**Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis in its simplest form is a categorizing strategy for qualitative data. Researchers review their data, make notes and begin to sort it into categories. Styled as a data analytic strategy, it helps researchers move their analysis from a broad reading of the data towards discovering patterns and developing themes. While researchers debate whether thematic analysis is a complete "method" per se, it is a process that can be used with many kinds of qualitative data, and with many goals in mind. For that reason, thematic analysis is often implicitly and explicitly a part of other types of data analysis including discourse analysis, grounded theory, and case study.

According to Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis is a process of "encoding qualitative information" (p. vii). Thus the researcher develops "codes," words or phrases that serve as labels for sections of data. Depending on the methodology and research question, codes can come in many shapes and sizes. Referring to a set of codes, Boyatzis explains, “This may be a list of themes, a complex model with themes, indicators, and qualifications that are causally related; or something in between these two forms” (vii). Boyatzis shows how one could take a variety of approaches to using thematic analysis and essentially get the same rigor. He contrasts theory-driven codes, derived from the researcher's or other existing theories; inductive codes, derived bottom-up from the researcher's reading of the data; and prior-research driven codes. He argues that all approaches have something to offer qualitative data analysis.

Thematic analysis is flexible and what researchers do with the themes once they uncover them differs based on the intentions of the research and the process of analysis. Many researchers use thematic analysis as a way of getting close to their data and developing some deeper appreciation of the content. Researchers interested in looking for broader patterns in their work in order to then conduct a more fine grained analysis often use thematic analysis as a first step. Thematic analysis is not tied to any particular epistemology or discipline.

**Ways to approach TA**

There are different ways TA can be approached:

* An inductive way – coding and theme development are directed by the content of the data;
* A deductive way – coding and theme development are directed by existing concepts or ideas;
* A semantic way – coding and theme development reflect the explicit content of the data;
* A latent way – coding and theme development report concepts and assumptions underpinning the data;
* A realist or essentialist way – focuses on reporting an assumed reality evident in the data;
* A constructionist way – focuses on looking at how a certain reality is created by the data.

More inductive, semantic and realist approaches tend to cluster together; ditto more deductive, latent and constructionist ones. In reality, the separation isn’t always that rigid. What is vitally important is that the analysis is theoretically coherent and consistent.

**Stages in TA**

One approach to TA involves a six-phase process:

1. **Familiarisation with the data**: This phase involves reading and re-reading the data, to become immersed and intimately familiar with its content.
2. **Coding**: This phase involves generating succinct labels (codes!) that identify important features of the data that might be relevant to answering the research question. It involves coding the entire dataset, and after that, collating all the codes and all relevant data extracts, together for later stages of analysis.
3. **Searching for themes**: This phase involves examining the codes and collated data to identify significant broader patterns of meaning (potential themes). It then involves collating data relevant to each candidate theme, so that you can work with the data and review the viability of each candidate theme.
4. **Reviewing themes**: This phase involves checking the candidate themes against the dataset, to determine that they tell a convincing story of the data, and one that answers the research question. In this phase, themes are typically refined, which sometimes involves them being split, combined, or discarded.
5. **Defining and naming themes**: This phase involves developing a detailed analysis of each theme, working out the scope and focus of each theme, determining the ‘story’ of each. It also involves deciding on an informative name for each theme.
6. **Writing up**: This final phase involves weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts, and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature.

Although these phases are sequential, and each builds on the previous, analysis is typically a recursive process, with movement back and forth between different phases. So it’s not rigid, and with more experience (and smaller datasets), the analytic process can blur some of these phases together.