

Thematic analysis

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What is Thematic Analysis?

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data. TA is unusual in the canon of qualitative analytic approaches, because it offers a method - a tool or technique, unbounded by theoretical commitments - rather than a methodology (a theoretically informed, and confined, framework for research). This does not mean that TA is atheoretical, or, as is often assumed, realist or essentialist. Rather TA can be applied across a range of theoretical frameworks and indeed research paradigms. There are versions of TA developed for use within (post)positivist frameworks that foreground the importance of coding reliability (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012), and given the emphasis on positivism in positive psychology (Friedman, 2008), it is unsurprising that such approaches are often favoured by qualitative researchers in this area (e.g., Selvam & Collicut, 2013). However, there are also versions of TA - like ours - developed (primarily) for use within a qualitative paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). These versions emphasise an organic approach to coding and theme development and the active role of the researcher in these processes, and some positive psychologists are embracing the greater flexibility that they offer to the qualitative researcher (e.g., Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012). Since we published our original paper on TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006), our approach has become the most widely cited of the

many (many!) different version of TA available to the qualitative researcher, and it is this version that we focus on in the rest of this brief commentary.

What does TA do?

TA provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data. Codes are the smallest unit of analysis that capture interesting features of the data (potentially) relevant to the research question. Codes are the building blocks for themes, (larger) patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organising concept; a shared core idea. Themes provide a framework for organising and reporting the researcher's analytic observations. The aim of TA is not simply to summarise the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question (but note that in TA, the research question is not fixed and can evolve throughout coding and theme development). The emphasis is on producing rigorous and high quality analyses; TA has in-built quality procedures such as a two-stage review process (where candidate themes are reviewed against the coded data and the entire data-set; see Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013).

Why is TA useful?

The hallmark of this form of TA is its *flexibility* - not simply theoretical flexibility, but flexibility in terms of research question, sampling size and constitution, data collection method, and approaches to meaning generation. TA can be used to identify patterns within and *across* data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices; 'experiential' research which seeks to understand what participants' think, feel and do. Researchers have used TA to explore a wide variety of experiential concerns within positive psychology - from analysing the perceived benefits of an intervention for adolescent alcohol misuse based on positive psychology models (Akhtar & Boniwell, 2010), to exploring the views of adolescents with positive body image (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012). TA can also be used within a 'critical' framework, to interrogate patterns within personal or social meaning around a topic, and to ask questions about the implications of these. This approach to TA is aligned with critical psychology perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2014), and thus may be less attractive to many positive psychologists, given the field's historical reliance on positivist

frameworks, and even some antipathy between critical and positive psychology (McDonald & O'Callaghan, 2008). However, even critics like McDonald and O'Callaghan suggest the potential for the development of a *critical* positive psychology, and TA is an ideal method for research within such a framework.

TA can be used to analyse large and small datasets - from case study research with 1-2 participants (e.g., Cedervall & Åberg, 2010) to large interview studies with 60 or more participants (e.g., Mooney-Somers, Perz & Ussher, 2008) - and homogenous and heterogeneous samples. Virtually any data type can be analysed, from widely used qualitative techniques such as interviews and focus groups to emerging methods such as qualitative surveys and story completion (see Braun & Clarke, 2013). Finally, TA can be used for both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) analyses, and to capture both manifest (explicit) and latent (underlying) meaning. For example, Selvam and Collicut (2013) used a theory-driven approach to TA when they examined whether the core virtues of positive psychology - wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence - were evident in anthropological data on African traditional religions. In contrast, Holmqvist and Frisé (2012) used an *inductive* approach to understand the experiences of adolescents with a positive body image, a group that was virtually unstudied. Inductive approaches are particularly useful when exploring new terrain, and there is much new terrain to be explored for the qualitative researcher in positive psychology.

This is not to say, however, that TA is an omni-method, suited to any and *all* qualitative research questions and designs. However, what distinguishes TA from most other qualitative analytic approaches is its flexibility, leading to a wide range of applications. Combined with its accessibility, this makes it attractive to qualitative researchers in positive psychology, with their wide range of concerns, and particularly to researchers in the field new to qualitative research and those seeking qualitative methods that move beyond the positivist paradigm that has tended to dominate the field.

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