, and then grouping these into themes. Once themes are identified, theoretical construction may begin. In thematic analysis, this process proceeds in a particular set of stages, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006):

Stage 1: Immersing oneself in the data. This stage involves transcribing interviews and reading the transcripts repeatedly. Transcribing is a time-consuming process but may be useful to become familiar with the data and offers the opportunity to begin to think about possible codes. While reading transcripts, a researcher should actively look for meanings and patterns. At this point, it may be useful to make notes on potential coding categories that could be further developed in subsequent analyses.

Stage 2: Generating initial codes. Once researchers are familiar with the data, they can identify an initial list of codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) contrasted data-driven codes that emerge inductively from the data set with theory-driven ones that respond to a specific question used to guide the analysis. Codes enable organization of the data into meaningful units, but they are not yet themes, which are broader and may capture several codes. Data may be coded manually or by computer. If one is coding manually, Braun and Clarke (2013) recommended writing notes or placing post-it notes on the texts, using highlighters or colored pens to enable the visual identification of repetitions. At this point, it is critical to code for as many potential themes as possible, as the value of some codes may become apparent later in the process, and more than one code may apply to portions of the data set.

Stage 3: Searching for themes. Once the data have been coded and material falling under the same codes has been brought together, a search for themes may begin. This stage involves considering how different codes may fit together into broader themes.

Themes may be organized hierarchically, with higher order themes and subthemes, or in networks of interlocking ideas (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Braun and Clarke (2013) suggested that visual representations such as tables or drawings may be helpful. At this point, a list of potential themes may exist, as well as codes that do not fit into any theme.

Stage 4: Reviewing themes. Once a set of potential themes is identified, they need to be reviewed and refined. Some potential themes may not be relevant to the research question, while others might be combined into broader ideas or divided into separate themes. There should be clear coherence of data within themes and equally distinct boundaries between themes. Two processes now occur: The first is to evaluate whether the coded extracts that make up a particular theme fit together, and the second is to assess whether the themes as a whole capture the entire data set. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggested rereading the entire data set at this point to capture any data that fit within themes but were omitted in earlier coding.

Stage 5: Defining and naming themes. Once a thematic map of the data exists, further refinement of the themes may occur. The critical task here is to identify the central idea in each theme and provide a name that concisely captures that idea. Subthemes may be described that capture dimensions of a theme. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggested writing a detailed analysis of each individual theme and how it fits into the overall picture of the data set.

Stage 6: Producing the report. Once themes and their interrelationships are fully identified, a research report may be written. The report should present the analysis in a way that the reader sees as trustworthy. This may involve including data extracts that distinctly illustrate the themes, as well as discussion of the decisions that were made during the process of the study. Braun and Clarke (2013) emphasized that the report of the study needs to go beyond simply a description of the data to make an argument. They raised critical questions that need addressing: "What does this theme mean? What are the assumptions underpinning it? What are the implications of this theme? What conditions are likely to have given rise to it? Why do people talk about this thing this particular way (as opposed to other ways)? What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic?" (p. 94)

The Value of Thematic Analysis

Banyard and Miller (1998) offered three reasons for the use of qualitative methods: (a) Such methods are consistent with the core values of community psychology; (b) they may be used to develop culturally anchored quantitative methods; and (c) they are useful for understanding the subjective meanings that people give to their experience that then give rise to certain behaviors. Thematic analysis meets all of these criteria.

Others argue that qualitative methods are valuable because the richness of qualitative data permits in-depth examination of nuances and contradictions, as well as the development of theory in underresearched areas (Pistrang & Barker, 2013). Perhaps most important is that qualitative methods allow access to meaning in context. They offer the opportunity to explore an issue in depth without the use of preordained analytic categories that may limit a participant's response or a researcher's investigation. Today there is a press for "evidence-based practice" that privileges randomized controlled methods and hypothesis testing, but such deductive methods may not be appropriate for all research questions. Not all people may respond to a situation in the same way and responses may vary depending on the setting. Particularly in a field such as community psychology where diversity is valued, inductive approaches such as thematic analysis allow an understanding of complexity and context-specific variation.

Qualitative methods such as thematic analysis are also valued as a means of giving voice to "the other," that is, of allowing those traditionally unrepresented or underrepresented in research to present their viewpoints in their own words, unhindered by predetermined response categories (Pistrang & Barker, 2013). Although quantitative research also may capture the responses of those

who traditionally have been marginalized, qualitative methods may allow more unfettered communication. In addition, those who believe that research should include an action agenda, intended to address injustices and bring about social change, may prefer qualitative methods because of the relatively more equal relationship between researchers and participants (Creswell, 2007).

All of these apply to thematic analysis. Additionally, thematic analysis has one major strength over other qualitative approaches, which is its considerable flexibility while remaining rigorous. Moreover, thematic analysis can be used across a variety of different theoretical frameworks and worldviews. These may differ depending on the theoretical orientation of the researcher or vary by the question being asked (Braun & Clarke, 2006), yet thematic analysis as a method for examining qualitative data may be widely useful. In addition, thematic analysis is relatively straightforward and accessible.

Issues to Consider

Although analyzing qualitative data using the stages previously outlined may appear to be straightforward, there are several pitfalls that may occur (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The first is a failure to develop an overall analysis of the data and instead simply presenting extracts of the data set. The second is simply using the interview questions to organize the data, in which case no analysis has been done. The third is an analysis that is not sufficiently grounded in the data, misinterprets the data, or does not persuade the reader of the argument being made. The reader may be hesitant to accept the argument being made if there is no attempt to consider data that contradict the main argument. Finally, a weak thematic analysis is one that fails to consider the theoretical framework that guides the work. Perhaps most important is that there be a good fit between what one claims and the supporting evidence, that is, that the analysis is clearly supported by data.

Critics of qualitative work assert that it is anecdotal or that researchers can selectively pick the data elements they want to make an argument rather than systematically analyzing a data set. Furthermore, those trained in quantiative methods may raise concerns about validity and reliability in thematic analysis. Traditionally, validity refers to the extent to which researchers' claims about knowledge correspond to the reality they are studying (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990), while reliability refers to whether consistent results are obtained when the same measures are used repeatedly. These concepts pose challenges for all qualitative research methods, including thematic analysis. The interpretive perspective in qualitative research rejects the idea of a singular reality that is independent of our perception of it. Complicating validity still further, participants may see things differently over time or may fail to recall events, and the process of data collection itself may affect participants' views (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). Consequently, the question of whether research findings conform to reality is inappropriate. Instead, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria for judging qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to whether the research participant finds the results believable. Because the aim is to describe the participant's worldview, participants are the best judge of accuracy in this case. Asking participants to comment on the researchers' interpretations and auditing field notes and other data by a researcher not directly involved in the study are ways of testing the credibility of the data (Barker & Pistrang, 2005). Transferability refers to the extent to which findings may apply to other settings, while dependability requires demonstrating that findings are consistent and could be repeated, perhaps by the inclusion in research reports of detailed description of data collection methods. Finally, confirmability refers to showing that the findings could be corroborated by others and are not biased by the researcher's values. For example, the researcher could describe a search for negative instances that challenge the interpretation of data or could keep an "audit trail" of work for others to review. These characteristics make up "trustworthiness," Lincoln and Guba's (1985) term for the rigor of research.

Some see these standards as unique to qualitative research, while others view these concepts as loosely parallel to those in quantitative research (Winters, 2013). For example, credibility may be seen as the parallel to internal validity, while transferability parallels external validity. Dependability is similar in concept to reliability in quantitative research, while confirmability is the counterpart

of objectivity. However, the constructivist assumptions underlying qualitative research place boundaries on the extent to which these concepts overlap. Quantitative research typically is rooted in a realist epistemology, which assumes that there is a real world independent of our perceptions of it against which validity claims can be tested. Interpretive qualitative research such as thematic analysis, in contrast, is based in the constructionist view that because there is no objective reality independent of our perceptions of it, it is impossible to verify our perceptions against a "real" world (Pistrang & Barker, 2013). Although qualitative research may be conducted from a realist perspective, here we discuss interpretive qualitative research based on a constructionist view of the world.

All research is vulnerable to being swayed by the personal values and beliefs of the researcher. This is a particularly sensitive issue in qualitative research, as the researcher becomes the measurement instrument, asking questions and making observations. Thematic analysis is less structured than quantitative research, raising more opportunities for the researcher to influence the outcome. Researchers bring their worldviews, their values, and their life experience into the research process. Reflexivity, the process of critical reflection by researchers about their impact on their research, is designed to work against the possibility of undue influence. Reflexivity might include researchers' reflections on their choice of methods and their assumptions about the phenomena under study or discussion of how their identities or background might affect the research process. The purpose of reflexivity is not to reduce bias, which assumes that complete objectivity is possible. Rather, reflexivity requires researchers to consider how their way of looking at the world may shape the research process, in both detrimental and productive ways (Bailey, 2012). The critical issue is the extent to which the research process is transparent, not whether it is biased (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004).

Transparency may be increased by reviewing notes or memos that researchers write during the course of a study. Memos may include discussion of potential codes and themes, as well as decisions made while data are collected. Memos may also include discussion of any personal characteristics or experiences that might influence the research. These might go beyond personal demographics to include previous experience with the subject under investigation. Such factors may not necessarily be negative, as they may alert researchers to subtle distinctions of the phenomenon under study and may increase trust from research participants, facilitating the research process (Barker & Pistrang, 2005).

CASE STUDY

Domestic violence (DV) courts are based on a problem-solving approach to justice that aims not simply to punish but also to rehabilitate. A common obstacle to rehabilitation is substance abuse, as DV and substance abuse often co-occur among both victims and perpetrators (Brookoff, O'Brien, Cook, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Campbell, 2002). Therefore, a number of people who come through a DV court are likely to also have a substance abuse problem. The goal of our study was to examine how a DV court treats substance abuse, both by offenders and victims. A detailed account of this study may be found in Riger, Bennett, and Sigurvinsdottir (2014).

We employed a constructionist perspective in our study. Because a DV court is a complex setting, it is unlikely that everyone in it will see an issue the same way. Our goal was to understand how different actors view the co-occurrence of DV and substance abuse in court and how those views are shaped by their roles and positions of power. We therefore interviewed people in a range of positions in the court and used thematic analysis to analyze the interviews because of its flexible yet rigorous nature, which would allow synthesis of different viewpoints into a coherent narrative.

The DV court in this study was located in a large Midwestern metropolitan area and was established in 1985. The court hears cases of violence by intimate partners and by family members or roommates who hit, choke, kick, threaten, harass, or interfere with the personal liberty of another family or household member. The court has connections with local batterer intervention programs and victim advocates but no formal connection with agencies that treat substance abuse. In 2011, the criminal side of the court conducted an average of 900 hearings per week (Office of the State's Attorney, 2011). A previous study of 899 offenders passing through the court showed that most (67%) were ethnic and racial minorities, few (17%) had postsecondary education, and the rate

of full-time employment (57%) was low (Bennett & O'Brien, 2007).

In order to study the court in detail, we needed approval to gain access to the court and its workers. The two senior authors of the study had worked with local DV agencies for many years and knew the administrator of the court. After getting support from the administrator, we wrote to the Chief Judge describing the proposed study and requesting approval to conduct interviews with members of the court. The study was approved by the Chief Judge as well as by the university's Institutional Review Board. The administrator then notified members of the court about the study, and we recruited key informants located in various roles throughout the court. In addition, we also interviewed key members of batterer intervention programs and substance abuse and domestic violence agencies.

Sample

We used purposive sampling, which involves deliberate selection of participants who are knowledgeable about the topic under study (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). To obtain a broad picture of the court, we interviewed judges, public defenders, state's attorneys, probation officers, the court administrator, advocates for victims, advocates for offenders, and a pro bono legal advocate. Most DV courts link to community agencies, such as programs for batterers or agencies that serve victims of domestic violence, and we also interviewed representatives from those agencies, totaling 22 key informant interviews, which usually lasted about 1 hour. All interviews were audiotaped with the participants' permission. The interviews were unstructured, but all participants were asked about how substance abuse becomes visible and is addressed by the court.

Procedure

We recruited participants by telephone; all those contacted agreed to be interviewed, although seven public defenders chose to submit written statements rather than be interviewed. Participants were asked how the court identifies substance abuse, how often they see substance abuse problems in court, how much of a problem they believe it is, how it comes up in court, and what they thought should be done about it, if anything. Each of these questions was tailored to participants' roles. An undergraduate assistant transcribed the interviews. In addition to the interview transcripts, we also observed the court in session several times and took notes during the process. These were not directly analyzed but informed our thinking about the data and emerging themes.

Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, data analysis proceeded according to the steps outlined by Braun and Clark (2006).

1. *Immersing oneself in the data.* During this phase, we became very familiar with the data. This happened in two phases. First, we conducted the interviews, asking the participants about substance abuse and the DV court. We listened to each participant, made notes during the interview. and informally discussed the content with each other during the data collection process. During the second phase, the two senior researchers read the interview transcripts repeatedly to understand not only the content of the interviews but also to identify nuanced differences in people's viewpoints.
2. *Generating initial codes.* The two senior researchers independently generated codes with the goal of organizing the data into meaningful units. Braun and Clark (2006) referred to coding done with specific research questions in mind as theory-driven coding, as opposed to more general data-driven coding in which specific issues to be examined in the data are not predetermined. It quickly became obvious in reading the interviews that a number of barriers prevent substance abuse from being identified and addressed within the court, and coding was done with an eye to examining those barriers. Each of the two senior researchers therefore went through the interview transcripts repeatedly to identify how and why substance abuse becomes apparent and is addressed in DV court. They also identified important differences in participants' views. For example, both of the researchers noticed that the issue of substance abuse came up in very different ways for those working with victims and those working with perpetrators in the court.

3. *Searching for themes.* After generating an initial set of codes, the two senior researchers compared their findings. For each code, they had identified quotes from the interviews to support their points. The researchers came up with slightly different, but significantly overlapping, themes. They discussed the themes, looking for commonalities in their analyses, and were able to integrate both of their coding schemes into one. The codes were reorganized into themes and subthemes.

   The combination of the two researchers' coding systems yielded the following themes: structural constraints (e.g., bounded role definitions precluding attention to substance abuse); economic constraints (e.g., lack of funds for substance abuse treatment); and negative attitudes of court and community personnel about the survivors of domestic violence (e.g., seeing the survivor as provoking violence).
4. *Reviewing themes.* At this point, Braun and Clark (2006) recommended reviewing and refining themes to see if some might be eliminated (as not sufficiently supported by the data) or combined. They recommended considering whether there is coherence within themes and sufficient distinctions among them. Up to this point, the two senior researchers had carried out all of the data analysis. The third researcher had read the transcripts but had not generated codes or themes. Now the third researcher read the entire data set with the three themes in mind in order to examine whether the themes fit the data closely and to assess coherence and distinction. The third researcher searched for quotes in the data that both supported and negated each of the themes. All three researchers then examined these findings and agreed that the themes represented the data and that all three themes were present across all the interviews.
5. *Defining and naming themes.* Next all three researchers met to discuss the themes, identify the essential features of each, and clarify the main point of each theme and any important subthemes. Each theme was given a name that captured its essential meaning. The researchers then reviewed a list of quotes drawn from the interview transcripts that were identified for each theme and chose the quotes that best exemplified the themes.
6. *Producing the report.* Braun and Clark (2006) emphasized that the report needs to contain an argument rather than merely describe the data. The argument that we made is that substance abuse is not identified or addressed in DV court because of specific barriers. For example, structural constraints, such as circumscribed roles, push legal actors to focus on violence and ignore substance abuse. Moreover, the court is an adversarial system, which prevents the identification of substance abuse because it would be harmful to both defendants and complainants. Negative attitudes toward victims can also prevent the identification and intervention of substance abuse. Finally, a lack of resources puts strain on the court and connected systems, making it even less likely that co-occurring DV and substance abuse among victims and perpetrators will be addressed. The report was written in the form of a journal article, which was published in an academic journal (Riger et al., 2014).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability checking takes a different form in a qualitative project than in a quantitative one. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness for judging qualitative research are to evaluate credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility involves seeing whether the participants find the results believable. We had intended to present the report to the court and had asked for a meeting in which to do so, but such a meeting was never scheduled, so it was not possible to get participants' reactions to the report.

Transferability refers to whether the findings may apply to other settings. Some of the results found in this study are likely to be found in other DV courts because they are produced by overarching systemic factors, such as the organization of the legal system. Whether negative attitudes would also be found in other DV courts remains to be seen. Dependability refers to whether the findings are consistent and repeatable from the existing data, which is supported by the fact that two

researchers independently found similar themes that were then reviewed by the third researcher. Finally, confirmability refers to whether findings can be corroborated by others and are not influenced by the researcher's values. To meet these criteria, the researchers looked for negative cases that challenged each of the themes. All of these factors support the study's reliability and validity.

Reflexivity

We approached the court as outsiders with no stake in the court system. The first two researchers are professors and the third is a graduate student; all identify as feminists. All three had worked with victims of domestic violence, the first two researchers for decades, and their sympathies lie with survivors of violence. Yet the researchers attempted to remain neutral during interviews so that respondents would express their opinions freely. No one, including victim advocates, hesitated to criticize victims. The researchers found themselves surprised and a bit shocked by the negative attitudes toward victims that were encountered in the court, but the negativity was not entirely clear until the data analysis was complete. Therefore, we do not think our attitudes affected data collection or analysis.

Limitations

Thematic analysis is a flexible method that allows analysis of qualitative data that is typically collected through interviews and observations. As with all qualitative research, as noted earlier, it is vulnerable to the beliefs and values of those who employ it. As is usual in qualitative studies, the results may be confined to the context in which they are gathered and may not generalize beyond this setting. The intention of this study was not to develop generalizable findings but rather to understand how actors in a particular context understood that situation. In addition to the possibility of skewed results, other problems potentially exist. The researchers obtained access to the court because of preexisting relationships with the court administrator; others may find access to a research site difficult. There are also practical problems in thematic analysis. Repeatedly reading interviews can be time-consuming and tedious, and consistent themes may not always emerge. Finally, this study required three people to do the analysis, which may not always be possible.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have briefly reviewed the conceptual basis, purpose, and process of thematic analysis. In our example, we used thematic analysis to systematically identify patterns of meaning in data collected from many people who work in a DV court. This method allowed recognition of important differences in how people conceptualize DV and substance abuse, as well as how systemic factors in the legal system hinder the identification of these co-occurring problems.

Thematic analysis is a flexible and accessible method which we would encourage researchers to employ when they have complex qualitative data but want a systematic and rigorous approach to accurately represent those data. Qualitative data from studies that focus on people in context are typically rich and multifaceted, making thematic analysis an important addition to the toolbox of any community psychologist.

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