

PERSPECTIVES

Using thematic analysis in counselling and psychotherapy research: A critical reflection

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Abstract

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In this brief commentary, we critically reflect on the use of thematic analysis, and particularly the approach to thematic analysis we have outlined, in counselling and psychotherapy research. We identify the distinct characteristics of our thematic analysis approach, and highlight some common areas of confusion and poor practice in published thematic analysis research in counselling and psychotherapy.

It has been just over a decade since we published a paper outlining a new approach to thematic analysis (TA) entitled *Using thematic analysis in psychology* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our approach to TA has become widely used both in and *beyond* psychology, and particularly in applied research areas, including counselling and psychotherapy. The popularity of our approach also seems to have prompted growing interest in TA more broadly, with a section or chapter on TA a common feature of many recently published research methods texts (e.g. Vossler & Moller, 2014), and the latest editions of established texts (e.g. McLeod, 2015). TA is recognised as a useful method for psychotherapy process research (Mortl & Gelo, 2015) and as a method that is ‘flexible, straightforward and accessible’ (McLeod, 2011, p.146) for counselling and psychotherapy researchers. TA has most commonly been used by counselling and psychotherapy researchers to explore the experiences and views of specific groups of clients and therapists (e.g. Carew, 2009; Hunt, 2013), typically drawing on data from interviews (e.g. Hunt, 2013), and, less often, focus groups (e.g. Carew, 2009). However, there are other ways of using TA. For example, our counselling psychology students have used a poststructuralist, queer and feminist theory-informed TA to interrogate therapists’ discursive constructions of heterosex (Shah-Beckley, 2017) and an attachment theory-informed TA to analyse psychotherapy transcripts (Willcox, 2017).

Although TA as a distinct analytic method has increased in popularity over the last decade, we continue to see evidence of confusion about TA – what it is, what philosophy underpins it and what ‘best practice’ looks like. In this short commentary, we address some of the main areas of confusion and poor practice in counselling and psychotherapy research. Our aim is to support counselling and psychotherapy researchers, research supervisors and research methods teachers to improve the understanding and implementation of TA (and our approach particularly) in this field.

We intended our approach to TA to be a *fully* qualitative one. That is, one in which qualitative techniques are underpinned by a distinctly *qualitative* research philosophy that emphasises, for example, researcher subjectivity as a resource (rather than a problem to be managed), the importance of reflexivity and the situated and contextual nature of meaning. Kidder and Fine (1987) dubbed this orientation ‘Big Q’ qualitative – qualitative research conducted within a qualitative paradigm (they contrasted this with ‘small q’ qualitative – the use of qualitative tools and techniques within a positivist paradigm). We assumed that most readers of our paper would understand this intent. We were wrong! In counselling and psychotherapy research, and in other research areas, we see many instances of our approach cited alongside other, often very different (particularly with regard to underlying philosophy),

approaches to TA, and our approach ‘mashed-up’ with a positivist research sensibility and analytic procedures. What is particularly troubling is that these ‘mash-ups’ seem to be *unknowing*, reflecting some degree of confusion about what qualitative research is, rather than active, ‘knowing’ choices.

One major point of clarification therefore is that TA is not a term for one approach to qualitative analysis, but many. Indeed, TA is best thought of as an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches, which share some assumptions in common (typically that TA is a method, not a methodology, and flexible in terms of theoretical application), but also vary in terms of analytic procedures and guiding philosophy. In more recent publications, we have distinguished between three ‘schools’ of TA: (1) ‘coding reliability’ approaches underpinned by a positivist philosophy and involving the use of a more structured approach to coding, with an emphasis on ensuring the reliability and accuracy of coding (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998), which we classify as a ‘small q TA’; (2) approaches like ours that are located within a qualitative paradigm and emphasise an organic approach to coding and theme development, with quality coding resulting from depth of engagement (‘Big Q TA’); and (3) ‘codebook’ approaches that combine the structured coding procedures of small q TA with the underlying qualitative philosophy of Big Q TA; which might be dubbed ‘medium Q TA’. This final school includes template (e.g. Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015) and framework (e.g. Smith & Firth, 2011) analysis, among others (see Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2018).

If drawing on different ‘doing TA’ resources, counselling and psychotherapy researchers need to understand any differences in philosophy and procedure and explicitly discuss how different procedures have been reconciled, and actively negotiate any tensions in underlying philosophies. It is important to stress that we do not advocate, even though it is often claimed that we do (!), the use of codebooks and coding frames, an approach to coding based on developing a singular ‘consensus’ and coding reliability measures. Why? Because these do not cohere with the qualitative sensibility that underpins and shapes our approach.

The various schools of TA outlined above differ in how the ‘theme’ is conceptualised. This brings us to another important point of clarification – if using our approach, we do not conceptualise themes as ‘domain-summaries’ (see Connelly & Peltzer, 2016); summaries of (often divergent) responses on a particular issue or topic. We have read many

instances of counselling and psychotherapy papers reporting themes with titles like ‘Experiences of...’ and ‘Barriers to...’ or one-word titles like ‘Causes’ and ‘Barriers’, in which the theme consists of a descriptive summary of what the participants said about these causes or barriers, without any sense of whether any or what underlying *patterning* ties the analytic observations together. In writing our 2006 paper, we again took for granted that most readers would understand what a (*fully realised*) theme is, and how this differs from a summary of participant responses to a particular data collection question, or in relation to a particular area or ‘domain’ of the data (we and others have identified such ‘themes’ as instances of an under-developed analysis; Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). In small and medium q approaches to TA, this is often how themes are understood – another distinction between schools.

In Braun and Clarke (2013) and Braun, Clarke and Rance (2014), we outlined our notion of a ‘central organising concept’ to attempt to more clearly articulate our conceptualisation of a theme. In our approach to TA, themes can perhaps be usefully thought of as key characters in the story we are telling about the data (rather than collection pots into in which we place everything that was said about a particular data domain). Each theme has an ‘essence’ or core concept that underpins and unites the observations, much like characters have their own psychological makeup and motivations. We find DeSantis and Ugarriza’s (2000) discussion of themes particularly useful. It highlights the ways in which themes are *active creations* of the researcher (rather than just passively ‘emerging’ fully formed from the data) that unite data that at first sight might appear disparate, and often capture implicit meaning beneath the data surface. For example, Moller, Timms and Alilovic (2009)’s research on trainee practitioners’ perceptions of personal therapy reported two themes: ‘personal therapy helps me to be a better practitioner,’ and ‘personal therapy costs me’. Each theme is organised around a central concept, which together ‘told a story’ about two contrasting ways the trainees made sense of the topic. This approach to themes has the potential to highlight shared meaning, as well as contrasts or disjunctures in meaning, more clearly than summaries which compile divergent views.

This brings us to another common area of confusion about the purpose and limits of TA. Despite countless examples of researchers describing TA as *merely* a descriptive method, useful for summarising only surface meaning, and of use just in research focused on participants’ experiences and subjective meanings,

TA is *not* simply a method for data description and reduction. TA *can* be used to describe and summarise – and there is nothing *inherently* wrong with this, if appropriate to the research aims. But more importantly, rich analysis typically moves from simple summation-based description into interpretation; telling a *story* about the ‘so what’ of the data. And TA can be used in ‘critical’ qualitative approaches, informed by poststructuralist, social constructionist and discursive theory, which are never (just) descriptive (Clarke & Braun, 2014). This means that although TA *is* widely used, its potential as a method is often under-appreciated, perhaps due to misreading TA as atheoretical, rather than theoretically flexible and able to be used within different theoretical frameworks.

So, finally, we emphasise that *theory is not optional* in TA! Although TA is flexible in terms of the theoretical framework(s) underpinning analysis (with the exception of theory-as-paradigmatic – small, medium or Big Q), it is never conducted in a theoretical vacuum, and thus should not be thought of as atheoretical. Yet we have read numerous papers in counselling and psychotherapy research that contain little or no discussion of the philosophy underlying and shaping the use of TA. This is problematic in TA, because theory is not ‘inbuilt’ as part of a complete package – as it is for many other ways qualitative data are analysed. Imagine shopping for a teddy bear... Most teddy bears are ready-made: the manufacturer has made the bear, stitched together the fabric, filled it with stuffing, added eyes and a nose and perhaps tied a ribbon around the neck. The ready-made bear is akin to such approaches – like interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and grounded theory – which offer qualitative *methodologies*, rather than (just) *methods*. In methodologies, theory is inbuilt, and ideal research questions, methods of data collection and sampling procedures are defined or delimited. TA is not like that. This means using TA is like shopping at a ‘make your own bear’ shop. The bear you take away has all the same elements as the ready-made bear (fur, stuffing, eyes, nose and ribbon), but *you* select the specifics – the type of fur, eyes, nose and so on. The final bear is a product of your choices. TA needs to be underpinned by theory, as much as IPA and grounded theory do, but *the researcher* must choose the theories that inform their use of TA, and how exactly they implement TA. McLeod (2015: 147) suggests that for this reason, TA ‘is a good choice for researchers who feel confident that they know what they are trying to achieve’. TA, then, requires researchers to think

about aspects of the research process that can potentially be side-lined if using a methodology like IPA or grounded theory, and we see this as a good thing! One that, underpinned by a sound understanding of TA, can lead to a *conscious* and reflexive application of approaches and procedures.

We hope readers of CPR find this brief discussion around some key ‘traps’ around TA useful, and we look forward to seeing how the use of TA in counselling and psychotherapy research evolves in the future.

Further Reading

Our thinking around TA has evolved considerably in the last decade, so we encourage readers of *CPR* interested in our approach to read some of our more recent writing, alongside our original 2006 paper. We particularly recommend a chapter that discusses TA in the context of counselling and psychotherapy research (Braun et al., 2014), our qualitative textbook (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which locates our approach within a broader qualitative research philosophy, and a recent chapter, which situates our approach in relation to the history and wider terrain of TA (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun, 2018). Our TA website provides a comprehensive list of our publications, as well as FAQs, lectures on TA, and a checklist for reviewers and editors on evaluating TA papers: <https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-research/research-groups/thematic-analysis.html>.

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Biographies

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