

An Appraisal of Thematic Analysis: Warts and All*

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Letter

The recent article 'Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars' in the All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (AISHE-J) by Maguire & Delahunt (2017) outlining thematic analysis is to be welcomed. Their choice of Braun & Clarke's (2006) six stages approach represents a methodical and relatively intuitive road-map for researchers new to the field of qualitative research, and thematic analysis in particular. The article is to be commended for its clarity and easy to interpret structure, it did perhaps present an overly positive portrait of thematic analysis. While an introductory article by necessity has to avoid many of the complexities within a field, the overview presents thematic analysis as uncontested and unproblematic. In this sense it could perhaps mislead less experienced researchers who may be unaware of the critiques and limitations of this approach. This response therefore aims to broaden the discussion to include a number of concerns with thematic analysis that have been identified. It is hoped that this will enable inexperienced qualitative researchers considering adopting this approach to have a more rounded and informed perspective. This piece also seeks to assist researchers considering embarking on the 'qualitative journey' through outlining some tactics and tools that may assist this process.

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One crucial point that researchers considering embarking on qualitative research for the first time need to consider is the real and ongoing perception in many quarters of a hierarchy of research methods (Smith, 1998). Novice qualitative researchers should be aware of an unfortunate credibility gap between qualitative and quantitative research in the eyes of many proponents of the dominant quantitative paradigm. Braun & Clarke (2006) refer to this when they discuss the perception held by many proponents of traditional 'hard' science that in qualitative research 'anything goes'. It should be noted that in some quarters qualitative research is not seen as 'real research', but rather as 'airy fairy' 'anecdotalism' (Laubschagne, 2003). Forewarned with this knowledge qualitative researchers can both anticipate how their research will be judged by some and thus can pre-arm themselves with both a robust methodology and defence.

Even among the qualitative research community, it must be acknowledged that there are also issues over the relative standing of thematic analysis. In 2006 Braun and Clarke acknowledged the low status of thematic analysis, stating that it was a 'very poorly 'branded' method' and that it had 'no particular kudos as an analytic method'. More recently in 2013 the same authors noted that:

'Despite widespread use, TA has only recently started to achieve the 'brand recognition' held by methodologies such as grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).'

It should also be noted that it has been suggested that despite its now significant level of use there is a lack of critical analysis of thematic analysis (King & Brooks, 2017).

In discussing Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework approach, Maguire & Delahunt (2017: 3355) suggest 'reading, and re-reading the transcripts'. However, based on experience, we would suggest qualitative researchers formalise this to involve at least a minimum of three full readings of the data over an extended period. It is crucial that time is set aside for reflection and the development of in-depth understanding. We suggest each full reading of the full data-set should be separated by at least a day for deeper thinking and reflection. For researchers more familiar with quantitative analysis, it is essential that they both invest this extra time in this process, and plan to allocate such time in their planned research time-line. This difference in the analytical schedule is crucial for quality and may be an unexpected factor for those

more experienced in statistical analysis.

Two further suggestions to novice qualitative researchers are the keeping of both a research log and a reflective diary. The research log is essentially a daily account tracking actions, observations and progress. Those from a lab based research background will be well used to keeping such a 'lab book'. However, the reflective diary may be a new element for those trained in what are sometimes termed the 'objective' positivist 'hard' sciences. Given that the researcher is the primary research instrument in qualitative research, a fuller understanding of one's own thoughts, feelings, expectations, assumptions and emotions is essential. Candid recording of these aspects of a project, and reflection upon them, is essential to avoid excessive levels of 'bias' from unduly impacting a study (Snowden, 2015).

Related to the issue of subjectivity, all qualitative research is impacted by the subjective self and the researcher's individual perceptual lens. This has implications for deductive and inductive approaches. The question remains of course, how much 'findings' emerge from the data, and how much they were searched for, albeit unknowingly. Debate continues as to how truly objective and self-aware a person can be. When language has subtle connotations and resonance, how can one approach anything objectively? Novice qualitative researchers should consider the work of Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006). These authors specifically address deductive and inductive approaches in thematic analysis, neatly proposing a hybrid approach combining elements of the two.

Bryman (2006) discusses other strategies that can be used to improve quality and rigour in qualitative research. These tactics include having multiple individuals code the data and then explore Inter-coder comparison (King & Brooks, 2017). Alternatively, other methods can be used to strengthen qualitative research, including thematic analysis, such as seeking participant feedback, and creating an audit trail (King & Brooks, 2017). Creating an audit trail is demonstrated in the article by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), but the term itself is absent. Familiarization with the term may help emerging qualitative researchers locate and access useful information on this topic.

Maguire & Delahunt are right to reference the work of Bree & Gallagher (2016) who outline how standard software packages, such as Microsoft Excel, can be used to support thematic analysis. However, although a valid contribution, this reference serves to underline the ongoing denigration within Universities and Institutes of Technology of qualitative research. It would be almost unheard for such organizations not to have site-wide licenses for statistical software such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), Minitab, or equivalent packages. However, easy access to purpose-built software designed to support qualitative analysis, such as Nvivo, remains an issue in many institutions of higher education in Ireland. This absence is indicative of a hierarchy that privileges quantitative knowledge. New researchers should use alternative software packages and methods as necessary. However, they should also push institutional hierarchies to purchase software to support qualitative analysis, and be informed about the benefits of packages such as Nvivo to both support tasks such as thematic analysis of primary data, and their potential to assist in conducting a literature review.

Maguire & Delahunt's (2017) outline of thematic analysis provides a valuable guide for novice qualitative researchers. However, it is essential for such researchers to be forewarned of the issues and debates that impact this approach. These include the relative standing of qualitative approach and thematic analysis in particular. In addition, less experienced qualitative researchers should consider using specialised software to support their endeavours, as well as both a research log and reflective diary. New researchers to this field are also advised to also consider the framework outlined by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane which advocates a hybrid approach combining inductive and deductive coding.

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