



Book Review - Thematic analysis: A practical guide

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Book Review

Thematic analysis: A practical guide

Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications. ISBN 978-1-4739-5323-9 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4739-5324-6 (paperback), 978-1-5264-1729-9 (digital).

For many qualitative researchers and evaluators using qualitative methods, the names “Braun and Clarke” roll off the tongue as easily as their own. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke have become synonymous with “thematic analysis” (TA), an analytic method (or rather, a family of methods) for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data sets. Their article “Using thematic analysis in psychology” (2006) put TA on the map as a clearly demarcated and legitimate method of data analysis. As of writing, that article has received almost 12,000 citations according to Google Scholar.

Since 2006, Braun and Clarke have written extensively on thematic analysis, refining their thinking and approach, culminating in a new book, *Thematic analysis: A practical guide* (2021, SAGE). For researchers and evaluators alike, thematic analysis is a “go to” method for analysing and synthesising qualitative data such as stakeholder interviews and focus groups. However, as Braun and Clarke (2019) have noted, TA is not a homogenous approach and is better understood as an umbrella term under which can be found a range of different thematic approaches to data analysis. More recently, Braun and Clarke (2020) refer to TA “methods” rather than TA as a single method, to emphasise the existence of different approaches to conducting TA. It is important for anyone seeking to use TA to make an unambiguous and reflexive decision on the type of TA they wish to employ when analysing qualitative data.

Thematic analysis: A practical guide is the first book-length exposition of Braun and Clarke’s version of TA, which they refer to as “reflexive TA”. They have previously written about the differences between other approaches such as coding reliability and codebook TA and reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Here again they include a chapter on these differences (Chapter 8). The authors suggest this chapter is a good place to start for those new to TA, to help the reader position reflexive TA within the broader family of TA methods. This chapter would also be a suitable entry point for evaluators who have used thematic analysis in the past but may be

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3 unfamiliar with the wide range of approaches to TA. Given the predominant focus on reflexive
4 TA throughout the book, however, the book title (which suggests a broad focus on TA) may be
5 slightly misleading for potential readers.
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9 The book is intended primarily for those seeking to learn to do reflexive TA, and
10 secondarily for those teaching it (with a companion website housing extensive resources to
11 support both audiences). It is possible for readers to engage with the book in a non-linear
12 fashion depending on their existing levels of knowledge and expertise, and specific areas of
13 interest (see the various reading pathways suggested in the “Scene setting” chapter). The book is
14 divided into two sections. Section 1 is a practical step-by-step guide to doing reflexive TA,
15 especially pitched at the novice researcher. More seasoned researchers, however, can also benefit
16 from this section, particularly those who still cite the 2006 paper for the use of TA, because the
17 “Braun and Clarke” approach to TA has been developed considerably since then. Section 2 is a
18 deeper dive into interpretation and theory, important concepts to understand to produce valid
19 and quality reflexive TA.
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28 True to its promise of practicality, the book uses a worked example dataset to demonstrate
29 reflexive TA in action. The dataset is used in Section 1 to work through each of the six phases of
30 reflexive TA whilst making it clear that reflexive TA is not necessarily a clear cut, step-by-step
31 process. These feature boxes provide a fascinating glimpse into the analytic process for reflexive
32 TA. These expositions of doing reflexive TA—from a set of notes responding to data
33 familiarisation through to coding, theme development and naming—demonstrate the organic,
34 processual yet systematic nature of the method. There are also insightful reflections from other
35 researchers on their experiences of using TA throughout these sections. Further on in Section 1,
36 the authors discuss one of the fundamental concepts of reflexive TA, namely what constitutes a
37 “theme”. Understanding this point is vital to producing quality reflexive TA—themes are not
38 simply summaries of content or topics capture patterns of “shared meaning, united by a central
39 organising concept” (p. 77). Quality reflexive TA is characterised by an analytic depth which is
40 not evident in mere topic summaries (see Chapter 9 in Section 2 for a fulsome discussion of how
41 to ensure the quality of reflexive TA). If a commissioner of an evaluation prefers topic or
42 content summaries of qualitative data rather than deep, theoretically grounded analysis, then
43 reflexive TA will not be the appropriate method. Section 1 wraps up with a chapter on writing
44 the TA report and contains excellent advice on why writing is fundamentally important to the
45 analytic process.
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3 In addition to the later chapters already mentioned, section 2 contains very accessible
4 discussions on the use of theory and the importance of interpretation to reflexive TA (again,
5 something which needs to be understood if the analysis is to go beyond mere description). Braun
6 and Clarke come into their own when they write to democratise the role of theory in qualitative
7 research. The “not so scary” theory chapter (Chapter 6) unpacks “Big Theory” with a light-
8 hearted and even irreverent tone that demystifies some of the more obtuse concepts in
9 qualitative research. Yet another key point to grasp about TA is that it is not—and should not be
10 presented as—atheoretical. A hallmark of quality TA and reflexive TA in particular is that it is
11 based on and presents a clear explication of theoretical orientation and assumptions.
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19 One of my favourite aspects of this book are the “Alerts” throughout which highlight
20 things to watch out for, common pitfalls and points of clarification. “Practice points” and “Key
21 concepts” sections also draw out the most important points for the reader to build
22 understanding of reflexive TA and its practice. The chapter on interpretation, for example,
23 contains an alert, “The wider context of data shapes our interpretation of their meaning”. This is
24 a point for all evaluators to keep top of mind, and Braun and Clarke have peppered their book
25 throughout with pithy statements like this. These nuggets will undoubtedly be written on many a
26 sticky note and attached to the computer monitors of qualitative researchers everywhere!
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33 A key difference between reflexive TA and other approaches to thematic analysis is the
34 role of the analyst, and this has implications for its use in an evaluation context. Whilst other
35 coding reliability approaches to TA maintain some claim to objectivity, reflexive TA is avowedly
36 “Big Q” Qualitative (Kidder & Fine, 1987) because the researcher’s subjectivity is viewed as an
37 analytic and interpretative resource to be mined and applied, as opposed to a liability which must
38 be managed (Braun & Clarke, 2019).¹ Reflexive TA requires the analyst to “both interrogate and
39 harness the value of” their own subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 6). Evaluation is
40 comprised of both evaluative thinking and reasoning; deductive and inductive processes, and
41 ultimately, evaluators are required to “render judgment” on the subject matter at hand (Scriven,
42 1980), drawing on the available evidence as well as their own values and beliefs (Markiewicz &
43 Patrick, 2016). Adopting reflexive TA brings these subjective elements to the fore in analysis,
44 synthesis, and reporting which ultimately (if adequately explained and justified) can lend
45 transparency and credibility to the qualitative data analysis, evaluation findings,
46 recommendations, and lessons learned. The ability to be transparently reflexive when engaging
47 with stakeholders right through to data analysis and reporting can help build and maintain the
48 evaluator’s professional credibility in the eyes of commissioners and stakeholders (for more on
49 professional credibility, see Moretti, 2021). Finally, the skills and orientations which Braun and
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Clarke identify as critical to a qualitative sensibility fundamental to reflexive TA are also relevant to the contextualised sense-making required in much evaluation where evaluators must arrive at an “understanding that is about nuance, complexity and even contradiction, rather than finding a nice tidy explanation” (2021, p. 7).

As with their previous publications, Braun and Clarke write in an invitational style, welcoming and accommodating a wide readership including those who are neurodivergent by, for example, contextualising and explaining jokes in the text or clearly sign-posting passages the reader is not to take too seriously. I believe it is their highly accessible style of writing and their ability to unpack complex ideas and communicate them clearly and succinctly which has played a large role in building their notable profiles within qualitative research circles.

The book is reasonably priced for an academic text (\$79.95 AUD for paper back and around \$50-\$60 for an eBook version—note, this review was of the eBook version). One small criticism I do have of the eBook version (which was accessed through SAGE’s online platform, VitalSource Bookshelf) is that the footnotes appear interspersed throughout the body of the text, which does detract somewhat from readability. This minor point aside, the book and companion website represent excellent value for money. *Thematic analysis: A practical guide* is set to become a classic within qualitative research and is an essential addition to the evaluator’s toolkit.

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11 ¹ Victoria Clarke [recently posted](#) a Twitter thread on the difference between Big Q and small q qualitative as it
12 pertains to reflexive TA. Both Braun and Clarke maintain a regular presence on the platform, posting on latest
13 developments in TA and qualitative research. Also see the [extensive website](#) at the University of Auckland for a
14 bounty of free resources on TA.
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