

Chapter 31

Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research

Anindita Majumdar
University of Calcutta, India

ABSTRACT

The popularity of qualitative methods in social science research is a well-noted and most welcomed fact. Thematic analysis, the often-used methods of qualitative research, provides concise description and interpretation in terms of themes and patterns from a data set. The application of thematic analysis requires trained expertise and should not be used in a prescriptive, linear, and inflexible manner while analyzing data. It should rather be implemented in relation to research question and data availability. To ensure its proper usage, Braun and Clarke have propounded the simplest yet effective six-step method to conduct thematic analysis. In spite of its systematic step-driven process, thematic analysis provides core skills to conduct different other forms of qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis, through its theoretical freedom, flexibility, rich and detailed yet complex analytical account has emerged as the widely used and most effective qualitative research tool in social and organizational context.

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of qualitative research, one of the seldom acknowledged, but most popularly implemented method, is thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, being both dynamic and complex in its analytical process, thematic analysis could be taken as the foundation method in qualitative analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003). The research analysts have further argued that thematic analysis should be the initial analytic technique for every qualitative researcher to learn, as it forms the plinth for training of basic skills on qualitative analysis method that could be utilised to conduct other forms of qualitative research.

As pointed out by Braun and Clarke (2006) in their research paper on thematic analysis, the qualitative research can be categorised into two groups. The first group consists of the analytical approaches that are related to some theoretical framework, for example grounded theory approach, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, etc. Whereas the second category is free from constraint of theoretical framework, and

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is much more independent and experiential in its approach to analysis. Thematic analysis belongs to this second group of analytic approach. Thus, being independent of theoretical framework, thematic analysis is a divergent, compatible and much more flexible research tool as compared to the other qualitative techniques. Thematic analysis, therefore, help create a rich, detailed, as well a complex account of data set.

Owing to its flexibility, thematic analysis, however, can never be criticised being devoid of scientific temperament. The method of thematic analysis consist of very specific and clear guidelines for its conduction, and these procedural guidelines no doubt give the method a scientific vigour. Braun and Clarke (2006), while propounding the six-step process of analysis in thematic technique, have not only focused on the procedural concepts like “what”, “why”, “when” and “how” of the method concerned but have also specified that the analyst should have clarity and immense technical expertise to carry out the analysis through thematic method. This touch of procedural simplicity mingled with complex technical background gives thematic analysis a detailed yet rich flavour in comparison to other qualitative analysis methods, and henceforth makes it the most popular and widely used method for qualitative data analysis.

Thematic analysis, because of its simple yet rich data analysis process, can be conducted within both kinds of research paradigms- Realist/ Essentialist paradigm and Constructionist paradigm. However, the focus to carry on analysis would be different for different paradigms. The analysis pattern for the first paradigm of Realist/ Essentialist approach should be more subjective in nature as this approach focuses straightforwardly on individual interest, motivation, life meaning and experiences while analysing a data set (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). In contrast, the Constructionist paradigm believes that meaning and experiences are social phenomenon and not completely an individual perspective (Burr, 1995). Therefore, while analysing data within constructionist framework thematic analysis leans more toward the socio-cultural phenomenon and structural context, rather than the subjective factors, from the account provided by the individual data.

However, it is noteworthy that thematic analysis often involves a number of decisions that are not always explicitly mentioned by the researchers. For example, the study by Taylor and Ussher (2001) on discourse analysis provides a good example of explicit thematic analysis research process, whereas, the study by Braun and Wilkinson (2003) on women psychology does not mention much about the explicit decisions involved while conducting the study. One of the example of a ‘bad thematic analysis’ is where the analyst simply put the questions asked, in the interview to the participants, as themes. In this example, no obvious methodological procedure is implemented, or to say no thematic analysis is actually done. To minimise occurrence of this kind of error as specified in the example, it is worth noting and evident that to conduct thematic analysis and to carry on with qualitative research, mention of the decisions taken and answering the probable questions on methods adopted for data collection and analysis is essential for maintaining scientific vigour of the study.

In this context, this chapter on thematic analysis purports to discuss the following points in detail, with the intention to impart better understanding and implementation of knowledge of the method, for the benefit of the young qualitative data analysts:

1. Concept of thematic analysis, and its two major types, viz. Inductive and Deductive.
2. Concept of ‘themes’ and its two major types, viz., Semantic and Latent.
3. Guideline for the six-step process of conducting thematic analysis as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), through early study example (Nicholas and McDowall, 2012).
4. Probable challenges of thematic analysis and how to make thematic analysis good.

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