

Encyclopedia of Case Study Research

Thematic Analysis

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Thematic analysis is a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding [p. 926 ↓] and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles. Thematic analysis is not particular to any one research method but is used by scholars across many fields and disciplines.

Conceptual Overview and Discussion

Although widely used, thematic analysis generally has not been well described. It is not a research method in itself but rather an analytic approach and synthesizing strategy used as part of the meaning-making process of many methods, including case study research. Richard Boyatzis describes five purposes of thematic analysis: it is a means (1) of seeing, (2) of finding relationships, (3) of analyzing, (4) of systematically observing a case, and (5) of quantifying qualitative data. As a sensemaking approach, thematic analysis is a tactic for reducing and managing large volumes of data without losing the context, for getting close to or immersing oneself in the data, for organizing and summarizing, and for focusing the interpretation.

A wide range of data sources may be used in a thematic analysis, including interview transcripts, field notes, information written by participants (e.g., diaries or journals), research memos, historical or site documents, photographs, drawings, maps, digital audio files, and video files. Historically, researchers have applied thematic analysis primarily to textual data and have transformed audio or video records to text via transcription prior to analyzing for themes. However, some computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software now offers the possibility of coding themes directly within digital audio and video files. NVIVO is an example of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software specifically designed for thematic analysis of qualitative data, with theory-building capabilities. The features of computer-assisted database management, including coding, linking, searching, and model building, facilitate rigorous and sophisticated thematic analyses, even for large, unstructured data sets and across sites and research teams.

The basic analytic strategy used in thematic analysis is *coding*, a process of closely inspecting text to look for recurrent themes, topics, or relationships, and marking similar passages with a code or label to categorize them for later retrieval and theory-building. Identification of themes can be done deductively, on the basis of theoretical constructs that the case study researcher wishes to investigate. Researchers might use their research questions, interview questions, or theory-derived categories as a start list of a priori themes for coding data documents, an approach that can facilitate within- or cross-case comparisons.

However, an inductive approach to coding is more typical of thematic analysis. Themes emerge from and are grounded in the data. Through a process of noticing patterns, attending to how participants label events, defining emergent themes, constantly comparing data against codes and categories, cycling back through documents to revise coding, recording interpretive insights in research memos, and developing data displays that reveal overarching patterns, the researcher builds a complex exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory case analysis grounded in the particulars of the case or multiple cases. Inductive thematic analysis avoids the rigidity and premature closure that are risks of a deductive approach.

Application

The examples that follow have been chosen to illustrate the breadth of application of thematic analysis. As well, the authors of these studies have described their analytic procedures explicitly.

Kenneth Ponsford and Judith Lapadat conducted a multiple-case study to describe the achievement perspectives of academically capable students who were failing high school in rural Canada. They used an adaptation of grounded theory, coding transcripts from open-ended interviews descriptively and inductively to categorize students' perspectives. Cross-case comparison yielded three overarching patterns that accounted for achievement perspectives: (1) academic factors (e.g., teacher as support, subject difficulty, variety in presentation), (2) social/family factors (e.g., family expectations, school–parent contact), and (3) peer factors (e.g., increased freedom, popularity). They derived suggestions for modifying school practices to provide better student support.

Jennifer Fereday and Eimear Muir-Cochrane used systematic thematic analysis with a hybrid of deductive and inductive coding, following a [p. 927 ↓] phenomenological approach, to explore the role of performance feedback on self-assessment in nursing in Australia. Their data included focus group transcripts and policy documents. This detailed account of stages of data coding and theme identification provides an exemplar of rigor in thematic analysis.

Sue Ziebland and Ann McPherson have described how thematic analysis is used to analyze cases in the medical database DIPEX, a compilation of patient interviews about experiences of health and illness in the United Kingdom. The database includes 40 to 50 transcripts of open-ended followed by semistructured interviews of patients, along with audio and video clips, for each type of illness, such as testicular cancer. The database and thematic analyses of patient perspectives are widely used for medical education.

Critical Summary

Researchers at the positivist end of the paradigmatic continuum may claim that because there is flexibility in how the step-by-step process of thematic analysis is applied the approach is seldom explained clearly enough for unambiguous replication. As well, the moment of creative insight that yields pattern recognition and emergent themes—that is, induction—resists formulaic description. Researchers at the interpretivist end of the continuum may argue that the very process of analysis itself—breaking texts into parts to reduce, sort, and label them—fractures the coherence and contextuality of narratives that constitute the data. Despite these critiques, thematic analysis is widely used as an analytic approach across methods and paradigms by case study researchers, qualitative researchers in general, and scholars of the humanities because of its power to yield insightful interpretations that are contextually grounded.

Judith C. Lapadat

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See also

Further Readings

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