"A starting point for your journey, not a map": Nikki Hayfield in conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke about thematic analysis

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In 2006, psychologists Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke published a paper entitled *Using thematic analysis in psychology* in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. The paper sought to provide guidance, for psychology colleagues and students, on the conceptualisation, considerations and practice of thematic analysis (TA). Their paper proved unexpectedly popular, both within their discipline, and beyond. In the subsequent years they have written an award winning and best-selling qualitative research textbook *Successful Qualitative Research* (Braun & Clarke, 2013), numerous chapters (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2012; Braun et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2016; Clarke & Braun, 2016), encyclopaedia entries (Clarke & Braun, 2014a, 2014b), commentaries (Braun & Clarke, 2016, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018) and editorials (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Clarke & Braun, 2017), and created a website (https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-research/research-groups/thematic-analysis.html), about TA, as well as written chapters and papers (e.g. Braun et al., 2017b; Clarke & Braun, 2019), and co-edited a book and a special issue related to other aspects of qualitative research (Braun et al., 2017a; Braun, Clarke, Frith & Moller, 2019). Over this time, their thinking around TA has evolved and they have encountered, and been frustrated by, many misuses and misrepresentations of their original paper. Early in 2019, Nikki Hayfield – who also writes and teaches around TA and has co-authored several chapters with them (Braun Clarke, Terry & Hayfield, 2019; Clarke et al., 2015; Terry et al., 2017) – interviewed Ginny and Victoria, asking them to reflect on these topics, and on their process, practice and thinking as TA proponents. The following edited transcript of their conversation highlights the context for writing their 2006 paper, some of the assumptions about qualitative research they made in writing this paper, their responses to misrepresentations and misunderstandings of their approach to TA, and their reflections on the importance of interpretation in TA.

The context for writing *Using thematic analysis in psychology*

Nikki: It's been thirteen years now since your 2006 paper was published. It's got over 55,000 *Google Scholar* citations. By any measure, it is a phenomenon. A paper with that many citations has clearly had a huge impact. How did it come about?

Ginny: It came out of our frustrations, and confusions around the sorts of things that we were encountering people doing with qualitative analysis, and the lack of a decent resource on TA.

Victoria: We wrote it to meet our own needs, because we were both teaching TA, and there wasn't an accessible resource that reflected what we were doing in our teaching that we could give to students. As sexuality and gender scholars, we were used to writing and communicating with very small audiences, so to go from that, to a context where we get sometimes multiple emails a day, from people all around the world, asking us questions about our work, is an interesting shift.

Ginny: We didn't expect to have this "influence". The thing I find hardest is that people take our writing out of context and treat it almost as gospel, as rules. Rather than our writing being understood as part of a conversation or as a starting point, a reflective practice. We want to have a dialogue with other researchers, we're not saying "this is the law".

Nikki: The paper is treated like authority, rather than as dialogue?

Victoria: And our ideas change, so our writing changes. If we wrote the paper again, we wouldn't write the same paper, because our ideas have developed. We're in this unexpected position of being positioned as people with authority. Sometimes people ask me a question and I think, "I have no idea".

Ginny: And we feel that we *should* have an answer to people's questions, because we're treated as authorities. I get asked questions about different qualitative methods and epistemological positions, some of which I've never heard of.

Nikki: You both did your PhD in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University, which has a rich history of qualitative research (see Antaki, 1994; Billig, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). How did that influence your writing about TA?

Victoria: Our experience at Loughborough was one of constantly talking about methodological issues, and we thought that was a "normal" part of doing a PhD. It's only when we left that context that we realised how lucky we were, and what we gained from being part of that culture of academics very interested in questions around *how* you do research, not just *doing* research (see also Jankowski et al., 2017).

Ginny: We did our PhDs at a quite particular moment, we were in a space of contestation about research and methods, and you had to think about and defend what you were doing, and address some of the fundamental questions about research: What are we doing? What do we think we're getting access to? Why are we doing this? Why should this be seen as worthwhile? Now that our PhDs are a distant memory, we think back to those times and think "wow, that was incredibly special and a privilege to be in a space where that was part of the air that you breathed". Both during our PhDs, and after, we'd been frustrated or perplexed by the lack of discussion of TA. We wanted to say "let's be more thoughtful and reflective about this as a process" in a rigorous and robust way.

Looking back: Reflecting on the paper

Nikki: That context is helpful for understanding what you say in the paper about not providing a recipe for doing analysis. Do you feel that that message has been received and understood?

Victoria: Not totally. It *is* seen as a recipe by many people. There is a whole spectrum of responses to the paper. Some people read and engage, and think about it seriously, and ask us thoughtful questions. Some people, because of the framework they bring to reading the paper, have lots of questions, perhaps because it challenges their understanding of qualitative research more broadly in various ways. And then there are people who think "oh great, a convenient reference on TA, I'll cite this". We suspect some people don't even read the paper, because they do things that completely contradict what we say.

Nikki: What issues arise from people using your approach in a mechanistic way?

Ginny: A tension for us is making sure people retain the fluidity, contextual decision making and processes of qualitative approaches. Because we lay out phases it's often understood as a step-by-step approach – so increasingly in writing we're trying to disrupt that sense of a rigid or stepped process, disrupt the idea that if you follow this series of steps…

Victoria: It will lead to a good outcome.

Ginny: It's not a case of carefully climbing up each of the steps, it's actively thinking about how you approach those. *That's* what's important.

Victoria: The thing I have seen is people writing "following Braun and Clarke's approach", then they will write "we did consensus coding, we measured inter-rater reliability, we used a code book". Where is that in our paper?

Ginny: We advocate for the *opposite*.

Nikki: Would you write a different paper were you to write it now?

Ginny: Yes and no. When we look back on the paper, we realised there are a series of assumptions embedded into it that we didn't articulate as we ideally should have done. We could have been clearer in positioning ourselves in relation to the values and assumptions that underpin how we see qualitative research, and TA (see Braun & Clarke, 2019). There were some things we didn't think needed to be said about qualitative research. When writing, you imagine your audience; even if you don't imagine it explicitly, it's already forming how you locate things. We imagined we were writing the paper for a small community of qualitative researchers in psychology. In the paper we discussed a spectrum of ways of doing TA – from fairly descriptive to more interpretive TA. One of our unarticulated assumptions was that *any* qualitative work is an interpretative process. Even if what you're providing is an experientially based account, that fairly straightforwardly aims to "give voice" to your participants, it is nevertheless an interpretative approach, to some extent shaped and situated by you as a researcher.

Conceptualising themes

Victoria: We've also changed some of our language since then, like "searching for themes" which we don't use anymore. We assumed that people would understand what we meant, that we weren't actually imagining researchers "digging in the dirt" for themes that are *in* their data waiting to be found, but that theme development is an active process – since we explicitly said that in the text. We have changed our language in more recent publications, and our latest language is generating initial themes. We would also clarify what we mean by themes.

Ginny: It's a big absence in the paper.

Victoria: It was one of the things that we assumed that everyone would understand.

Ginny: We've realised we were wrong.

Victoria: It's only seeing lots of people using our approach, and not conceptualising themes as we do, that we've been able to think more clearly around *how* our conceptualisation of themes is *different* from what they're doing.

Ginny: It also forced us to question why we conceptualise themes like that, and why that matters for the method.

Victoria: The most common problem we see is topic summaries being treated as themes – a student once memorably called these "bucket themes" because they're effectively a "topic dump". There's a topic in the data, and the theme becomes *everything* participants said about it. That's *not* how we conceptualise themes, but we see that type of theme so much, especially in applied research. Topic summary themes cluster around experiences of X, benefits of Y, barriers to Z, and so on. That type of analysis doesn't tell a thematic story.

Ginny: One of the things that we articulated later (Braun & Clarke, 2013, Braun et al., 2014) is the idea of a central organising concept, the central idea of each theme. It's like the sun in our solar system – everything is related to that central point. A theme could have multiple facets, like the planets, but these would all come back to a central point, idea or understanding. That is a very different from a topic summary, so it makes no sense to us to think about a theme in those ways. That is part of how we've subsequently developed our thinking to convey more clearly what we mean by a theme.

Why reflexive thematic analysis?

Ginny: Another thing we would have developed more fully is our "quality criteria", because what we see as counting for good quality TA rests on a qualitative paradigm being a starting point for research.

Victoria: We realise now *how much* our approach to TA reflects an approach to qualitative research that's reflexive and involves asking questions that are not just about very surface-level observations or simple descriptions of experience. We no longer describe our approach as just TA. We've gone through different names and, for now, have settled on *reflexive TA*

(Braun & Clarke, 2019). This name signals that it's a particular type of TA, located in a qualitative paradigm, which centres researcher reflexivity. There are many other forms of TA available to researchers. Giving our approach a specific name is useful to distinguish it from other approaches, and signal what's philosophically key about our approach. It is flexible, but it also has limits, because it's designed for researchers working within a *qualitative* paradigm. If you're not working in a qualitative paradigm, our approach doesn't make sense. People could use more positivist forms of TA, such as Boyatzis (1998).

Ginny: Or use qualitative content analysis.

Victoria: Ironically, the best outcome would be for fewer people to use our approach, because it's not the approach they need, they need something else.

Ginny: That's a really important point. We're not saying this is an approach that suits everything, or that everyone should be doing it! It's comes back to: What is your purpose? What is the context of your research? And, does this approach work for that context and purpose? If it doesn't, do something else, and do that well rather than saying you're "following Braun and Clarke" but doing something different.

Victoria: In subsequent writing, we've tried to situate our approach in a broader landscape of TA and articulate how our approach is different from other approaches (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun, Clarke, Terry & Hayfield, 2019; Terry et al., 2017). That's been a learning process for us. People's responses to our work have compelled us to read more about TA more broadly.

Demarcating different TA approaches

Nikki: Something you taught me Victoria is the importance of owning your approach, and I'm not sure if people understand your approach as *an approach* to TA among many others?

Ginny: I think when we first wrote, that wasn't a meaningful question about TA, because there weren't clearly demarcated *different* TA approaches.

Victoria: TA has evolved over a very long period of time in different disciplines, there are all these different approaches. But we didn't articulate those differences clearly in the paper; what we have since done is map them out, so we can identify and explain where our approach fits. There are what we call "coding reliability" approaches like the one outlined by

Richard Boyatzis (1998), which are positivist or neopositivist. He writes about building a bridge between quantitative and qualitative enquiry, so the research philosophy is positivist, but qualitative data are collected and analysed. That approach has appeal within particular research areas, but it's *very* different from what we're trying to do. More recently we've come to understand that there are various "code book" approaches – like template (King & Brooks, 2017) and framework (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) analysis. These have some of the structure of the positivist approaches, but they're broadly located in a qualitative philosophy. Then there's our reflexive approach, and approaches similar to ours (e.g. Hayes, 2000; Langdridge, 1994). We're offering our approach as one that reflects *fully* the principles of qualitative enquiry both in terms of philosophy and technique.

Other developments in thematic analysis

Nikki: In what other ways has your understanding of TA changed and evolved?

Ginny: The field has shifted and developed from when we published that paper too, other people write about TA, so that situates our work as part of an ongoing conversation about TA. It's like, when you're doing an analysis, you don't *finish* analysis, you stop. It's not like you get to the final point. You could do more, you could go further, but you make a decision that this is the point at which I'm going to stop. When we write about TA, it's similar, it's part of a live ongoing conversation about TA and represents a development and refinement of *our* thinking. This in turn reflects our *context* and all the things happening around us – our teaching experiences, our supervision experiences, the other writing about TA that is published, the criticisms that we hear, and so on. Every time we write, we're writing from a slightly different viewpoint, or a slightly different set of circumstances. This means what we write is going to shift and change. If we're still writing about TA in five years' time, what we write then will be different to what we write now. I'm wary of wanting to fix things as 'this is it, this is the absolute thing' because qualitative research is the antithesis of that.

Victoria: Our writing reflects "where we're at now".

Ginny: People should treat the things we write as provisional and contextual rather than absolute. To come back to that point I was making earlier, we're not dictatorially describing the way *everything* should be done, so much as saying: "these are things that we think are

useful and important, based on this set of understandings. And this is how we suggest you approach doing this, if you're going to do this practice we're describing and developing".

Victoria: We think of our scholarship around TA as an invitation, a springboard; it's something to help you on your journey. We're *not* saying, "this is your journey, here's the map, here's all the resources you need to get to your destination". We're saying, "here's a walking stick, a pair of socks, and a compass; plot your own route".

Mis-readings, misunderstandings and misconceptions

Themes do not emerge

Nikki: So, what are some of the key mis-readings or misconceptions of your approach?

Ginny: I feel like we're caricatured as saying "themes do not emerge, themes do not emerge", but what's behind that, is thinking around what TA is about, what our particular approach to TA is about, and what the qualitative research process more broadly is about. This hasn't just come from us; our original paper cited other researchers (Fine, 1992; Taylor & Ussher, 2001) discussing the problematic idea of the researcher as a neutral conduit for true meaning, where researchers disassociate themselves – maybe almost unethically – from the knowledge production process. Think about *why* we say, "themes do not emerge", and what that means, or reflects.

Victoria: We get asked "what words do we use instead of emerged?" We have suggested constructed, generated, developed, *we* use those terms. But it's not just a case of getting your terminology right. Rather it's thinking about the philosophy that underlies the way you're doing research, and if you do your *own* thinking about that, you'll be able to come up with your own terms.

Nikki: You have to come up with your own terms because it depends on the epistemological approach that you're taking for a start. You probably wouldn't say you've "constructed" your themes if you're taking an experiential approach to your data.

Ginny: It comes back to TA not just being something that you *apply*, that you follow a set of steps or phases, and then you get your answers. Rather it's a process, and you need to understand *what* it is that you're doing and the methodological framework you are doing it

in, to make *choices* and *situate yourself* in relation to the work that you're doing. If you do that, you should understand why themes do not emerge.

Victoria: We're not the police of language, arbitrarily saying you can use this word and not that word. What we're trying to challenge are the assumptions embedded in the idea that themes emerge from data. We're not challenging the use of that word in all contexts, and the different thinking that might underlie it in other contexts. For us, this is specifically related to TA. The term "emergent themes" is used in other analytic approaches. In interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), for example, researchers use this term to reflect their inductive approach. Even though we say "themes do not emerge", understand *what* we're addressing when we say that, rather than seeing it as a prescription that you can never talk about themes emerging.

Ginny: Never use the "e" word.

Nikki: Are there other problems that you see in published TA?

Ginny: A lot of the problems seem to stem from people's sense of familiarity with qualitative research as a field, and the values and philosophies of qualitative research, and of course those can be hugely variable. But it's understanding that what you're doing is part of this broad orientation. And it's fine if you want to do something that's more positivist.

Victoria: But own it.

Ginny: Exactly. Understand that you're doing something that is particular and has a set of *values* that inform it and that these values are not universal, and not necessarily ones that we would ascribe to. One of the things that troubles us is how people write up a methods section, and how they describe what they've done analytically. Far too often we encounter "I followed Braun and Clarke's six steps", and then they list the phases. Not describing *what* they did or *how* they engaged with these phases, or their active decision making. That approach reflects a quantitative positivist approach – you lay out the steps, rather than discussing your practice in a reflexive, contextually located way. I want to see more reflexive descriptions of the method *as used*. I want editors to demand better around that for qualitative research, and allow the increased word count that necessitates, because it matters for how you evaluate the research. When the process of reflexive TA is described in a generic way, you don't know to what extent the researcher has understood and positioned

themselves as active in the process and recognised that they read their data from a position. There's a risk of treating meaning as self-evident, as something that appears to you automatically through a process of reading data, rather than recognising that you are shaping where you're going with your analysis.

Victoria: Our approach is often being used in a broadly experiential mode of inquiry, often in applied research, and there's no statement of theoretical assumptions or researcher reflexivity. There's an assumption about what qualitative research is, but that's not articulated. It seems as if our approach is simply applied to the data, akin to a quantitative method or tool. There's no humanness, no person. I want to know about the person who's done the analysis and their thinking, and process.

Ginny: They might write that they followed the phases and ended up with five themes, but there's no sense of *what happened along the way* from the data collection, and the early stages of engagement, to the development of those five themes. Were these the themes you started with? If you did interviews, did you think of these themes as you were doing the interviews, and then you identified them in the transcripts. Or did you go off in a completely different direction from what you expected? It's those elements that get lost, and those are vital for assessing the quality of qualitative research.

Reflexive thematic analysis is not atheoretical and a tool for description and summary

Nikki: Are there any other common problems in published TA research, common misunderstandings of TA?

Victoria: No discussion of theory. No discussion of reflexivity. Those are so common.

Ginny: We're associated with atheoretical qualitative research, and some people are critical of us for "taking the theory out" of qualitative research. That's probably the most fundamental misunderstanding of our approach. We're trying to provide a way of approaching research that's very strongly embedded in theory. Research is *inescapably* a theoretical undertaking, even if you're not conscious that it is.

Nikki: Does that reflect a continuing lack of receptiveness in some quarters to methods which aren't in a positivist tradition?

Victoria: As qualitative research becomes more popular, more people are coming to it from a positivist perspective and have the questions that qualitative methodologists were discussing in the 1980s and 1990s, questions we thought were resolved. Just this morning we got a question about consensus coding. For lots of qualitative methodologists, that's such a non-issue. But we get questions on a regular basis about consensus coding and things that are very firmly wedded to positivism.

Nikki: Have there been any other criticisms of TA?

Victoria: What we mostly hear is people telling us the criticisms they've heard. Students who've been told TA is not sophisticated enough for a doctorate, and they need to do grounded theory, or IPA. I find that a mystifying critique, because it seems to hinge on the idea that TA is atheoretical.

Ginny: It's misread as just descriptive.

Victoria: And it's not. Obviously, it *can* be those things, but it's intended to be an approach that is *embedded in theory*. But unlike other approaches, you select the theory it's embedded in. It can be just as sophisticated as other approaches.

Interpretation in qualitative analysis

Nikki: Now a thorny question: what constitutes sufficient interpretation in TA?

Ginny: For me, the starting point for interpretation is recognising that you're always reading the data from a position that assumes something, takes some things for granted. The meanings of the data aren't obvious. What's crucial is that you make sense of your data from that position. It's not simply that you identify a pattern, but that you say why this pattern is important, what it means, and why you think it means that, and maybe what the implications of that are. What are the assumptions that my interpretation rests on? How does my interpretation relate to the theoretical or sociocultural context, the context of the data generation, maybe the policy context, the applied context? Don't treat the data as self-evidently telling you something, being meaningful and being important, actually *make an argument* about why the data are important and what they mean. I increasingly think "telling a story" and "making an argument" are the most useful language for describing analysis, and the process of analysis. You're telling a story as an analyst, and you're making an argument in relation to the data, and if you see yourself as doing those two things, it

positions you in a very different way from just simply capturing or describing what was in your data.

Victoria: Yes, and I really see this when working with students, because they will often say "I didn't see what you're seeing". Often students are just starting out on their research journey, whereas we bring all the knowledge we've accrued over the years. It's what you bring that shapes how you make sense of data, and what you have to decide as a researcher is "what story do I tell?" It's not a case of deciding what's the "right" interpretation, you need to think about "what story do I want to tell based on my data?" For students who've captured experience, "what story do you want to tell about this group of people's experiences?"

Ginny: In addressing that question of what story do you want to tell, the data have to provide the anchor for what that story can be. You can't just tell any story about the data.

Victoria: It's embedded, it's rigorous, it's systematic. But there's no *one* way of making sense of data. Think about where you sit in relation to your data, and how you interpret and make sense of them.

Ginny: And locating your analysis in relation to other scholarship. The story you're telling is not an isolated story, you're telling a story that sits in relation to other scholarship, and you're engaging in interpretative processes that are embedded in the fields of scholarship that your work is located in. This is so important, and it adds richness and depth and rigour to your analysis, because it also shows that you're thinking about how your story is part of a bigger picture.

Victoria: That's a really important point about qualitative research. There's sometimes pressure from journal editors and reviewers to present something completely new and different. That's a very positivist way of thinking in some ways; that's not how knowledge accumulates in qualitative research. It accumulates through lots of small-scale studies, addressing the same topic area, and through that you can start to tell a bigger broader story. Your research is always in conversation with other research, and I think sometimes students worry, particularly psychology students who've been trained in a positivist quantitative tradition, that if they engage a great deal with existing literature, that somehow detracts from their research. No! You're part of an ongoing conversation.

Nikki: Something that I've experienced students grapple with is the difference between interpretation, and no longer being grounded in the data. Sometimes I think people can make a jump too far from their data. Is that something you've encountered as well?

Victoria: Yes absolutely. One thing I often comment is "I'm not seeing it in relation to the data you've presented, I think you've gone too far". The data are still the anchor, whatever interpretation you're making, you've got to be able to say: "this is what's going on here in this piece of data". As an example, in counselling and psychotherapy research, sometimes the analysis consists of clinical interpretation of what lies behind what's being said, but there isn't enough in the data to ground that interpretation analytically. A therapist works in a particular theoretical framework that shapes how they interpret what people say, that type of interpretation of words might work for them as a clinical tool, but when it comes to data analysis, the grounding isn't there.

Ginny: It depends too on what you're trying to do with the analysis. I'm someone who is always drawn towards more theoretical analyses, going further interpretatively than a more descriptive capturing of experience or perspectives and so on. Sometimes in supervising, I will go off on tangents and say, "This may be highly speculative, I'm not seeing your whole dataset here, but have a think about this, can you see what I'm speculating on here? Go back to your data and look at it with my questions in mind". And the student may have evidence for it in their data, or it may be that there was just this one particular quotation that sent me off on something that's completely unjustifiable. It also comes back to how you're treating the data, and what claims you're making.

Nikki: Do you have any insights to share on how that more theoretical engagement with the data remains convincing as an analysis?

Ginny: For an analysis that develops more theoretically, I might spend time developing analysis around one particular quotation, and discussing what I see as the implications or the consequences of that quotation, or locating it within literature, and using that literature as a way of developing something that is different from providing a rich interpretative account of experience, or practice. If what you're doing is more capturing, reporting and interpreting perspectives and experiences, your justification for speculation or for going further also has to be really clearly articulated. Sometimes I see big leaps, so for instance a

statement about what's in the data, and then a jump to some piece of literature, but you need to take five steps between those two things to make a case for that leap.

Victoria: Sometimes that theoretical engagement is compartmentalised from the data. Here's my data, a little diversion into theory, and back to my data. It's not really helping you unpick the meaning of the data, but it's providing a wider context around it. What you're talking about Ginny is using theory to unpick what's going on, and that's a different task to contextually locating the data.

Writing collaboratively and negotiating disagreements

Nikki: You've published not only your 2006 paper, but many publications since then too. From working with you, I know you don't always agree! Can you tell me about your process of writing together?

Victoria: We've developed an effective collaborative writing process because we've worked together so much, and we understand our similarities and differences. The fact that we don't agree about everything is good, because it encourages us to reflect on our own thinking. We always find a way through our disagreements because when we're writing pedagogically-oriented papers and books we're trying to hold some of the tensions, hold our positionality, but provide something that has a degree of reassuring "authority" for students. Sometimes we articulate our disagreements in our writing, though, to demonstrate that there isn't one way of doing things in qualitative research.

Ginny: With things that we disagree on, it's a process of dialogue, which, as you say Vic, allows us to reflect on where we're coming from and why we may value something. That can be useful for writing, because it might not be a disagreement in principle, but it might reflect something more contextualised. We might disagree about say sample size, and then we find a space between what one of us might see as *ideal*, and what might be *realistic* for a researcher or student in a particular context to put into practice. We try to provide a reassuring voice, but without closing down complexity and nuance. That's why articulating different viewpoints is really useful in writing.

Victoria: It's also taught me that research is never perfect, that research is always situated, contextual, involves compromise, and is always a pragmatic exercise. I get frustrated with people who imagine research being conducted in this ideal context where there's lots of

time, resources, expertise, skills. That's a *rare* occurrence for research. Lots of research is being conducted by students, more than is being conducted by academics, and they're always constrained in various ways. That's real research; not compromised research. I think our disagreements often relate to the different contexts we're located and work in, and the different students we work with.

Ginny: It's also really useful for revealing hidden assumptions, or hidden things that you can't always see yourself, no matter how reflexive you might think you're being.

Victoria: Reflexivity is always a work in progress, it's never a finished end product, and you're always reflecting on your assumptions and seeing things differently.

Key messages for editors and reviewers

Nikki: Moving on from researchers using TA, can you sum up your key messages for editors and reviewers reading TA papers?

Victoria: Recognise that TA is a diverse form of practice, there's lots of different approaches, and editors and reviewers need to support researchers in bringing some clarity, nuance, and positionality to the practice of TA.

Ginny: Too often reviewers present their perspective and their "take" on qualitative research as *definitive*, when it actually comes from a theoretically and methodologically grounded position, which may not be shared by the authors of the paper they're reviewing. If you're going to tell somebody that they're doing something wrong, tell them *why* you think it's wrong, not *that* it's wrong. Or ask questions about it and articulate what they need to defend and explain, and recognise that you might not agree with what they have done, but that doesn't make it in and of itself necessarily wrong or bad.

Victoria: It's also really important to know your limits, to know what you don't know. If you know a little bit about qualitative research, it's important to appreciate there's a lot more to know. And it might be that researchers are doing something that's perfectly legitimate, but the reviewer just doesn't know about it.

Ginny: Own your own position. Recognise where you come from and discuss that.

Victoria: That's for academia generally. Whatever you're doing, recognise you're doing it from a position and own it. We share other researchers' frustrations of being reviewed by

people who were very confident in their opinions, but their opinions were based on a limited understanding of qualitative inquiry. This was discussed on *Twitter* recently: researchers using reflexive TA being told to discuss saturation and coding reliability measures. These practices come from a very different position from our approach, but the problem is the reviewers aren't aware of that, and so they present as meaningful for *all* qualitative research, what is in fact a particular positioned practice or standard.

Ginny: And for editors, while recognising that it is increasingly difficult to find willing reviewers, who you ask to review is going to affect the kind of review you're going to get. Qualitative inquiry is a vast field with disagreements, contestations, assumptions, challenges and so on.

Nikki: Why do you think some of these issues arise?

Victoria: Many research fields need more methodological expertise, and many are lacking sorely in qualitative expertise, especially when that expertise is not fully valued – like within our discipline. If papers were reviewed by experts in qualitative methodology, some of these problematic practices wouldn't survive the peer review process. I like thinking of qualitative knowledge as "bandwidth". Some people have relatively little knowledge or a narrow bandwidth, and some people have lots of knowledge or a wide bandwidth. It's not that anyone knows everything, but it's useful to know enough to understand where you're positioned, and what you do and don't know. Problems come where people say: "*this* is qualitative research", narrowly defining it, and what they've described is a particular approach.

Ginny: An example of this comes from a research meeting I attended the other day. Somebody declared that "the purpose of research is to tell people's stories. If you're not doing that, why are you doing it?" That's *one* purpose of (qualitative) research, but it's not the *only* purpose. That's a perfect example of the sort of definitive declarations around the purpose of qualitative research we see in reviewing.

Nikki: As you mentioned Victoria, reviewers often suggest that researchers should be engaging in practices that don't "fit" with your approach – like codebooks. Do you have suggestions for researchers around the best ways of dealing with that?

Ginny: Recognise that reviewers and even editors don't know everything, and they don't necessarily know more about what you're doing than you do. The first piece of advice I give people is "argue back". I'm amazed at how many people ask, "is that alright?", so I realise I say that from my position of now feeling relatively secure and confident to hold my ground. If you know your approach, you have an entitlement to question or challenge others' evaluation. But do ask yourself, "do I understand where I'm coming from enough to provide that challenge"? It may be that what you need to do in a revision is explain *your process* more, rather than just saying, for example "I didn't use a code book". It might be that you haven't actually articulated what you did well enough to demonstrate to the reviewers that you've followed a really rigorous process.

Victoria: It's often when you're trying to save words you cut out information that is useful for reviewers and editors. Hopefully there's some really constructive and thoughtful guidance in reviews, but they are just people's opinions, and you *can* have a dialogue and say, "this is why I haven't addressed this". I don't think there are many editors that would say it's a condition of publication that you do absolutely everything that the reviewers are asking – because sometimes they ask you to do contradictory things – but rather that you respond to their suggestions.

Ginny: If we try to treat reviews as having potential for improving our practice, and our thinking, and if we feel confident about what we've done methodologically, we can understand which of the comments are useful and which of them are coming from a completely different position. Avoid thinking in extremes – "they don't understand therefore they're wrong", or "they're saying all these things therefore I must have done this terribly badly".

Victoria: It is rare to get a review where you feel the reviewer has really understood what you're trying to do and has helped you to articulate that more clearly. That is ideally what the peer review process provides, but often it falls short.

Looking forward: The future development of thematic analysis

Nikki: How do you hope TA develops in the future?

Ginny: What I would like to see is more thoughtful use, and evidence of thoughtful use, rather than just use. We want people to think about what they're doing and understanding

what they're doing, rather than dropping in a citation because the reviewers told them to, or the editors suggested it might be useful to read Braun and Clarke (2006). As mentioned earlier, we're sure we get *a lot of* post-hoc citations, where people haven't read our papers before they've done their analysis, they haven't provided any citations for their use of TA, and a reviewer asks "Haven't you read Braun and Clarke?", and then they've had a look at our paper and thought, "oh yeah, that sounds like what I did". That's a caricature, but that post-hoc citing is happening. That is something I would like to see disappear in the future.

Victoria: I did think we'd reach a sort of "peak TA", where people would move on to other things, but we don't seem to have reached that point yet, because it has enough flexibility to open up possibilities. People are doing hybrid things with methods, reflexive TA has been blended with other approaches, such as narrative analysis, or case study research. It's become a fun tool for play, which is great, it opens things up rather than closes things down. So more positively, people are doing things with the approach that we never sort of imagined or anticipated; I hope that continues.

Ginny: There's much more interest in creative methods and a range of participatory type of approaches.

Victoria: Our approach is used in participatory research, and in creative research, because it provides flexibility. It seems because it has flexibility, it travels.

Ginny: And people find it accessible too. We'd like to see lots more examples of it applied to visual and creative data.

Victoria: That's the thing, we developed this approach to TA, but we don't own it, and it's part of a conversation, we want people to take it forward.

Reviewer comments: A brief reflection

We appreciated the very positive and engaged reviewer comments we received on this edited transcript of our discussion. As this is not a regular paper, but a discussion-based paper, we cannot go back and change the conversation that took place. Each conversation is – as those of us who interview recognise – a product of the specific set of circumstances, of time, place, persons, and many other factors, that come together in a particular moment. They are never complete, never a full-and-final pure telling of the 'truth' of things. But we appreciate the engagement our discussion stimulated, the reflections, questions and

comments. Although we cannot address all things, we'll respond to a few – and if people wish to use this conversation as the starting point for a commentary, that would be great!

One reviewer made connections to constructivist grounded theory (e.g., Charmaz, 2006), and indeed, this perhaps highlights the overlaps and similarities across versions of 'pattern-based' methods and methodologies that Victoria and Ginny have commented on elsewhere (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These issues of overlap/similarity and interest in what makes particular methods what they are is reflected in psychology as a discipline. Indeed, the 'obsession' with method, and particular articulations and enactments of method, embedded in certain research values is a hallmark of our discipline. Even as there is creativity, resistance, and expansion, the juggernaut of psychology's arch-positivist-empiricism is a context we are born from. Ginny and Victoria's 'takes' on TA are inevitably based in, and both respond and react to, this disciplinary location. As much as we believe reflexivity is a hallmark of good (TA) practice, reflexivity is also always blinkered in ways we cannot imagine and sometimes may never get to see through. The value of talking with others about their 'takes' – whether during the analytic process, at any point during a particular project, or indeed our entire research trajectories – highlights a way to start to break through those blinkers.

Critical questioning seems to us to be vital for both quality and ethicality, in (reflexive) TA practice, and qualitative researching more generally, and for disrupting authorial authority at the same time as we inevitably enact it. But, to quote a reviewer, "ethical stickiness" is part and parcel of qualitative research – of all research – and though we don't have space here, we welcome further discussion of this. This is something feminist scholars have grappled with (e.g., Weatherall, Gavey & Potts, 2002), and we value Michelle Fine's (e.g., 1992) unpacking of a 'giving voices' approach as transparently ethical. We certainly don't feel that more 'straightforward' semantic TA approaches are necessarily more, or obviously more, ethical than more critical and constructionist analyses (e.g. Clarke & Braun, 2019). The bigger ethical question of how we tell our analytic stories, how we connect our research to the wider socio-political context (connected to current geo- and nationalist-politics, and beyond) is also vitally important. It's beyond the scope of this piece to do more than raise questions, but what are the opportunities and obligations for ethically good social science scholarship, in troubling political times? This is a vital conversation we should all be having –

at the same time as we do not want to close down the idea of value from a wide range of perspectives, practices, and questions, from the micro to the macro.

A more prosaic query was for more explication of the 'misuses' of TA. That we can offer more on: Ginny and Victoria are currently finishing that very paper, and it will eventually be available in a forthcoming Special Issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology* on quality in qualitative research (Clarke & Braun, 2020).

Author information

Virginia Braun is a Professor in the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland, Āotearoa/New Zealand. She is a feminist and critical (health) psychologist, and her research explores the intersecting areas of gender, bodies, sex/sexuality, health, and (now) food. She also has an ongoing interest in qualitative research and (with Victoria Clarke) wrote the award-winning textbook *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners* (SAGE). They have written extensively on thematic analysis (including with Nikki Hayfield), and are finishing a new book, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*, for SAGE. She co-edited *Collecting Qualitative Data* (Cambridge University Press) with Victoria and Debra Gray – which introduces a range of methods for collecting qualitative data beyond the widely-used interview or focus group – and is interested in other methods like qualitative story completion. She is on twitter @ginnybraun.

Victoria Clarke is an Associate Professor of Qualitative and Critical Psychology at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. Her research interests focus on the intersecting areas of sexuality and gender, appearance and embodiment, and family and relationships. With Virginia Braun and others, including Nikki Hayfield, she has written extensively about thematic analysis and is current co-authoring a book on thematic analysis for SAGE. Her other books including *Successful Qualitative Research* (SAGE) and *Collecting Qualitative Data* (Cambridge). She also has a particular interest in developing survey and story completion methods for qualitative research, and recently created a story completion website with Virginia, Nikki and others (https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-research/research-groups/story-completion.html). You can follow her on Twitter @drvicclarke where she regularly tweets about thematic analysis and qualitative research.

Nikki Hayfield is a Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, UK. Nikki teaches about and supervises students using qualitative methods including thematic analysis. She has written several book chapters about thematic analysis with Victoria Clarke, Virginia Braun and with Gareth Terry. She is currently co-authoring a book on TA with Gareth as part of an *American Psychological Association* (APA) series on qualitative methods. She continues to use thematic analysis in her research which is mainly around sexualities. You can follow Nikki on *ResearchGate* or via her UWE page.

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