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# Everything changes… well some things do: Reflections on, and resources for, reflexive thematic analysis

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When we first wrote about thematic analysis (TA) in a paper entitled *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology* published in the journal *Qualitative Research in Psychology* in 2006, we thought we were writing a paper that we could give to our students, one that reflected our values and practices as qualitative researchers. We did *not* imagine the paper would become hugely popular (at the time of writing, it has over 120,000 *Google Scholar* citations). We certainly didn't imagine that we would write more about TA! But since receiving an invitation to write a chapter on TA for a US edited collection published in 2012 (Braun & Clarke, 2012), it feels like we have done nothing but write, talk and teach about TA. These experiences, and the questions we've been asked, have pushed us to learn more about the wider landscape of TA, and to reflect on the assumptions we made when first articulating our approach (see Braun & Clarke, 2019). How our approach has been taken up and the many misunderstandings, myths and confusions that are evident in published TA research (see Braun & Clarke, 2021a) have also informed our evolving thinking and writing. Our understanding of TA, and our articulation of our approach, *has* changed – in often-subtle but nonetheless important ways.

In this short piece, we respond to an invite from *QMiP Bulletin* to signpost the resources we have created for learning about and doing (and teaching and supervising) TA; we also briefly signal some the things that have changed in our thinking. Our new book *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Braun & Clarke, 2022) is the most recent articulation of our approach, and represents the culmination of a decade's worth of learning about and reflecting on TA. If you only read *one* thing, we recommend reading that.

## What has changed?

Starting with something that could be seen as trivial, but is fundamental, is that we now call our approach *reflexive TA*. The change from just 'thematic analysis' reflects our increased understanding of the diversity within TA, a desire to more clearly demarcate our approach from other approaches, and a wish to emphasise the role of researcher reflexivity in our approach. We are now careful not to describe TA as a singular method, with one set of established procedures and paradigmatic assumptions, but as – using Fugard and Potts' (2019) term - a *family of methods*. Like human families, members of the TA family of methods have some things in common: practices of coding and theme development; the potential for a focus on latent (implicit, underlying, hidden, conceptual) and/or semantic (manifest, overt, surface, explicit, descriptive) meaning[1]; and some degree of theoretical flexibility. Theoretical flexibility is a defining feature of TA because it is closer

[1] Terms we recently learned originate from content analysis, and the psychoanalytic theoretical leanings of some early content analysts (Krippendorff, 2019).

to a method than a methodology – if a method is defined as a theoretically-independent or flexible tool or technique, and a methodology as a theoretically informed and delimited framework for research. Members of the TA family of methods also diverge, just like human families can, with different approaches and different values. The difference is captured by a second key change.

Over the years, we have been developing a loose, work-in-progress typology to capture some of the procedural and philosophical divergences across different TA methods. Initially, we distinguished between *small q and Big Q TA*, building on a distinction made by US psychologists Kidder and Fine (1987) between small q and Big Q qualitative. Small q captures the use of qualitative techniques within a disciplinary-dominant positivist paradigm, whereas Big Q qualitative refers to the use of such techniques within a qualitative paradigm or values framework. In small q, qualitative = qualitative tools and techniques; in Big Q, qualitative = qualitative tools and techniques + qualitative research values. We designated the approach we developed as *fully* qualitative (techniques + values), Big Q TA, whereas many other approaches to TA could be located in the small q category. We love Linda Finlay's (2021) recent differentiation between 'scientifically descriptive' and 'artfully interpretative' approaches to TA, which captures a similar broad division. We still find a basic bipartite distinction helpful, but now typically discuss an expanded tripartite typology: *coding reliability (small q) TA, reflexive (Big Q) TA,* and *codebook TA* (the latter includes approaches like framework, template and matrix analysis; see Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2022). As well as designating differences, the groupings aim to capture shared core aspects that unite a range of TA approaches, related to underlying paradigmatic assumptions/research values, how core constructs like themes are conceptualised, and analytic procedures. The key takeaway is that TA is not *a* method singular, and different approaches to TA can diverge both procedurally and philosophically. They cannot simply be blended together in a coherent way (see Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021d).

Our 2006 paper designated *six phases of TA* – having seen these referred to as "steps" or "stages", we are now careful to emphasise that these are phases rather than steps or stages, as the latter terms can imply the researcher moves through the process seamlessly in one direction, with each "stage" in the process clearly separated and contained from the others. We like to think that "phases" captures the recursive nature of reflexive TA, and the way the different processes can blur into each other, particularly as researchers become more experienced with the method. We have also *renamed these phases* (see Table 1), to correct some misunderstandings of how themes are conceptualised in reflexive TA, and better capture this recursive process – noting that the core *approach* and *practices* within each has not changed.

Table 1: The original and revised names for the six phases of reflexive TA

| **Phase** | **Braun & Clarke (2006)** | **Braun & Clarke (2022)** |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Familiarising yourself with the data | Familiarising yourself with the dataset |
| 2 | Generating initial codes | Coding |
| 3 | Searching for themes | Generating initial themes |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4 | Reviewing themes | Developing and reviewing themes |
| 5 | Defining and naming themes | Refining, defining and naming themes |
| 6 | Producing the report | Writing up |

The most meaningful changes are phases two to five. We removed the reference to "initial" in phase two as it unhelpfully implied there should be subsequent phases of coding, rather than – as intended – signalling the way coding in reflexive TA is inherently recursive and iterative, organic and free-flowing. We changed "searching for themes" to "generating initial theme" for two reasons: 1) because it better captures the provisional nature of themes in this early phase of theme development – these themes are an opening gambit, to be explored further and fully developed in later phases of theme development, likely reworked and perhaps even abandoned; 2) the phrase "searching" allowed readers to conceptualise themes as (real) entities, waiting within the data (more on this in a moment). We renamed phases four and five to better capture the way theme development is an ongoing process across *all* these phases. It is not the case that the researcher develops the themes in phase three, checks and rubber stamps them in phase four, and then develops interesting names for them in phase five. Rather across all these phases, themes are continuously worked, reworked and refined as the researcher develops their interpretive "take" on the data.

The final important change we highlight here – linked to the renaming of "searching for themes" – is a refined way of defining "a theme" for reflexive TA – as distinctions in the way "themes" are conceptualised across the TA family of methods both became clearer, and evolved with more scholarship on the method. This has crystallised most recently into a distinction between themes conceptualised as *topic summaries*[2] and (the not very pithy) *themes as patterns of shared meaning, underpinned by a central concept*. Topic summaries draw together data related to the same *topic* – what unites the observations in the theme is the shared topic, rather than a shared idea, experience, perspective, etc. Such topic summaries often contain quite disparate experiences, ideas, perspectives etc. A classic topic summary theme title is something like 'Barriers to X' or 'Experiences of Y'. So, for example, under the heading of 'Barriers to clothing shopping for disabled people with limited mobility', a topic summary theme would report on various different observations or experiences related to the topic of 'Barriers' - a lack of accessible toilets, a lack of accessible parking, or any parking, steps into and within shops, steps with no handrails, clothing rails crammed closely together with no room for wheeled walking frames (rollators) or wheelchairs to move easily between them, small changing rooms with no room for rollators or wheelchairs, clothes and accessories on high shelves that cannot be reached. All of these are examples of barriers, but there is no story here, no shared meaning. A shared meaning theme addressing a similar topic area might tell a story about ableism in the built environment, or ableism in government policy, and the multifaceted ways in which this creates access barriers to clothing shopping. This shared meaning theme would draw in similar data, but it would do so to tell a story around a central concept of

[2] We initially used the term domain summary, but topic summary seems to more clearly capture the focus of these 'themes'.

ableism. In some types of TA, particularly coding reliability and codebook approaches, themes *are* often conceptualised as topic summaries, but in reflexive TA, they are *not*. In reflexive TA, you need some uniting idea, experience, perspective etc, before you can claim a theme. Using a topic summary instead of a shared meaning theme is probably the most *common* of the 'common problems' we see in the use of reflexive TA (for others see Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

Related to us realising we needed to clarify our conceptualisation of themes as patterns of shared meaning, was also the need to clarify our understanding that themes are not real things. They don't exist in any ontological sense *within* data; therefore, they cannot be searched for, found or identified. Rather, the patterns that we capture when we discuss themes in reflexive TA are the outcomes of the researcher's interpretive engagement with the data. They are something the researcher generates, through coding, and then through clustering codes, and pondering, questioning and wondering about what these clusters might mean, what story they might tell. Themes are inevitably and inescapably shaped by, and reflect, everything the researcher brings to their analytic process – their personal positioning, skills and creativity, training and disciplinary sensibility, values and assumptions. If themes are conceptualised as topic summaries, they can be identified at the start of the analytic process, they can even be thought of as real things, that exist within the data. But if themes are conceptualised as shared meaning themes, they can only be generated through analysis. As Ely et al. (1997) wisely noted, if themes "exist" anywhere, it is inside our heads as we think about the data and what they might mean.

These developments reflect a method – or family of methods – that is evolving, in our own writing, and the writing of others. We urge those new to TA to go beyond whatever 'hype' might surround our 2006 paper, and read widely. And for reflexive TA, specifically, we provide a wealth of resources. Which, at the risk of seeming crassly self-promoting, we list here, and encourage you to engage with, in the spirit of better analytic work.

## Resources for doing, teaching and supervising reflexive thematic analysis

We now provide a semi-annotated guide to various resources to facilitate better reflexive TA.

### *Our thematic analysis website*

The best place to start navigating the resources we have created is our University of Auckland TA website: www.thematicanalysis.net. This contains links to all of the other resources we outline here. The website includes FAQs about TA, examples of good practice from student projects (e.g. describing the researcher's reflexive TA process), an annotated reading list of all our publications, various other reading lists (e.g. examples of TA using interviews, examples of more descriptive TA), and much more.

### *Four papers and a book – for a thorough grounding in the latest developments in reflexive TA*

If you have only read our 2006 paper, and want to catch-up with new developments in reflexive TA or refresh your understanding, the following four papers, as well as our new book (discussed below), provide a thorough grounding. They cover the TA typology mentioned above, research design, the

(non)usefulness of saturation as a rationale for 'sample size' in reflexive TA[3], differences and similarities between reflexive TA and other approaches that develop patterns (themes, categories, discourses) across qualitative data, and quality matters:

> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196
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> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health*, *13*(2), 201-216. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846
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> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, *21*(1), 37-47. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360
>
> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 328-352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

The final paper listed here is particularly useful for editors and reviewers, as it includes a discussion of common problems in published TA, and a tool for editors and reviewers evaluating TA manuscripts for publication. If you are an author wrangling with the notorious 'Reviewer 2', you may also find this paper useful!

***Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis***

Another potentially more accessible way into recent developments in reflexive TA for student readers or those new to reflexive TA are various reflective pieces we have contributed to. These include a reflective commentary (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and several interview-based pieces – most recently for *The Psychologist*[4] – in which we reflect on various things, including influences on the development of reflexive TA, common misconceptions and problems we encounter, and how our understanding of TA has evolved over the years:

> Coxon, A., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2022). "Thematic analysis of travel to places that we've never heard of": Astrid meets Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, to hear about using thematic analysis to explore patterning and meaning in data. *The Psychologist*, February, 38-43.
>
> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health*, *11*(4), 589-597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806
>
> Lainson, K., Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Being both narrative practitioner and academic researcher: A reflection on what thematic analysis has to offer narratively informed

[3] For an earlier discussion of determining 'sample' size in TA – in response to a statistical model proposed by Fugard and Potts (2015) – see Braun and Clarke (2016).
[4] There is an extended version of this interview available online: https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-35/february-2022/thematic-analysis-has-travelled-places-weve-never-heard.

research. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 4, 86-98. https://dulwichcentre.com.au/product/being-both-narrative-practitioner-and-academic-researcher-a-reflection-on-what-thematic-analysis-has-to-offer-narratively-informed-research-kristina-lainson-virginia-braun-and-victoria-cla/

Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Hayfield, N. (2019). "A starting point for your journey, not a map": Nikki Hayfield in conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke about thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. ONLINE FIRST. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2019.1670765

***Blogs, podcasts and interviews***

We have produced a two-part blog on writing qualitative dissertations and theses[5], with a particular focus on writing up reflexive TA, for the edpsy.org.uk blog.

Victoria has taken part in various podcasts and interviews, which provide a useful entry point for those developing their understanding of reflexive TA, including the Words Matter podcast series in qualitative research[6], episodes 33 and 34 of the NVivo Between the Data podcast[7], and an interview for the Researching Education website[8].

***Lectures and talks***

We have recorded a few public lectures and talks on TA, which are available on YouTube. These often cover similar ground to our published work, but in a different format. In this lecture, we provide an introduction to our approach to TA[9]. In this lecture, Victoria maps out the different types of TA and different conceptualisations of "themes" in TA research[10]. In this talk, Ginny focuses on TA and quality: Thematic analysis: The good, the bad and the ugly[11].

We have also uploaded to YouTube various audio lectures (narrated PowerPoints) on qualitative research, including a four-part lecture on thematic analysis[12]. The slides for these lectures are available to download and use in teaching from www.thematicanalysis.net.

***How to guides and commentaries, including those aimed at specific fields***

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[5] https://edpsy.org.uk/blog/2021/tips-on-writing-a-qualitative-dissertation-or-thesis-from-braun-clarke-part-1/
[6] https://www.wordsmatter-education.com/blog/podcast-46
[7] https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/resources/nvivo-podcasts#:~:text=NVivo%20Podcast%20%2D%20Between%20the%20Data,applied%20practices%20and%20passionate%20insights
[8] https://researchingeducation.com/braunandclarke/
[9] https://youtu.be/5zFcC10vOVY
[10] https://youtu.be/4voVhTiVydc
[11] https://youtu.be/KZqlW5nmgjU
[12] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLBw6Qig8KBId9YuIMzAg7w

We have written 'how to' guides on reflexive TA for various edited collections, and briefer introductions to reflexive TA in the form of commentaries, editorials and encyclopaedia entries. Some with a broader focus on psychology or the social sciences (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021e, 2021f; Braun et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2015; Terry et al., 2017). Others are oriented to specific fields – such as:

- Sport and exercise psychology (Braun et al., 2016)
- Critical psychology (Clarke & Braun, 2014)
- Quality-of-life research (Clarke & Braun, 2014)
- Health and clinical research (Braun et al., 2014a; Braun & Clarke, 2014)
- Counselling and psychotherapy research (Braun et al., 2014b; Clarke & Braun, 2018)
- Positive psychology (Clarke & Braun, 2018)

Our introductory qualitative research textbook – *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (Braun & Clarke, 2013) – also includes detailed "how to" guidance on TA, from a 2013 perspective; the extensive companion website[13] for that book includes datasets that can be used in teaching.

***Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide***

Finally, there is our recently published book, which provides the most up-to-date and in-depth discussion of reflexive TA. Alongside the book we have created an extensive companion website[14]; we highlight some of the key resources on this companion website below. The publisher Sage hosted a book launch webinar[15] – which was recorded and is available on Sage's YouTube channel. If you access the webinar via Sage's MethodSpace[16], you can also read an interview in which we reflect on the popularity of reflexive TA, and why we are known for saying "themes do not emerge"[17], among other things. In the webinar, our TA colleagues and co-authors – also TA authors in their own right[18] – Nikki Hayfield and Gareth Terry posed questions from the audience.

*Resources on the TA book companion website for teachers and supervisors*

[13] https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/successful-qualitative-research/book233059
[14] https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/thematic-analysis/book248481
[15] https://youtu.be/hns-tlUx1_Q
[16] https://www.methodspace.com/blog/thematic-analysis-in-conversation-with-virginia-braun-and-victoria-clarke
[17] You can buy a "themes do not emerge" badge from the Little Science Co.: https://littlescienceco.com/
[18] See Terry and Hayfield (2020, 2021) and Terry (2021)

The companion website is open access – and includes an additional online-only chapter on teaching, supervising and examining for quality reflexive TA[19]. This chapter includes lots of hints and tips particularly aimed at those new to teaching or supervising reflexive TA.[20]

If you are *teaching* TA, the companion website includes PowerPoint slides with all the end of chapter exercises for student readers, so you can easily incorporate these into your teaching. The full dataset that we draw on to provide a worked example of TA in the book – Facebook comments about people choosing to be child free – is available in both the original format that we worked with and an edited more reader-friendly version. There is also a dataset of media items focused on men and healthy eating. Both of these datasets can be used in teaching reflexive TA (and map onto exercises provided in the book). We have provided PowerPoint slides for an introduction to TA lecture – readers are welcome to use and adapt these for their teaching.

If you are teaching more advanced classes or workshops on TA, we have included all of our materials from one or two day-long specialist TA workshops, including various exercises that focus on different aspects of TA practice.

*Resources on the TA book companion website for learning to do reflexive thematic analysis*

Extra resources for learners include a reflexive dialogue between Nikki Hayfield and Gareth Terry focused on their experiences of researching women who choose to be childfree. The aim of this dialogue is to give learners a more concrete sense of what reflexivity involves in practice. There are also two published papers that provide excellent examples of a more experiential/inductive approach and a more critical/deductive approach to reflexive TA. The original published papers are available, but we emphasise the value of reading the abridged versions, which include reflective commentary by the authors designed to illustrate the thinking and choices that occur 'behind-the-scenes' of the seamless published account of the research.

**Some parting advice…**

This list just captures our own writing around reflexive TA – quite an extensive list considering we thought our 2006 paper got everything we had to say out of our systems! There is also an ever-growing list of resources on TA published by others, some reflexive TA, and some other TA approaches. Do we have any advice for navigating this wider space? As it turns out, we do. We would offer two simple pieces of advice. First, be wary of information that makes gross declarative statements about what TA *is* without acknowledging the diversity and difference across approaches. Second, aim to become a thoughtful, reflexively aware reader of advice and statements about TA, considering what (theoretical and paradigmatic) values align with what is presented – especially if this is not stated – and asking yourself "what is being assumed?" here. The same advice goes for our own writing! And third – which we are sneaking in here – make sure not to treat methodological advice as rules, so much as guidelines for thoughtful practice. Real life research is messy, and

[19] https://study.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/additional_chapter_-_teaching_supervising_assessing_and_examining_ta.pdf

[20] For an earlier discussion of teaching TA to psychology undergraduates, see Clarke and Braun (2013).

analytically, we are better equipped to deal with that if we understand the logic and purpose of what we are doing than if we are trying to follow rules (which might not always fit).

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