WEEK 5

MEDICAL RESEARCH

Thematic Analysis

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THEMATIC ANALYSIS (TA)

1. Introduction & Foundational Concepts

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a flexible and highly descriptive qualitative research method designed for identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring patterns—referred to as themes—within text-based qualitative datasets. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research. However, its flexible nature demands absolute methodological transparency to maintain rigor and trustworthiness.

Transcribing the data:

• For thematic analysis, verbatim transcripts are quite common; that is, transcripts that aim to capture every utterance from the participant and serve as an accurate record of the conversation.

Key Features:

- Organizes and reduces large amounts of qualitative data in a **flexible and systematic** way.
- Helps researchers identify **meaningful themes and patterns** related to the research question.
- Commonly used because it can be applied to a **wide range of research topics and questions**.
- Suitable for analyzing **open-ended survey responses, interviews, and other qualitative data sources**.
- Provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions than quantitative analysis alone.
- Allows researchers to interpret the meaning behind the data while maintaining flexibility in analysis.
- Requires a **clear and transparent process** to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

TA is a method of "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data".

> **THE ANALYTICAL GOLDEN RULE:**
> • *Analysis is stating: What does the data say?*
> • *Interpretation is stating: What does it mean?*

2. Core Definitions: Codes and Themes

What is a Theme?

A theme captures the subjective meaning and the broader cultural-contextual message embedded within data. Scholarly consensus (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000) shows that historically, 'theme' was used casually without precise definition. Methodologically, it acts as a 'red thread' running through underlying meanings, tying scattered blocks of raw text together to answer the question 'Why?'.

Scholar & Source	Methodological Definition of a Theme
Brink & Wood (1997)	The term “theme” is used for describing the fact that the data are grouped around a main issue.
Speziale & Streubert (2011)	theme is a structural meaningful unit of data which is necessary for providing qualitative findings.
Polit & Hungler (1999)	a recurrent and systematic occurrence which appears in qualitative data analysis.

3. Braun & Clarke’s Six-Phase Framework

Phase 1: Become Familiar with Data (Familiarization of Data)

- **Data Immersion:** Deep immersion requires repeated reading of the transcripts, observation logs, and field notes. Researchers must review all data pieces comprehensively; selective reading risks overlooking crucial, unexpected patterns.

- **Verbatim Transcription:** Audio/video recordings must be fully transcribed verbatim, capturing every word and utterance precisely to act as an uncorrupted archival record.
- **Formatting for Analysis:** Transcripts must feature broad left/right margins for manual coding. Field observation logs should structured with a left column for descriptive notes (raw occurrences) and a right column for reflective notes (analytical insights) to establish triangulation.
- **Early Memoing & Chunking:** • Get a sense of the data holistically, read several times (immersion) • Classify and categorize repeatedly, allowing for deeper immersion • Write notes in the margins (memoing) • Preliminary classification schemes emerge, categorize raw data into groupings (chunking**)**
- **Example on rough notes made on interviews transcripts (Research focus, question: What are students' perceptions of feedback?)**:
- The students do seem to think that feedback is important but don't always find it useful. There's a sense that the whole assessment process, including feedback, can be seen as threatening and is not always understood. The students are very clear that they want very specific feedback that tells them how to improve in a personalised way. They want to be able to discuss their work on a one-to-one basis with lecturers, as this is more personal and also private. The emotional impact of feedback is important.

Phase 2: Generate Initial Codes

• Codes and coding are sometimes called labels and labelling (Rapley, 2011).

• Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive information compiled during a study (Huberman, Miles, & Saldana, 2014).

• We coded each segment of data that was relevant to or captured something interesting about our research question.

• A code is simply a short, descriptive word or phrase that assigns meaning to the data related to the researcher's analytic interests.

• When applicable, in vivo codes are assigned. ❑In vivo codes are phrases taken from the participants to capture the meaning of the line or text passage (Babchuk, 2019). April 2025

• Coding allows the researcher to simplify and focus on specific characteristics of the data. •

Researchers will move from unstructured data to the development of ideas about what is going on in the data (Morse & Richards, 2002).

• Labels can be about actions, activities, concepts, differences, opinions, processes or whatever you think it is relevant.

• You might decide that something is relevant because:

❑ It is repeated in several places; ❑It surprises you; ❑The interviewee explicitly states that it is important; ❑You have read about something similar in previous published research; ❑It reminds you of a theory or concept.

• Structural coding (or index coding): Coding based on questions (research questions, interview guide questions) and/or topics of inquiry.

• Descriptive coding: Coding of the basic topics of chunks of data (often a noun).

• Process coding: Using gerunds ("-ing" words) to code action in the data (Frequently used in grounded theory).

Themes	Codes
The purpose of feedback	Help to learn what you're doing wrong. Unable to judge whether question has been answered. Unable to judge whether question interpreted Properly. Improving grade. Improving structure.
Emotional response to feedback	Like to get fdbk (Feedback) Difficult for L to predict impact Student variability in response to feedback Fdbk taken personally initially Don't want to get fdbk if haven't done Well. Reluctance to hear criticism. Fear of possible criticism. Want fdbk in L's (Lecturers) office as emotional response difficult to manage in public. Negative fdbk can be constructive. Negative fdbk can be framed in a supportive way

Case Study Matrix: Code Generation Example (Domestic Cycle of Violence)

• An interview with a family member ("I") who had witnessed abusive situations between two relatives; an older man ("he") who provided care for his wife, who suffered from mental and physical disabilities ("she"):

Raw Interview Transcript	Initial Reflexive Notes	Assigned Analytical Code	Overarching Preliminary Theme
“She doesn’t get the care she wants. Then she gets worked up, screaming, kicking, making a scene”	Wife gets highly agitated and creates an open scene.	Wife’s structural role in the abusive dynamic.	Being caught in a cycle of violence.
“He goes crazy then”	Husband immediately retaliates and ‘goes crazy’.	Husband’s behavioral role in the abusive dynamic.	Being caught in a cycle of violence.
“After these episodes I think is when I have seen the bruises”	Physical evidence of injuries observed directly post-episode.	Empirical evidence of ongoing physical abuse.	Being caught in a cycle of violence.

Phase 3: Search for Themes

Clustering: Reviewing long codebooks to pool similar codes into unified stacks. These groupings are named and given independent concise rationales.

Hierarchical Layering: Organizing segments hierarchically into primary overarching themes, secondary subthemes, or isolated temporary codes requiring deeper exploration later.

Phase 4: Review Themes (Validity & Reliability of Themes)

• Themes should be coherent and they should be distinct from each other.

• At this step, we may delete themes, collapse themes together, and identify subthemes.

• Things to think about include: ❑Do the themes make sense? ❑Does the data support the themes? ❑ Are there themes within themes (subthemes)? ❑Are there other themes within the data?

Practical Evolution: From Codes to Subthemes (Student Feedback Study)

In an empirical dataset examining student perceptions of feedback, general codes evolved from basic concepts into a structured hierarchy:

Theme: Emotional Response to Feedback	Subtheme: Feedback as Potentially Threatening
• Expresses general desire to receive feedback. • Difficulty for lecturer to accurately predict personal student impact. • Broad individual student variance in processing evaluations.	• Refusal to receive feedback if performance was poor. • Fear of potential criticism; deep reluctance to hear flaws. • Feedback taken entirely personally; severe initial emotional blow. • Direct request for private one-on-one office review to manage emotional fallout out of public sight.

Phase 5: Define and Name Themes

identify Essence:

During this phase, we wrote detailed analysis for each individual theme, identifying the story that each theme told while considering how each theme fit into the overall story about the entire data set in relation to the research questions.

The process of peer debriefing, with someone who knows a great deal about the area of the inquiry and the method of thematic analysis, will help expose the researcher to aspects of the research that might otherwise remain unspoken

Phase 6: Produce the Write-Up (Interpretation & Reporting)

Usually the end-point of research is some kind of report, often a journal article or dissertation.

• Direct quotes from participants are an essential component of the final report

• Literature can be used to confirm the research findings as well as provide an opportunity to challenge and add to the literature

• Many authors recommend submitting the analyses to participants for their feedback through the process of member checking

Thematic Analysis

- **Thematic analysis is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research**
- **It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (themes) within data**
- **Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question**
- **The themes become the categories for analysis**
- **Thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in six phases to create established, meaningful patterns. These phases are: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.**

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