

Chapter 10

Exploring Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Thematic analysis has evolved as a prominent qualitative data analysis method, rooted in the rich history of social sciences and, in particular, psychology. It stands as a cornerstone in qualitative inquiry, offering researchers a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns, or themes, within qualitative data. This chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of thematic analysis within the context of qualitative research, addressing its theoretical foundations, methodological considerations, and practical applications. It explores approaches to thematic analysis, including induction, deduction, and abduction, highlighting their distinctive characteristics and applications to qualitative data analysis. It also outlines key steps involved in conducting thematic analysis. Overall, this chapter aims to equip researchers, practitioners, and students with the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct rigorous and insightful thematic analyses of qualitative data.

1. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research methods play a crucial role in advancing research and scholarship in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, and more (Divan et al., 2017). Despite their widespread use and recognition of their value, researchers from backgrounds such as science, engineering, business and

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management, may find the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of qualitative methods unfamiliar and challenging (Rowland & Myatt, 2014). Nonetheless, there is a growing appreciation for the unique insights and depth of understanding that qualitative approaches offer (Rosenthal, 2016). While there are numerous resources available on qualitative research, they often emphasise aspects such as design and data collection, neglecting to provide comprehensive guidance on the analysis process itself. Indeed, qualitative analysis presents its own set of challenges that require careful navigation. From the initial stages of data immersion to the final interpretation of findings, researchers must engage in a reflexive process that goes beyond surface-level understanding. However, existing literature on qualitative methods tends to focus more on the preparatory stages, leaving a gap in resources dedicated to the complexities of qualitative analysis.

Thematic analysis has evolved as a prominent qualitative research method, rooted in the rich history of social sciences and, in particular, psychology. Its emergence can be traced back to the early works of scholars such as Frederic Bartlett and Gregory Bateson, who laid the groundwork for identifying recurring themes and patterns within qualitative data. The works of Frederic Bartlett and Gregory Bateson are seminal in the historical development of thematic analysis. Frederic Bartlett's research, particularly his work "Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology" (1932), laid foundational principles for understanding how individuals construct and recall meaningful narratives and themes. Additionally, Gregory Bateson's contributions, including his seminal work "Steps to an Ecology of Mind" (1972), emphasised the importance of pattern recognition and interpretation in understanding human communication and behaviour. These works provided critical insights into the cognitive and sociocultural processes underlying thematic analysis, shaping its emergence as a prominent qualitative research method.

However, it was the seminal contributions of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke in the early 2000s that propelled thematic analysis into the forefront of qualitative research methodologies. Their influential papers, notably "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and "Thematic Analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2012), provided a comprehensive framework and guidelines for conducting thematic analysis across various disciplines. Since then, thematic analysis has gained widespread recognition and adoption in social sciences, healthcare, education, and beyond, owing to its versatility, accessibility, and rigour in uncovering meaningful insights from qualitative data.

The need for clear guidance on the practical aspects of qualitative analysis is growing. Nowell et al. (2017), for instance, argue that the lack of emphasis on rigorous and relevant thematic analysis has significant implications for the credibility of the research process. Indeed, without robust guidelines and methodologies for conducting qualitative analysis, researchers may struggle to ensure the trustworthiness and

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