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Chapter 18: Approaches to thematic analysis: Becoming a knowing researcher

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Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Appreciate that thematic analysis is a family of methods.
- Distinguish between codebook approaches and more organic, open and reflexive approaches to coding data.
- Recognise the difference between topic summaries and shared meaning-based themes.
- Discuss the role of the researcher in thematic analysis, including the active role in reflexive thematic analysis.
- Reflect on and make appropriate conceptual, procedural and language choices for different thematic analysis approaches.

Introduction

Thematic analysis is a common choice for analysing qualitative data, involving processes of coding and theme development to generate understanding around patterned meaning. It is typically understood as an analytic *method* (a theoretically flexible tool or technique for analysis), rather than an analytic methodology, such as discourse analysis, which comes with an inbuilt theoretical framework [see 1]. However, these apparently straightforward descriptions conceal complexity. Thematic analysis is not a method (singular) so much as a group of methods, which share some aspects, but can diverge significantly in procedure and philosophy. Certain iterations of thematic analysis are aligned with different research values or 'paradigms' (the belief systems that shape your research design decisions, see Chapter 3). Understanding these paradigmatic differences is crucial for making appropriate decisions in research using thematic analysis. This chapter aims to explain different approaches for clinical education researchers, who are likely to

encounter very different examples and explanations of thematic analysis across disciplines and publications. This chapter offers a framework for understanding these differences, so that you can make informed decisions in your own projects and achieve alignment between your stated paradigm and analytic methods. For further practical guidance, please see our book [1].

The spectrum of thematic analysis approaches

Thematic analysis approaches exist on a spectrum from the 'scientifically descriptive' to the 'artfully interpretive' [2], or positivist to non-positivist. (The ways paradigms are referred to vary by discipline and geographic location [see 3, 4]. We have chosen to use broad terms in this chapter rather than the terms used in Chapter 3). Another useful way to map the thematic analysis spectrum is a small q-Big Q qualitative differentiation [5]. Big Q captures the use of qualitative data and analytic techniques within a qualitative paradigm or values framework; small q refers to a narrower orientation to qualitative research, focused on data and technique. There is no one set of values that all Big Q researchers agree on, but most would reject the possibility of objective knowledge, view qualitative research as inherently subjective, and meaning and truth as contextually situated, partial and multiple [6]. In small q, qualitative research tends to default to the disciplinary dominant values framework – usually some version of positivism (a conceptual framework that – depending on the version – values producing or striving to produce objective knowledge about an-assumed-to-be-independent-of-human-practices reality; it often now appears in a modified form referred to as post-positivism, see Chapter 3). Whether your qualitative approach is Big Q or small q, non-positivist or post-positivist, there is an aligned thematic analysis approach. This chapter gives you the tools to figure out which approaches do and don't fit with your research paradigm and values, and (thus) how to do conceptually coherent thematic analysis.

What do thematic analysis methods share? Typically, they encompass processes of coding and theme development, with the end result a set of themes capturing important meanings in the data. They allow you to engage more inductively or deductively with the data, basing your analytic interpretations very strongly in the data content (inductive) or in ideas somewhat external to the dataset, such as ideas developed through other scholarly engagement, or theoretical constructs (a more deductive approach). They also offer the possibility for you to explore and code meaning in more semantic (manifest, explicit) or more latent (hidden, implicit) ways [see 1]. Where thematic analysis methods diverge is in the conceptualisation of core constructs, and the process of coding and theme development – and the role of the researcher in this. Across different approaches,

procedural differences reflect underlying research values, which legitimate their use. Understanding the differences in core concepts and procedures for different methods is essential to being a 'knowing' practitioner of thematic analysis. In this chapter, we illustrate our discussion of key differences in conceptualisation and procedure using an example study (introduced in Box 18.1) from one of our students. We chose this study as it has broad relevance to health research and education, highlighting the value of insights generated across disciplinary contexts – such as health psychology – where different research questions are likely being asked.

Box 18.1. Experiences of diagnosis and self-treatment for people with pernicious anaemia.

Conducted by Valentina Acquaviva, this study explored people's experiences of seeking a diagnosis of, and self-treating, pernicious anaemia. Pernicious anaemia is a chronic auto-immune disease that limits the body's capacity to absorb B12 from food and supplements. Symptoms overlap with those of other conditions, making diagnosis difficult. Within the UK National Health Service, treatment typically involves a B12 injection every two to three months. Anecdotally, some patients report requiring more frequent injections, but their doctors are often unsympathetic. Valentina's MSc Health Psychology project took a broadly experiential approach, aligning with much qualitative health psychology research that emphasises listening to the voices of patients and their illness and treatment experiences, and making empathetic interpretations of participants' sense-making [see 1]. Participants were recruited through the Pernicious Anaemia Society, and advertising on social media. Because the participant group were geographically dispersed and likely to experience fatigue and other symptoms that could limit their capacity for more demanding data generation, Valentina opted for an online qualitative survey [7]. The survey was kept short (three substantive questions) and participants were asked to indicate their willingness to take part in further data collection; those participants were sent a follow-up survey with an additional three questions, developed following familiarisation with the initial survey data. Responses from the two surveys were treated as a single dataset and analysed using a reflexive version of thematic analysis.

What is a theme and why does how we conceptualise themes matter?

Producing a set of themes is the purpose of thematic analysis, but what a theme is, is all too often implicit rather than explicit. This matters, as there are almost oppositional conceptualisations of 'a theme' in different methods, and failure to explicitly understand this can result in incoherent and poor-quality thematic analysis [see 8]. A common definition of a theme is a pattern of meaning identified or developed across a dataset. However, this definition obscures variation in what

'patterned meaning' is understood as, and in practices for 'identifying' such patterning. We highlight divergence by briefly describing three – not mutually exclusive – theme conceptualisations: 1) themes-as-topic summaries; 2) themes as shared-meaning-based interpretative stories [see 1]; and 3) themes as diamonds scattered in the sand.

What we call a topic summary theme is one centred on a particular topic or domain within the data. It often summarises what participants reported in relation to that topic, which might be closely aligned to a data generation question. For instance, participants in the pernicious anaemia study were asked a question about their experiences with General Practitioners (GPs) and other health professionals. A classic topic summary theme would be 'Experiences with GPs', with the theme overviewing the main points raised by participants describing their encounters, illustrated with data extracts. It might be divided into two subthemes – 'Positive experiences' and 'Negative experiences' (Box 18.2 provides some examples of the latter from the data). What unites material included in a topic summary theme (or subthemes) is the shared *topic*. Because of how they're conceptualised, such 'themes' can be developed early on in, or even *before*, the analysis processes, making them more like analytic 'inputs' than 'outputs'.

Box 18.2 Data extracts from the pernicious anaemia study that could illustrate 'Negative experiences' or 'GPs are dismissive and obstructive'.

I still continued to feel unwell even with thyroid treatment and went back to the GP who told me there was nothing serious wrong with me and sometimes we just have to put up with things.

My GP was, as so often is the case, totally useless - saying that 'it had been caught early because I only had mild macrocytosis' and dismissing the fact that I was experiencing some significant neurological issues as not being anything to do with B12.

My GP insisted I was depressed and became annoyed when I said I did not want to take anti-depressants as I thought it was something else… This condition has significantly impacted on my life […] This is not recognised or addressed by my GP. I have to manage it alone.

A theme as a shared-meaning-based interpretative story captures something fundamentally different. A theme here conveys variation and nuance across the dataset related to, or united by, a central idea or concept. A shared meaning theme from the pernicious anaemia study was 'GPs are dismissive and obstructive', which captured the various ways GPs were experienced as dismissing participants' health concerns and obstructing their access to meaningful treatment (see Box 18.2). Echoing the use of 'postcode lottery' to depict regional disparities in healthcare,

a theme which captured *unpredictability* around GP support was termed ‘GP lottery’. This included that even good GPs couldn’t be relied on (because they were a locum, they left the practice or retired), meaning participants who were currently supported by their GPs still experienced substantial anxiety about their treatment being withdrawn. The participant experience of GP care captured in these themes overlaps with the topic summaries just noted, but here we hone in on a central aspect of interaction/experience, which illuminates something crucial for understanding the particulars of the experience of pernicious anaemia-related care. Within our approach to thematic analysis, which we now term reflexive thematic analysis [9], the researcher tells an interpretative story about what this meaning helps us understand about our topic, rather than offering a descriptive account of data content [2], differentiated into positive and negative experiences. In contrast to topic summaries, shared-meaning-based themes cannot be developed early on in the analytic process, because they require sustained analytic engagement to understand which patterns may be significant and offer useful insights [see 10, 11]. Developing this type of theme requires you to really get to know your dataset and to spend time noting and reflecting on different facets of meaning contained therein. Such themes are often quite different from what might have been imagined at the start of the process.

Our third conceptualisation orients to a different-but-related issue: are themes real, or are they produced (which isn’t the same as made up!)? We’ve called the (implicit) conceptualisation of themes as *real* as a ‘diamonds scattered in the sand’ [12] approach. Here, themes are treated as real in the sense that they pre-exist analysis, they can be ‘extracted from’ data, and your role is to ‘discover’, ‘identify’ or ‘find’ these themes in the data. This understanding of themes often intersects with themes-as-topic summaries. It does not align with reflexive thematic analysis, as it evokes the researcher as (ideally) neutral conduit from data to results. Furthermore, it obscures how important being an active, reflexive researcher, who understands that you produce the analysis through your engagement with the data, is for reflexive thematic analysis (this active role is captured by the shorthand phrase: ‘themes do not emerge’). The themes as diamonds conceptualisation does appear in research exploring meaning-based themes, but it is not well aligned with Big Q qualitative research values [see 13]. A more coherent understanding is that themes offer a way to organise your reading of your data, your sense-making activity, and provide the structure for the interpretative story you will tell. That story does not pre-exist the analysis, or reside in the data, but develops from you working to make sense of, and develop an analytic story about, your dataset.

How a theme is conceptualised matters for a range of reasons, including what you understand data as giving you access to, what practical analytic processes you engage in, and methodological considerations you have to address. Take the notion that themes should accurately or faithfully represent the participant experiences conveyed in the data – a worthy idea, but one that is theoretically bounded, and needs unpacking. Do you imagine your analysis offers an accurate (or inaccurate) mapping of the data, or an analytic *interpretation* of the data? With the former idea, which overlaps with topic summaries and themes-as-diamonds, themes can be correctly or incorrectly identified; the allocation of data to themes through coding can be correct or incorrect. This post-positivist framing means processes to ensure accuracy – such as someone else checking/validating that data have been correctly interpreted – become necessary. Other practices that fit with post-positivist logic are realist/concrete measures of (theme) frequency and calculations to determine sample sizes [e.g. 14].

With shared-meaning-based interpretative story themes, the idea that themes might be correct or incorrect makes no sense. Because of the inherent subjectivity in the analytic process, themes cannot be validated as correct or incorrect by anyone else. However, just because themes are conceptualised as stories the researcher has produced, based on their analytic engagement, this doesn't mean anything goes. Themes cannot be right or wrong, but they can be stronger or weaker, with greater or lesser interpretative depth. And what we can say is always bounded by the dataset [1].

The thematic analysis family: A tripartite typology

Methods of thematic analysis get us to themes in quite different ways. We have developed a typology of approaches based around these procedural differences – reflecting 'textbook' characterisations of thematic analysis methods, rather than the messier reality of these methods as used and reported in practice. We call these coding reliability, reflexive and codebook approaches to thematic analysis. The procedural differences overlap, but imperfectly, with whether themes are analytic outputs (and interpretative stories) or analytic inputs (topic summaries).

Coding reliability thematic analysis

Coding reliability thematic analysis falls at the scientifically descriptive [2], small q end of the spectrum. Informed by a post-positivist paradigm, a central concern is establishing the accuracy and reliability of data coding [e.g. 15, 16], and the analytic process is designed for this purpose. Themes tend to be conceptualised as topic summaries, and developed early in the analysis,

alongside a coding frame or codebook, which is then used to guide the allocation of data to themes. The coding frame consists of a definitive list of codes. For each, there is a label, definition, instructions on how to identify the code, details of any exclusions, and examples [15]. Themes are typically described as 'found' and 'identified' evoking a 'diamonds in the sand' conceptualisation. In coding reliability thematic analysis, coding is primarily about *process*, rather than generating a specific product (codes); themes and codes aren't clearly distinguished, and the terms are often used interchangeably. A typical code/theme would be 'negative experiences of GPs' mentioned earlier – coding would identify all instances of such experiences in the data, and then this data would be summarised and reported as a 'theme'. Multiple coders (some ideally naïve to the topic) would independently apply the coding frame, to avoid assumptions and expectations, or 'bias'. The level of coder agreement is calculated, with high levels of inter-coder agreement, determined by standard statistical tests, treated as evidence the coding was reliable and accurate. The reassurance of objectivity that coding reliability approaches appear to offer may hold appeal to clinical education students who have been taught to value objectivity and avoid bias, and where commonly deployed quality criteria [e.g., 17] can reinforce such notions. To us, in terms of the qualitative insights they can produce, such approaches are limited by their conceptual and procedural commitments [see also 2].

Reflexive thematic analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis – including the approach we have developed [1, 18] – is firmly Big Q and artfully interpretative [2]. In reflexive thematic analysis, themes are conceptualised as meaning-based, interpretative stories. Themes are 'developed' or 'generated' by an active and ideally reflexive researcher, after thorough familiarisation and coding processes. Coding is radically different both conceptually and in practice, to coding reliability thematic analysis. Codes are a *product* of the process of coding – conceptualised as 'things' produced during the analytic process. Rather than the broader coding categories characteristic of coding reliability thematic analysis (e.g. 'negative experiences'), necessary to facilitate high levels of intercoder agreement, codes in reflexive thematic analysis tend to be more nuanced, capturing your analytic 'take' on the data as well as summarising meaning you consider to be analytically relevant. Code labels are typically pithy phrases (e.g. "I know my body" evoked the ways participants in the pernicious anaemia study claimed experiential authority on their bodily experience), rather than one or two words capturing the topic. The coding process itself is open, organic (evolving) and doesn't involve a (fixed) codebook or coding frame. As coding progresses, codes can and should evolve to better capture your deepening insight into your data (e.g. coding labels can be tweaked; the

boundaries of a code refined; two or more codes collapsed together; a particularly complex code split into two or more codes to better parse out different meanings). Potential themes are explored through clustering codes, considering the stories they capture and convey about the dataset, and re-clustering and refining until a robust, meaningful and important story of the dataset has been developed. As a subjective, iterative process, there is no right or accurate way to code, no correct themes to 'identify'; any analyst could bring different understandings. A single researcher is common. We hope to convey to clinical education researchers the value of the rich, nuanced, unexpected insights that Big Q/reflexive thematic analysis can generate, and that this can support resistance to the post-positivist traditions delimiting research in some clinical disciplines [e.g. 19].

Codebook thematic analysis

Codebook thematic analysis is located somewhere between coding reliability and reflexive approaches, and encompasses methods often developed for applied research, such as template analysis [20] and framework analysis [21], which may make these particularly useful for some of the research questions and contexts clinical education researchers work on. For example, framework analysis was developed for applied social policy research, to help researchers, working as teams, often including qualitative novices, analyse large datasets to tight deadlines, and to produce analyses that addressed very focused research questions (e.g. what are the barriers to or facilitators of successful implementation of a policy?). In order to meet pragmatic demands, codebook thematic analysis tends to offer relatively structured analytic procedures, using some kind of codebook (template, framework, etc). This compromises on the open-ended and exploratory character of Big Q, even as qualitative research values are still embraced. In codebook approaches, in contrast to coding reliability approaches, the intent of using a codebook is to chart or map the developing analysis, rather than to determine the accuracy or reliability of coding. Where a team of coders is used, as is often the case with framework analysis, this is typically to divide the labour of analysing a large dataset to a tight deadline, not to determine the accuracy of coding. As with coding reliability thematic analysis, the themes produced through codebook approaches tend to be topic summaries, developed early on – an input orientation – though some applications, like template analysis, do allow for the possibility of developing themes from and through coding.

These procedural variations also more subtly shape the nature of the components of the developing analysis. For instance, as previously noted, in coding reliability thematic analysis, a prioritisation of coding agreement necessitates having codes/themes that are relatively broad or coarse, and often focused on relatively superficial meaning [22]. For similar reasons, codes tend

to be relatively descriptive and concrete; a code/theme might be designated as latent because the participant doesn't use particular words, even though the ideas they are explicitly expressing are captured by the code/theme. The open organic approach of reflexive thematic analysis, where coding quality is not judged by consensus or agreement between coders, means that codes are often more fine-grained, nuanced and interpretative. In reflexive thematic analysis, the notion of latent codes designates the assumed, the unspoken, the inferred, rather than the explicitly stated.

The role of the researcher in thematic analysis

Researcher subjectivity – what we bring to the analytic process, and how that (potentially) shapes analysis – is treated very differently in different thematic analysis methods. The post-positivist foundations for coding reliability thematic analysis, which idealise objectivity, frame researcher subjectivity as 'researcher bias' [18]. Such subjectivity becomes a validity threat as it risks distorting the truth, and must be controlled for. Conceptually, such 'influence' is able to be managed and contained (through coding agreement procedures). In reflexive thematic analysis, situated in a non-positivist Big Q paradigm, the notion of 'influence' itself is problematic, as it conceptually evokes the research and the researcher as separable, with the latter only potentially acting on and shaping the former. In reflexive thematic analysis, these can't be disentangled; the researcher *is* the research. Researcher subjectivity is positioned not just as inherent and inescapable, but as an asset, as valuable. This position reflects a non-positivist take on knowledge generation as inherently subjective and situated [see 21], and researcher subjectivity as not something to be afraid of. Reflexive thematic analysis invites us – requires us – to interrogate our subjectivity, our generative role in the research, and to reflect on and articulate this in our research and research reporting. However, centring research subjectivity doesn't mean 'anything goes'. The practice of *reflexivity* is key to good quality practice for Big Q qualitative research. Helpfully there are many resources around reflexivity [e.g., 23, 24, 25], including an excellent example of reflexivity when doing reflexive thematic analysis [26]. We offer a brief reflexive account of researcher subjectivity as an asset in the pernicious anaemia study in Box 18.3.

Box 18.3. Subjectivity in the pernicious anaemia study.

One of the aspects we engaged with reflexively in the pernicious anaemia study related to our positionality on the topic and our relationship to our participants – something that is also an ethical consideration! Basically, we might ask, am I an insider, sharing key aspects related to this project, or an outsider? (It's rarely this stark, we can be inside and outside in various ways,

[see 27].) In the past, only privileged outsiders were trusted to be 'objective' when researching socially marginalised groups. Thankfully, this has changed in many contexts, and the disability activist slogan 'nothing about us without us' captures the emphasis on working in partnership *with*, rather than doing research *on*, minoritised groups, especially when the researchers are outsiders. Valentina was an outsider in the pernicious anaemia study, as she didn't have lived experience of pernicious anaemia or B12 deficiency. Victoria her supervisor did, and self-treated with B12 injections. Victoria's insider experience was highlighted in recruitment materials in an effort to build trust with potential participants and to convey a sense of Valentina and Victoria being broadly 'on their side', wanting to hear and do justice to their stories of diagnosis and self-treatment and any frustrations they experienced with standard treatment protocols.

Such positionality was also related to the *analysis* process – the ways their experience (or lack of experience) with B12 deficiency and self-treating shaped how they engaged with the data and was part of an ongoing dialogue from the 'noticings' in early familiarisation through interpretation of final themes.

Diversity of thematic analysis methods and question of quality

Your approach to using (or managing) researcher subjectivity needs to conceptually fit with your approach to thematic analysis, and so is part and parcel of doing methodologically coherent, quality research. Unhelpfully, terms like 'researcher bias' and 'reflexivity' are often used interchangeably, including in quality criteria and reporting standards [e.g., 28, 29], leaving us to navigate our way through a conceptual fog. This messy use makes it especially important that you build and gain conceptual and theoretical understanding of what you're doing, and why, when doing your research, starting with whether you're aiming to be a descriptive scientist or an interpretative storyteller [2]. Our top tip for doing good quality, methodologically coherent thematic analysis is to endeavour to strive to be what we term a *knowing* researcher. If you do not understand the philosophical/theoretical and conceptual differences across the approaches, and how these translate into procedural differences, thematic analysis can go very wrong [see 8].

Common problems we encounter in published thematic analysis include some things we've already highlighted, including confusing topic summaries with shared meaning themes, and treating thematic analysis, and making claims about it, as if it were a single, homogenous method. Other problems are connected to theory, including treating thematic analysis as atheoretical, not

specifying a theoretical framework, or treating the approach as inherently realist, essentialist or phenomenological, and/or descriptive/summative. Thematic analysis can indeed be these things. But reflexive (and codebook) thematic analysis hold the potential for more social/radical and interpretative/theoretically-informed research [see 1]. Theoretical consideration matters, not least because no analytic approach is ever atheoretical. You always make assumptions, whether knowingly or not, about what your data represent, and what constitutes meaningful knowledge. For quality, you need to ensure your research is theoretically and conceptually coherent (recognising that the landscape and language of this varies by disciplinary context [see 3, 4]).

That there is much variation across thematic analysis methods, and much design flexibility, especially within reflexive thematic analysis, is one of its advantages. Even just considering reflexive thematic analysis, there are: multiple research questions that can be asked, from ones based in experience (as in the pernicious anaemia study) to ones unpacking how a topic is represented or constructed in a certain forum or context [see 1, 13]; multiple data types that can be analysed, such as the qualitative survey used in the pernicious anaemia study, or interviews, or policy documents; various interpretative lenses and frameworks that can be deployed, as well as ontologies and epistemologies used (see Chapter 3). This flexibility makes researcher knowingness (see Box 18.4) important, because it's easy to produce philosophically and methodologically incoherent analyses unless theory, design, and analytic claims are considered as a package. Wider concepts of design coherence and methodological integrity [e.g. 13, 28] are useful for guiding 'knowing' good practice.

In the pernicious anaemia study, we evidenced methodological integrity through different design elements 'fitting' together – theoretically, we adopted a critical realist ontology (we assumed the existence of a reality independent of human practices, but understood participants' experiences and representations of GP interactions were mediated by language and culture). This aligned with a research question exploring participants' experiences of diagnosis and self-treatment, but avoided a naïve experiential realism. The use of an online qualitative survey to gather self-report data from participants was appropriate to the research question, and made sense for the participant community. Finally, our use of an inductively-oriented reflexive thematic analysis approach, with mostly semantic (explicit) coding, cohered with the other design elements, and provided a robust approach for addressing our research question, which considering researcher subjectivity.

Box 18.4. Becoming a knowing thematic analysis researcher.

A *knowing* researcher is one who endeavours to 'own' their perspectives [30] – both personal and theoretical. Being a knowing researcher is about striving to research coherently from a clear values base, and being deliberative in your choices around, and practice of, thematic analysis. To do this (well), you need to develop a sense of 'who you are' as a researcher – and the values that inform your beliefs about research, and about life, the world and so on. This is the case no matter what type of thematic analysis you are doing.

It also involves a questioning engagement with method – not simply doing something because someone tells you that is what good practice looks like, but considering the assumptions embedded in particular concepts and practices, and whether they align with your research values and thematic analysis approach. Take 'saturation' and 'member checking'. Both are widely touted and sometimes treated as (universal) quality measures for qualitative research [e.g. see 17]; other qualitative researchers argue that they are inherently post-positivist practices, and not coherent with all forms of qualitative research [e.g. 31, 32, 33]. Being 'knowing' involves working out whether a particular concept or practice is coherent with your research values base and methodological approach. Thankfully, qualitative methodologists enjoy thinking about such things, so much has been written about these and other concepts, to help us make these judgements.

Be(com)ing a knowing qualitative researcher won't happen overnight – especially if you're steeped in post-positivist values. Many of us are like the US psychologists described by Jeanne Marecek, who 'swim in the waters of logical positivism, empiricism, realism, and quantification without knowing they are wet' [34]. But knowingness is important, even for post-positivist forms of thematic analysis, because values are inescapable, and influential. We emphasise striving! Set being a knowing researcher as your goal, but give yourself time to become that, and don't stop asking questions, because knowingness is a way to travel, not a destination to reach.

Ethical considerations are also part of the broader remit of knowingness and quality. Ethicality in thematic analysis isn't just about adhering to professional ethics codes (see Chapter 7); being an ethical thematic analyst means reflecting on broader ethical issues, such as our social positioning in relation to our participants (as discussed in Box 18.3), and the ways the stories we tell about our participants might impact on the communities they are part of. Social power and privilege are part of research; ethical challenges will be nuanced by whether we have more social power and privilege compared to participants, and in what ways this connects to our topics. Considering the impact of our stories isn't just about whether individual participants might be upset if they don't

like our analysis, but includes the potential for wider harm or other consequences we haven't anticipated. Could our analysis inadvertently further stigmatise an already stigmatised group? Such considerations are especially important if our participants are vulnerable or socially marginalised. Ethics for Big Q thematic analysis/qualitative research is not necessarily a place of tidy answers, hence the importance of reflexivity.

Summary

This chapter introduced you to the family of thematic analysis methods and highlighted some shared characteristics – producing a set of themes from data through processes of coding and theme development; the possibility of coding for semantic and latent meaning, and orientating to data inductively or deductively; and some degree of theoretical flexibility. We explored differences across the three main branches of the family – coding reliability, reflexive and codebook approaches – in how themes are conceptualised, how coding and theme development are enacted, and the research values that ground analytic procedures. We discussed different ways researcher subjectivity is conceptualised – as problem or resource – and what that means for thematic analysis practice. Because of the diversity, which is often poorly recognised, we argued that researchers need to design coherent research, and to practice thematic analysis *knowingly*. This involves reflecting on and articulating your research values, selecting an approach that aligns with these, and using concepts and language that cohere with your research values and thematic analysis approach.

Box 18.5. Top tips for undertaking and reporting thematic analyses.

- Strive to achieve philosophical and methodological coherence in your choice and process of thematic analysis.
- Clarify what you understand by a theme. Do you plan to develop topic summaries or shared meaning themes?
- Reflect on your role as analyst. Are you a descriptive scientist or an interpretive storyteller?
- Guide the reader through the structure of your analysis, with a clear overview of the themes and thematic structure that aligns with what is reported.
- Make sure your reporting style matches the thematic analysis approach you have taken. For reflexive thematic analysis, you need an analytic narrative to tell the reader what your interpretation is and why it matters, and a clear, overall story that brings everything together.

Box 18.6. Common pitfalls when undertaking and reporting thematic analysis.

- Assuming thematic analysis is a single approach. Take time to develop understanding of different approaches when planning your research.
- Producing too many themes, rather than developing overarching patterns of meaning. Less is often more in the pursuit of interpretative depth and nuance.
- Justifying your choice of thematic analysis using generic characteristics (e.g. flexibility, accessibility), without explaining their specific value or relevance for your study. Make sure you provide a clear and coherent rationale for using thematic analysis [see 35].
- Applying common quality criteria (e.g. saturation) without question. Consider which markers of quality are relevant for your chosen thematic analysis approach.

Box 18.7. Ethical issues when undertaking and reporting thematic analysis.

- Reflect on your position in relation to your research participants. Are you an insider and/or outsider and where does power lie?
- Consider whether your analysis poses any risk of harm, particularly where marginalised groups are involved.

Further reading

Our TA website is a useful place to start your further reading and exploration of TA, as it links to all the resources we've created, as well as providing FAQs, reading lists and more: www.thematicanalysis.net

For the definitive guide to doing reflexive TA, see: Braun V, Clarke V. Thematic analysis: A practical guide. London: SAGE; 2022.

For a thorough discussion of design coherence in reflexive TA, see: Braun V, Clarke V. Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. Qualitative Psychology. 2022;9(1):3–26.

Two books that provide guidance on coding reliability approaches to TA are:

Boyatzis RE. Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 1998.

Guest G, MacQueen KM, Namey EE. Applied thematic analysis. Los Angeles: Sage; 2012.

For guidance on template analysis (a codebook approach), see: King N, Brooks JM. Thematic analysis in organisational research. In: Cassell C, Cunliffe AL, Grandy G, editors. The SAGE

handbook of qualitative business management research methods: Methods and challenges. London: Sage; 2018. p. 219-36.

For guidance on framework analysis (a codebook approach), see: Ritchie J, Spencer L. Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In: Bryman A, Burgess RG, editors. Analyzing Qualitative Data. London: Routledge; 1994. p. 173-94.

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