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Being both narrative practitioner and academic researcher: A reflection on what thematic analysis has to offer narratively informed research

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Abstract

What opportunities are there for narrative practitioners to engage in academic research whilst retaining an alignment with poststructuralist ideas, feminist commitments and narrative practice principles? This paper considers Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's model of thematic analysis (TA) as an approach which can overcome some of the tensions that arise when integrating both narrative practitioner and researcher stance. Drawing on one practitioner-researcher's experience of navigating some of these dilemmas and incorporating a rich discussion of some of the heritages, understandings and intentions that underpin TA and its development, this paper seeks to assist, inform and encourage narrative practitioners who are reaching for approaches that offer a good fit for their research hopes and aims.

Keywords: Qualitative research, narrative practice, practitioner-researcher

Introduction

A growing number of narrative practitioners are taking an interest in pursuing academic research, for a variety of reasons. This is an exciting progression, yet one that can bring with it experiences of uncertainty and challenge. This paper contributes to a wider conversation about moving between practitioner and researcher identities and, in particular, considers a methodological approach that offers possibilities for narratively informed researchers to overcome some potential practical and theoretical dilemmas.

The paper is organised into three parts:

- A story of the first author's *(Kristina)* experience of integrating her narrative practitioner stance and commitments with those of an academic researcher.
- Central to this paper is an interview with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, originators of a model of thematic analysis (TA) that can be utilised consistently with poststructuralist and feminist thought, about the ideas, heritages and intentions that underpin the approach.
- A summary of key points of congruence between TA and narrative practice principles.

It is hoped that this paper will offer: encouragement to narrative practitioners considering academic research; companionship for researchers currently struggling with their own dilemmas; and some insight into what TA can offer narratively informed researchers.

Part 1. Moving from practice to research: What can we bring with us?

I *(Kristina)* was working as a narrative practitioner in Aotearoa New Zealand when I had the opportunity of moving to Australia to embark on my PhD. It was an exciting and somewhat daunting time, both personally and professionally. My area of research was to be long-term experience of anorexia and I had found the principles and ideas of narrative therapy a really good fit for how I preferred to think and practice. My hope was that by bringing a narrative lens to research I could contribute to a counter-literature that escapes what I saw as a

predominance of deficit-based research conclusions about people whose lives are affected by anorexia, especially over time.

Hurdles not barriers: Finding my feet as an academic researcher

Knowing I was diverging from some well-trodden paths I foresaw a few challenges, but it was only well into my first year, nearing confirmation time, that I began to fully appreciate some of the theoretical tensions arising between aspects of what had become my comfortable professional identity and the intellectual ground I preferred to stand on, and some of the traditions of academic research. I was lucky to be surrounded by social worker academics, also familiar with traversing complex professional realms and of being passionate about people's wellbeing and holding a focus on wider social contexts. But there were nonetheless points of difference and discomfort in moving from practice into research.

The design of any research project needs internal theoretical consistency, yet I necessarily found myself reading methodological literature that often stood in contrast to the poststructuralist training and feminist commitments I so dearly wanted to bring to my study. I found myself tripped up by fixed methodological designs that were practically unsuited to my project or had an emphasis on seeking 'the truth' or expectations that I could achieve a state of 'researcher neutrality'. Dedicated to concepts of multiple truths, I couldn't understand how two or three people agreeing on something meant it was 'real' and as an insider-researcher I could never claim my experience wouldn't influence me, just as any life experience shapes perspective. I also learned that power is often attended to differently in research and counselling relationships, with academic parlance giving new meaning to my endeavours and interactions. Invitations to contribute were called 'participant recruitment', the stories people told me became 'data', recording them was spoken of as 'harvesting', and the sense I made of people's stories was 'data analysis'.

There were times when I wondered where, or even *if*, I fitted into this new culture. But I gradually came to see these matters as hurdles not barriers, and once I thought of them as edges to my research practice knowledge they became points for advancement and learning.

Searching and re-searching: Frustration and circles as making progress

Ironically, one of my most substantial research 'bumps in the road' could have been entirely avoided had I realised what I was reading when I first encountered Braun and Clarke (2006)[1] in the very early stages of my PhD. It had been handed it to me as part of a collection of papers recommended by one of my supervisors, but I hadn't fully appreciated there was a problem at that stage, let alone being sufficiently on the lookout for a solution. So, I didn't pay the right sort of attention and moved on. But, as I have had to repeatedly learn, research involves a series of iterative stages. There are periods of circling and scoping, becoming deeply familiar with our terrain whilst remaining alert and prepared for the unexpected, watchful for the previously unnoticed. Tempting as it may be to seek reassurance from the sort of linear progression that can be charted by milestones passed and boxes checked, research is also a creative task that requires re-looking, re-asking and re-considering. Only after I had read widely, made a series of unproductive attempts at finding the right-fit methodology, found myself continually frustrated by some sticking point

[1] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101, was the initial paper that outlined the model of TA.

or other, and begun to feel a little despairing, did I eventually go back and re-read Braun and Clarke (2006).

Finally getting unstuck!

Although I knew I had read the paper before, it was as though I hadn't. Perhaps it was the prior process of learning what was unhelpful or gaining a better understanding of theory that made the realisation possible but finding what I was looking for was very exciting! It feels a little like a confession to say I was initially drawn to the clear six-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013) that felt manageable but, as I read on, opportunities began to materialise. These were new possibilities, made available by the model's practical and theoretical independence. I won't describe the model, Braun and Clarke's own writing is abundant and accessible[2], but the two key features that stood out for me were the design flexibility so crucial for my project, and the conceptualisation of themes not as essential truths that somehow existed independently of the research process, but as constructions of the researcher (see in particular Braun & Clarke, 2016).

Being new to research, I needed plenty of information and reassurance, which I easily found in Braun and Clarke's wider writings, dedicated webpage and online presentations. I took additional confidence from learning about their intellectual backgrounds in qualitative research, critical thinking and feminism (see Jankowski, Braun, & Clarke, 2017). Increasingly, I found that what I was reading aligned with my own theoretical understandings, research hopes, narrative training, and political and ethical commitments. Here was an approach I was not only comfortable with but offered me a way out of my impasse and enabled me to progress my study.

So, I was delighted when I later had the opportunity to have a conversation with the originators of this model. As a PhD candidate interviewing senior academics I was a little nervous, but of course my meeting with two ardently feminist scholars, teachers and qualitative research enthusiasts was relaxed and enjoyable. We met via video-conferencing on opposites sides of the globe, a summer morning for my interviewees, a winter evening for me. Our agreed focus for the conversation was how their approach to TA might be of interest for narratively-informed researchers.

Part 2. An interview with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke: Exploring heritages, commitments and intentions

Kristina: Since your first paper about TA, Braun and Clarke (2006), your model has become a very popular approach for qualitative researchers. How do you account for its appeal?

Victoria: I think it filled a gap. Lots of people were doing something called 'TA', but without drawing on particular sources, procedures or ways of working, so our paper turned out to be needed and wanted. Exploring the history of TA is difficult, but it's been in use at least since the 1930s, and pretty much every empirical discipline has a tradition of some sort of TA work, perhaps called content analysis or thematic content analysis. Our approach, which we now call reflexive TA (see Braun & Clarke, 2019), to distinguish it from other TA approaches, also has the benefit of not being too constrained by inbuilt theoretical assumptions.

[2] Details of wider readings, website and online lectures are provided at the end of this article.

Virginia: We also made a pragmatic, and for some controversial, decision to write something that wasn't heavily theoretical but that was practical, clear and accessible. But without losing the nuance and content that is so important for qualitative research. What neither of us realised until we received feedback, was that our writing voice was something people found useful and accessible. We didn't set out to become methodology writers, but it became really clear it was something people valued. We can understand that from our own experiences of reading dense methodological writing where it's hard to get beyond the theory and into the pragmatics.

Kristina: A key reason for choosing to use TA in my own research was because it seemed particularly appropriate for use within post-structuralist and constructionist paradigms? Would you agree, and can you explain why that is?

Virginia: I think for both of us that's our intellectual lineage, and our natural intellectual and theoretical home. Perhaps even more than we imagined, it was those ideas that shaped how we thought about TA. Neither of us comes to idea of meaning as de-contextualised, deeply psychological, or outside of social relationships, power, meaning and so on. We emphasise TA as a method of being reflective and asking questions rather than fixing things or de-contextualising, so it aligns very well.

Victoria: Yes, we wanted a method that worked for us and for other qualitative researchers. Much of the existing work around TA was written for people wanting to engage in qualitative positivism, which wasn't a good fit for our research, at all. We wanted to articulate an approach that had some of the features of other approaches but was theoretically flexible and enabled us to do the kind of work we do, whilst still providing a way of working for people using more experiential and 'giving voice' approaches. So, it very much reflected our own interests and finding a way of working for ourselves.

Virginia: And for our students. We came through qualitative method training from a deeply theoretical point of view, and from an anti-procedural approach. We recognise that as a huge privilege, one that most people coming into qualitative research don't have. Or that they don't necessarily have the time or the will for. That deep embedding in theory may not be necessary for the kind of work they want to do. We wanted something useful for teaching and supervising students, as an entry into qualitative research. We're enthusiastic about qualitative research and we want more people to do it, and to do it well. We wanted to encourage that and create ways forward.

Kristina: One thing that really stands out in your model is the conceptualisation of themes. You speak of the construction of themes rather than their emergence. Could you say a little about what was important, or that struck you about other models, that had you wanting to talk about themes a little bit differently?

Virginia: I think it's important to note that we're not the first people to articulate that. For instance, Jane Ussher wrote about the active researcher in TA research (see Taylor & Ussher, 2001). There's also a long history in other fields of recognising that themes don't simply emerge from data, and researchers are not simply giving voice to people or revealing something … it's just that we have been very articulate and vocal about it! This is also why we now call our approach reflexive TA – to acknowledge the active role of the researcher in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Victoria: Yes, there's even a little badge now, that you can buy online from Science on a Postcard. It says, "Themes. Do Not. Emerge!" and people report wearing those when teaching! But I think it reflects our heritage of being trained in critical psychology and feminist psychology. Both of those traditions really see the researcher as active in the process and embrace researcher subjectivity. Rather than using passive, third person language that's associated with mainstream science, it's about articulating and communicating research in a way that makes the researcher role visible. We only recognised more recently how much that informed our thinking, having taken for granted that was what good qualitative research looked like. Only through our teaching, presentations and talking to people in lots of different contexts have we been able to see that it reflects a very particular take on research. We're having to explain even more now than in the past why we don't like the idea of themes passively emerging from data. It really goes to the heart of our heritage as feminist and critical researchers and the idea that we are active in the process. But also, that we need to take responsibility for how we interpret people's words, rather than applying a rhetoric of positivism and assuming that it's possible to abdicate responsibility for the interpretations you've made. It's really important to acknowledge the power in the research process, to acknowledge that you're not merely describing or 'giving voice'. You are editing and interpreting. All of you as a person shapes how you make sense of people's words. To make the researcher visible is part of taking responsibility for how you've interpreted people's words. It's responding to the power in research relationships. Sometimes people think it's quite a trivial thing, but it's really important.

Virginia: It's fundamental to the conceptualisation of what you're doing as a researcher. If you're doing TA the way we write about it, that's an active process. It's not an extractive process, you're not a conduit, nor is it a mode through which the truth of people's experience is being revealed to you magically. I think it's a bit of a kick back against the ongoing dominance of positivism and the idea of the neutral or unbiased researcher. People still ask, "What about you and your bias?" To me, it's a bit of a stick in the sand saying, "No we don't want to pretend that this process is somehow neutral or unbiased. Why not value what we bring to the research, and value the fact that our interpretation is informed by all these things?" Why not treat those not as a detraction, but as a resource?

Kristina: I love what you're saying about it not just being a conceptualisation of the themes, but a conceptualisation of what you're doing in the research process and of holding yourselves accountable to your role in that that. So, in considering whether TA is suited to feminist and critical research, is there anything you'd like to add?

Virginia: Just, "Yes!"

Victoria: We're writing a book on TA at the moment and that has meant searching for citations of our paper, to see what people are doing with it. There are even feminist researchers talking about feminist TA, which is so exciting! Our feminist heritage, and the really rich tradition of feminist qualitative research is absolutely at the heart of how we think about qualitative research. We were conscious of wanting to not alienate people or side-line our work by branding it feminist TA, but it's nonetheless so fundamental to how we think about qualitative research; developing an approach to TA that couldn't work with feminism is just unthinkable to us.

Kristina: Attending to the operations of power and privilege is key in narrative practice. As this can be a challenge when entering into research relationships, what can TA offer researchers who would like to adapt the methodology to fit local contexts, and to privilege insider knowledge?

Virginia: I think that through writing in a way that we see as fairly accessible, and not tying the process of doing research heavily to theory, it provides a method that can be used in more collaborative research processes. Participants can be engaged from a position of not just inputting, but as co-participants in that process. Although, I don't do much research in those realms myself so can't speak from experience.

Victoria: But it is being used quite a lot by people engaged with those approaches, which we've been really excited by. Also, the emphasis on latent coding is important here (as opposed to semantic coding – focusing on the surface or obvious meaning of data). That's a term that's sometimes misunderstood as referring to unconscious meaning, but what we're really trying to highlight with this term is the potential to code and explore the implicit and underlying meaning and facilitate a focus on structures and power. We've really tried to emphasise needing to see data as contextually located. As a researcher you need to do that interpretative work and talk about how data are is situated within a particular context, and how that social context might shape meaning in the stories being created by participants. That interpretative work about how context shapes meaning is quite specific to feminist and critical traditions, so doesn't translate well to all disciplines. But a critical heritage is so integral to our approach that it would work incredibly well for the kind of research that you're talking about, where people are thinking about power and how people are socially located.

Kristina: Similarly, the questions we ask people are influential in shaping research. Some models have very specific ideas about the types of questions you can ask, and the characteristics of participant groups, but you've left that very open and flexible.

Victoria: It's not that anything goes, but *almost* anything goes … small groups of participants, larger groups, a whole range of methods. And it's not that interviews aren't fantastic, I've done hundreds of them, but there are so many other ways of engaging participants in research and collecting data. We wanted something flexible and fluid to give researchers lots of room for creativity in terms of what sort of data they might collect, the people they speak to, the nature and characteristics of the sample. I think probably more than any other method it has that flexibility.

Virginia: When I teach qualitative research to students, I talk about three different sets of questions in the process. Your research question, which is what you're trying to gain an understanding of; the questions you ask of your participants, which aren't your research questions but provide data for answering your research question; and the questions you ask of your data in order to answer your research question. All of those questions are different, so it's not just about blocking together the answers to one kind of question which happens in some forms of analysis – that can be a real tension point around our approach to TA. The point about what kind of questions you can ask is very tied to considering how you will get the data that helps you understand your topic of interest, in this particular context. Rather than just doing interviews and asking people direct questions, it's important to think through the range of available possibilities, and consider what's interesting, valuable or pragmatic.

Kristina: So, focus groups, story completion …?

Victoria: Using story completion narrative approaches would be *amazing*! It's a method that so invites a narrative lens, and we're always hoping someone who uses a narrative approach in their research will use this method. For positivist forms of TA, such as Boyatzis (1998), Guest and colleagues (2012), and Joffe (2012), the sort of questions you ask participants might be quite structured or rigid, but we wanted an approach that would work with more 'messy' data and with a very participant led style of interviewing. This can be a struggle for students to embrace. If you're interviewing for the first time and want to cling to your interview guide like it's a life raft I'd say, "No! Learn the questions, so you know what you *want* to ask. But then set it aside and just talk." The flexibility in the method allows you freedom to follow up on things, it allows messiness in data collection. It's really vital to get to the unexpected and unanticipated, which I think is the most exciting thing about qualitative research - when you're surprised by your data.

Kristina: There's been a tendency in narrative practice to resist positions of being an analyst or interpreter of other people's words. How do you see this fitting with the role of researcher ... do we become an interpreter, a reporter, or something else entirely?

Victoria: To be bold in answering this question, you can *never* simply report. Research that is presented as reporting isn't, because you're making all kind of decisions in the research process which means you're *in* the account that you're presenting. You ask participants particular questions in particular ways, your embodiment, self-presentation and manner will impact on how participants interact with you and what they were willing to disclose to you. You are the one picking the data extracts to illustrate and contextualise the reporting. Feminist psychologist Michelle Fine (1992) speaks about how in the process of editing people's stories they become our stories about their stories, rather than direct reporting. For us, we'd encourage researchers to embrace that fact that you are always an interpreter and always telling stories. Don't see that as an abuse of power, because what can be more troubling is a retreat into the language of positivism, using multiple coders or measuring coding agreement so you can claim that this is an 'accurate' account of what participants have said. Because then you're abdicating responsibility for how you've interpreted and made sense of those stories. Acknowledging your role and taking responsibility feels like a more accountable approach to power to me.

Virginia: It feels more ethical to do that than to pretend that you're just a conduit. Analysis is always interpretative, and I increasingly see analysis as a storytelling role. We are telling stories about the stories our participants have told us. Not necessarily stories in a narrative sense but telling a tale or giving an account of what participants have told us. I think storytelling is a useful framework because it doesn't pin analysis to the 'real' as if there was a single truth we are representing or misrepresenting. We are crafting an account of what we've seen, what we've made sense of, and coming to some kind of conclusion. It's really important to talk about your positionality and to recognise the power relationship that's inherent in that. Not to say that's inherently bad, but it's what (much) qualitative analysis is, and the context that it's structured in. Of course, there are many different qualitative approaches that take this approach, but the researcher voice ultimately dominates and has final say, so it's *our* storytelling.

Victoria: And you're not storytelling into a vacuum. You're storytelling to an audience and sometimes to achieve a particular aim. We're crafting a story about stories, and hopefully

one that's meaningful for participants in terms of creating a desirable social impact. That's important to hold in mind. Who you're telling the story to, and to what ends.

Kristina: That sounds like quite a political goal … is that a good fit?

Virginia: I think we inherently see research as political, and always want to develop understandings of the things we research in order to make a difference. Not necessarily directly, but the ultimate goal is change in some way, always.

Kristina: In thinking about the politics of doing research, one of the key matters is creating space for the voices of people whose experiences have been marginalised. In TA we talk about patterns and similarities. Can we also create space for diversity and marginalised voices?

Victoria: I think sometimes people misunderstand how we talk about patterns of shared meaning, which is that the similarities in meaning are on the surface of the data, people using the same words and so on. Rather what we have in mind is that articulations might look quite disparate on the surface but there is underlying social meaning that draws them together. We entirely expect TA to capture divergences in articulation, and themes to capture competing understandings. Meaning is contextually located, so a really rich and complex analysis would hopefully capture divergences, and different ways of understanding.

Virginia: And if your question is also about the inclusion of people who are marginalised societally, who don't often have a voice in research, that's a process we address through our research relationships, recruitment processes, sample conceptualisation and so on, rather than just in the analysis. How you bring people's voices into the research is important far earlier on in the process. If in your analysis there are 20 participants and only one person has a disability, or one person is queer and everyone else is straight, to focus on that one voice is setting that person up as a voice of X identity or Y condition, which is tokenistic. It's important to consider how to be inclusive in our research practices right from the get go.

Victoria: It's also about thinking flexibly about method. The message I try to convey is to put the participants first. Think about how to collect data in a way that will work for them. We're both researchers in sex and sexuality and its really clear in our research field that how you collect data shapes who will participate, and who is willing to tell their story. It's important to consider who has the opportunity to participate, how to make research inviting and accessible to marginalised people who may distrust research and who don't see any value in it. Design the study in a way that is more likely to invite those voices in.

Virginia: Another important element is not feeling entitled to do research with any group, just because they haven't been included in research. It's a long-standing debate in feminist research, about the politics and ethics of the identity of the researcher and the relationship between the researcher and the research community.

Kristina: Are you aware of any examples of your model being utilised or adapted from a First Nations perspective?

Virginia: I have supervised Māori students who use TA approaches and see their research situated within Indigenous frameworks more or less, so definitely that's possible. I would always come back to questions about the relational, social and knowledge values that research is predicated on within this particular community, and the question of why the research is being done, then ask how a method can be determined that aligns with both of

those things. Our approach has lots of flexibility in terms of the broad epistemological, ontological and practice ways it's utilised, so if it's resonant and suits the purpose then absolutely, go ahead and see how it works. And because we're not rigid about the six phases, or following them in exact ways, we're excited to see what people do with it

Victoria: Yes, people are doing all kinds of work that we never anticipated. Case study research, combining TA with other methods to create hybrid approaches. It's really great that people have picked it up and run with it.

Virginia: Sometimes we think what people do with it is great, and other times we scratch our heads and think, we're not sure.

Kristina: Another commitment in narrative practice is staying close to people's own words. Often the term 'rescued words'[3] is used when referring to people's own expressions, similar to the research term 'data extracts'. How visible are participants' own words in your model of TA? Is there a place for 'rescued words' in the final reporting?

Victoria: Using data extracts is such an integral part of analytic reporting. Using people's own words, not only to illustrate themes but to build and develop the analysis by examining the very specific features of how people talk about things, is integral to the validity of qualitative enquiry. Readers can look at the words and the sense the researcher has made of them and decide for themselves about the validity of those interpretations. It's fundamental to credibility and integrity. I've seen arguments about having no data extracts in papers, which I find troubling on so many levels.

Virginia: Some methodological writing around this suggests that you produce an analytic narrative that you can drop data extracts into, as illustrative examples of the points you're making. Arguments that suggest you don't need data extracts rest on the idea that whether we drop them in or take them out, you have the same analytic points. But in critical, constructionist and poststructuralist TA that argument doesn't work. People's words highlight how themes are expressed and articulated. In that way quotations provide validity. But it's just as important to recognise that constructionist qualitative research doesn't support 'giving voice' claims. This is interrogative work based on implicit assumptions, rather than the explicit things being said. That use of data that can trouble some people, because it doesn't fit with a simply validating people's meanings type of approach.

Victoria: It's also thinking deeply isn't it. Focussing on just a fraction of the data, reflecting, thinking, going for a walk, coming back to it … in a year, two years! We're ideally aiming to develop an interpretation that articulates something far more interesting, complex, nuanced, situated and insightful than the initial observations we had about the data. It's hard to conceptualise and write about, but it's a process of dwelling with your data, thinking about it and asking yourself questions with the aim of developing something really textured.

Virginia: Not analytically foreclosing things, which sometimes you have to, if you have a deadline for a dissertation or something like that. But trying to give yourself enough space to think beyond that surface level.

[3] For further information about rescuing words see Newman, D. (2008). 'Rescuing the Said from the Saying of It': Living Documentation in Narrative Therapy. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, *2008*(3), 24.

Kristina: If someone reading this interview felt inspired to try TA, do you have a particular piece of advice or suggestion for them?

Virginia: Don't just read our 2006 paper and assume that's the end of our thinking around TA. Our thinking has really evolved, developed, shifted and changed in some instances. So, read widely around method. Also, try to keep things open, fluid and flexible and not grasp too tightly onto what you're doing. Expect things to change and shift. Ask yourself questions, and if things aren't shifting and changing talk to others. They may ask a question that shifts your thinking.

Victoria: Give yourself time, that's the thing I cannot say enough. Give yourself time to really think and dwell with the data. Sit with uncertainty and recognise there will be moments where it feels anxiety-provoking or overwhelming. That's all normal … you're not doing something wrong if you feel those things. You're embedded in a process that can be frustrating, amazing, exciting, inspiring, energising, creative, overwhelming and scary. But by the end of it, hopefully you'll have something that's worth that emotional journey, that's really insightful, novel and interesting. And if your goal is social change, that will hopefully help achieve that change for the people you've spoken to

Virginia: Coming back to that point about giving it enough time, actually the most basic bit of advice is that it's always going to take a lot longer than anticipated. I've never met anyone who's done it quicker.

Victoria: I don't want to put people off or stop them from being excited about doing qualitative research, but just recognise that it's not an easy process. It's challenging and involves you as a person, as a human being. But I've never heard anyone say they've regretted doing it. It has its moments of challenge, but students feel really proud of what they've achieved. It's so exciting when a student does their first qualitative research project and it's something bold and confronting, with the potential to really shake things up. People doing their first TA project can do incredible things.

Virginia: That's an inspiring comment.

Kristina: Yes, there are so many things you've said that are inspiring. I know I'm very excited about it. Thank you so much for your time and contribution.

Victoria: It's been nice to talk and reflect.

Virginia: And thank you for finding a time to suit all of us! Nice to meet you virtually.

Part 3. TA and narratively informed research: Points of congruence and areas for consideration

The table below summarises a range of key points of congruence that make TA worthy of consideration for researchers seeking to bring a narrative lens to their work. Of course, TA is not the only methodology that narratively informed researchers can use! Wider exploration and reading are recommended, as a better fit for a given project may be found elsewhere. Nor will TA meet the requirements of every research endeavour. But we hope that highlighting some significant points of interest will assist narratively informed researchers in deciding whether TA is a good fit for their circumstance and context.

A flexible and accessible model
• The reflexive TA approach outlined by Braun and Clarke is appropriate for use with myriad forms of data types, collection styles and participant groups, allowing innovation to suit the research context. • Six, clearly set out and relatively straightforward phases with plenty of information on the approach available via journal articles, book chapters, a website and online presentations.
The ability to do qualitative research in its own paradigm
• Theoretical freedom allows TA to be used consistently in poststructuralist frameworks, escaping positivist ideas by conceptualising themes as constructions, rejecting notions of inter-coder reliability, saturation or prevalence as equating to significance. • TA does not seek essential truths, researcher objectivity or naïve reporting of experience, but embraces researcher subjectivity as a resource. • Accountability is achieved through making the researcher's own social location, epistemological and other assumptions, and research decisions visible. • Rigour and validity come, not from claims of generalisability of findings, but through transparency, thoroughness, consistency and methodological congruence with the researcher's chosen theoretical framework. • Knowledge is recognised as co-produced between researcher and participant. Experience is seen as contextual, and social structures and discourses influential in shaping experience and how stories can be told.
Particular congruences of TA with narrative ideas
• Consistent with narrative practices of co-research[4] by calling on subjective accounts and valuing insider knowledge. • Invites researcher reflexivity and awareness of our own role in shaping the research. • Escapes analysing individuals, highlights common experience and illuminates wider contexts that make experience and meaning-making available. • Remains close to participant accounts through integration of participants' own words in the reporting, keeping some context around those words. • Requires close listening, lingering in the detail of conversations, and an awareness of what is 'absent but implicit'[5] that makes the story knowable. • Inclusion of rich, nuanced and complex descriptions, using rescued words.
Key areas for researcher attention before and beyond the six-phase analysis

[4] For more about narrative co-research see Epston, D. (1999). Co-research: The making of an alternative knowledge. *Narrative therapy and community work: A conference collection*. Vol. 1. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

[5] For more on the absent but implicit see White, M. (2000). Re-engaging with history: The absent but implicit. In White, M. *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and interviews* (pp 35-58). Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications

- TA is a central part of the wider methodology but does not constitute its entirety. The researcher must make a range of decisions to ensure theoretical consistency at each stage, retain accountability for each decision made, and ensure the overall usefulness of the design for the intended goals.
- The six phases alone don't address issues of power and privilege or bring marginalised experiences to the centre. The researcher needs to consider elsewhere in their design how this will be done.
- TA makes more sense of commonalities than of idiosyncrasies, so care is needed to ensure fair representation of diversity, without tokenism. It is important to consider how, given the researcher's theorising role, themes will be generated to accommodate diversity and represent a variety of perspectives.

Conclusion: Hopes for future research

By richly exploring the commitments of reflexive TA's originators and telling a story of how it proved to be profoundly helpful for one researcher in overcoming some of the practical and theoretical dilemmas that can arise when conducting narratively informed research, this paper has sought to establish some of the feminist and constructionist understandings that underpin Braun and Clarke's approach to TA and outline some of its usefulness. In offering a number of important recommendations for researchers reaching for ethical and credible research practices, and a summary of key points of congruence between reflexive TA and the ideas of narrative therapy, we hope that our combined stories of experience, intention and practice development will contribute to a growing enthusiasm for, and engagement with, the production and co-production of high-standard qualitative research by practitioner-researchers employing a narrative lens.

Some further reading

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Jankowski, G., Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2017) Reflecting on qualitative research, feminist methodologies and feminist psychology: In conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. Psychology of Women Section Review, 19 (1). pp. 43-55.

Additional resources

The TA website contains a more extensive list of publications, resources and FAQs at:

www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/thematicanalysis

Online lectures given by Victoria and Virginia on TA are available at:

https://youtu.be/5zFcC10vOVY

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4voVhTiVydc

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