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Thematic analysis:
The 'Good', the 'Bad' and the 'Ugly'

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Abstract: Thematic analyses can take multiple forms, some of them systematic, others intuitive. In practice, published research that involves thematic analysis comes is all sorts of shapes and styles: some good, some bad, and some just plain ugly. In this article, I attempt to clarify the nature and practice of thematic analysis. I offer concrete examples of what I consider to be *good* practice, highlighting instances where I think the thematic analysis has been conducted in an appropriately rigorous way, yielding rich, informative findings. First, different types of thematic analyses are identified and contrasted. The second section considers the stages and process of conducting an analysis. The third section explores four key criteria to evaluate thematic analysis: Rigour, Resonance, Reflexivity and Relevance – the 4 R's. Throughout, I emphasise that there is no one way to do thematic analysis. The form of analysis engaged depends on the research and methodological context as well as on the type of data collected, the researcher's own preferences, and what is required by others (e.g., the journal, examiners).

Keywords: Thematic analysis; reflexivity; methodological integrity; scientific rigour; artistic resonance

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that aims to identify patterns and meanings within data. Thematic analyses can take multiple forms, some of them systematic, others intuitive; some more explicitly scientific, others creatively artful. The ways in which researchers engage the process and write up themes also vary considerably. In many ways, 'good' thematic analysis depends on the aims and context of the research and the specific methodology adopted. What type of thematic analysis is engaged depends on the epistemological positioning of the research/researcher.

In practice, published research that involves thematic analysis comes in all sorts of shapes and styles: some good, some bad, and some just plain ugly. (While the notion of 'ugly' might be considered a little harsh, I use it here provocatively – a little bit of artistic license to punch up my point.) As a journal editor, I have read submissions with much anticipation, only to find a promising article let down by inadequately worked themes. How might the author of such an article have set about producing a better thematic analysis?

This paper aims to promote some discussion by examining the theory and practice of thematic analysis. In what follows, I attempt to present some pointers by clarifying the nature and

practice of thematic analysis. I offer concrete examples [1] of what I consider to be good practice and of instances where I think the thematic analysis has been conducted in an appropriately systematic way, yielding rich, informative findings that are consistent with the aims of the study.

Throughout, I try to show the broad range of what thematic analysis can involve spanning the spectrum of art and science. While my own preferences lean towards artful/literary thematic descriptions (as fitting my hermeneutic phenomenological methodological orientation), I respect and value more scientific versions for those studies embracing more post-positivist or realist values (e.g. some grounded theory and descriptive phenomenology).

In the first section, different **types** of thematic analyses are identified and contrasted. The second section considers the **stages and process** of conducting an analysis. The third section explores four key criteria to **evaluate thematic analysis**: Rigour, Resonance, Reflexivity and Relevance – the 4 R's. Throughout, I riff off my theme, 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly'.

Types of Thematic Analysis

The term 'thematic analysis' refers both to the thematic structure of headings and to the explication of the theme (which may include some narrative description, explanation, and/or substantiating quotations or reflections). Thematic analysis offers more than category tag-lines or a summary description of what participants have said. Instead, it can be likened to a distillation process by which the researcher identifies or comes face to face with the explicit and implicit meanings they have discerned in the data, and then synthesises these findings. A 'good' thematic analysis doesn't simply emerge – it has to be actively 'worked with'; it involves painstaking extraction and reconstruction.

There is no one way to do thematic analysis. Its content, form and style vary according to the different philosophical and methodological (i.e. epistemological) commitments involved. Variations span polarities such as: science-art, objective-subjective, realist-relativist, post-positivist-constructivist, descriptive-interpretive, inductive-deductive, semantic-latent, and so on. As Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 39) assert, thematic analysis is best seen as a "*family* of methods". To make it even more complicated, thematic analysis can be used as a method in its own right (following Braun and Clarke) or as part of other methodologies (e.g. grounded theory) which seek patterns in the data and have the option to present findings as themes.

See Braun and Clarke (2021) for an offer a comprehensive account of how their approach contrasts with other *pattern-based approaches*, namely: qualitative content analysis, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, grounded theory and discourse analysis.

Loosely speaking, thematic analysis can be divided into two (overlapping) camps: 'Scientifically descriptive' versus 'Artfully interpretive' [2] - See Figure 1.

In one camp reside researchers who take a more scientifically orientated, post-positivist, objective, realist/essentialist epistemological stance. Here the emphasis is on systematic and reliable coding procedures where inductively generated thematic categories are seen as 'valid' and as representing the manifest data. This approach – seen particularly in mixed methods designs or more realist versions of grounded theory -- is often guided by protocols and set procedures. Sometimes, software such as *NVivo*® (QSR International Pty Ltd) or *ATLAS.ti*® [3] is employed to organise the data and help researchers see patterns. However, such analysis is done, the goal to use an objective approach to analysis in order to provide explanations or make predictions, while working to minimize human subjectivity/biases (Levitt et al, 2016).

Researchers who take interpretivist paths and embrace more relativist positions that eschew the representational 'truth' of categories are in the other camp. These researchers are more explicitly creative, artful and/or reflexive. They use dialogical exchanges with participants to uncover (latent) meanings and, in their analysis, they try to make their interpretive process transparent (Levitt et al, 2016). Alternatively, they may critically deconstruct discourses with ironic, post-structural forms that aim to disrupt and critique taken-for-granted certainties. In this type of thematic analysis, meanings are understood as contingent upon the specific context and the particular interpretive/theoretical lens through which they are viewed.

Researchers engaged in thematic analysis of this sort tend not to follow set methods as if they are recipes. If different researchers are involved, they will collaborate but there is no

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[1] I chose the particular studies as exemplars because they can be freely accessed online and they seemed to make my argument about the range of thematic analytical choices well.

[2] Braun and Clarke (2019a) distinguish between three main types of thematic analysis: coding reliability approaches, code book approaches and reflexive approaches.

[3] While Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) can assist researchers with organizing large amounts of qualitative data, the researcher still has to lead the analysis.

expectation that consensus will be reached. Researcher reflexivity and (inter-)subjectivity are celebrated as resources rather than as threats to credibility and validity.
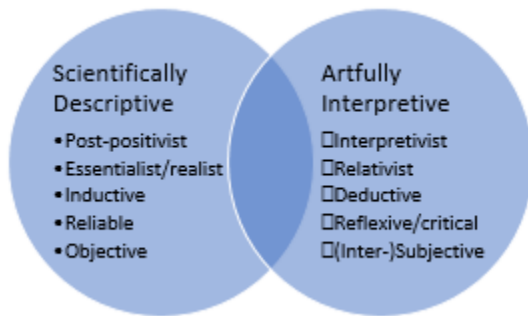
Figure 1: Scientific descriptive versus artfully interpretive approaches to thematic analysis

In practice, most qualitative researchers probably have at least a foot in each camp, and some locate themselves firmly in the middle. As these qualitative researchers pragmatically craft their analysis, they tend to take a critical realist or constructivist epistemological position which recognises that any knowing is produced by the researcher who is actively (co-)constructing meanings with participants. They consider meanings to be fluid while accepting that participants' stories reflect something of their subjective perceptions of their experience (if not their actual experience). Both science and art may therefore be embraced. These researchers attempt to be rigorous by taking a systematic, stepwise approach to coding/categorising and by ensuring eventual theme headings are justified and well evidenced, and perhaps the themes are 'validated' by co-researchers or participants. At the same time, these researchers might embrace creative opportunities and literary embellishment.

To give some concrete examples of what these various thematic analyses look like, consider the contrasting approaches taken by the three following studies:

- **Herron and Sani** (2021) explore the meanings of 'emptiness' from the perspective of those who have experienced this. 240 participants detailed their experiences in a survey. And inductive (data driven) thematic analysis was engaged to describe the different manifestations of emptiness. In addition to statistical analysis of the survey data, the open text responses of participants were examined for their semantic or explicit (rather than implicit) meanings. The findings were grouped under components related to: affective, agentic, and bodily self; self and other; self and external world. A composite, summary definition of emptiness was offered:

A sense of going through life mechanically purposelessly and numbly, with a psychological and bodily felt inner voice, together with a sense of disconnectedness from others, and of not contributing to an unchanged but distant and remote world. (Herron & Sani, 2021)

- **Finlay and Payman** (2013) offer a hermeneutic-existential phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of 'traumatic abortion' (which involves profound levels of complicated grief and dissociation). The researchers engaged interview dialogues with women who had had abortions in the 1970s/1980s. One in-depth case study is followed through by processing the data in various relational-reflexive ways. Three interpretive themes were seen to capture the implicit (latent) meanings: 'Feeling Torn'; 'Racked with Shame and Guilt'; and 'Monstrous (M)othering', highlight the ambiguities and contradictory aspects of the experience. A further theme of 'Entrapped Grief' became elaborated in a subsequent paper referring to the stories of three women (Finlay, 2015). The research highlighted layers of enduring trauma and a story of unsupportive or toxic relationships that tended to lie behind the immediate physical trauma of the abortion.

- **Mitchell** (2020) employs a phenomenologically orientated Reflexive Thematic Analysis to explore the lived experience of using videoconferencing for psychotherapy. Semi-structured interviews were engaged to explore the subjective experience of six experienced integrative psychotherapists who use videoconferencing psychotherapy as part of their practice. Thematic analysis (inductive and deductive) identified four themes: 'Seen and Hidden', 'Intimacy and Distance', 'Open to Connect' and 'Similar but Different Worlds'. The analysis suggests that integrative psychotherapists are able to engage online at relational depth and that online therapy is not inferior to in-person work, but different.

Probably most of the qualitative researchers in the psychotherapy field who engage thematic analyses, like Mitchell (2020), fall somewhere in that 'constructivist crafting' bracket that straddles science and art, inductive and deductive methods, and both description and interpretation. Ideally, these researchers will position themselves and their values explicitly, as this has implications for the aim of the research and the nature of the knowledge claims that can be made.

In weaker papers, authors tend not to make their epistemological commitments explicit; they simply follow recipes for conducting a thematic analysis. These researchers may not recognise the diversity of pattern analysis possible. Braun and Clarke and colleagues (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014; Terry et al 2017) argue that failure to attend to this diversity leads researchers to produce 'mash-

ups' in which incompatible techniques are collapsed incoherently together.

It's important to be consistent and this is where **methodological integrity** comes in. Levitt et al (2016) state that integrity in qualitative research is established when:

> Research designs and procedures (e.g., autoethnography, discursive analysis) support the research goals (i.e., the research problems/ questions); respect the researcher's approaches to inquiry (i.e., research traditions sometimes described as world views, paradigms, or philosophical/epistemological assumptions); and are tailored for fundamental characteristics of the subject matter and the investigators. (2016, pp. 9-10)

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

'Good' thematic analysis, then, reflects a fit between the research methodology, goals, and the researcher's beliefs. The researcher reflexively appreciates that choices have to be made, that different approaches to thematic analysis cannot just be clumped together at random because they represent contradictory epistemological commitments. The researcher is also clear about their specific methodological choices, although at time this can be a source of understandable confusion. For instance, some (critical realist) grounded theory studies take a more inductive approach; some (constructivist) grounded theory is more deductive. Similarly, some phenomenological studies (such as those employing a descriptive approach) tend to lean towards being more inductive and scientific, whereas hermeneutic (interpretive) variants tend to engage artful writing or view the data deductively through a particular conceptual lens.

'Bad' and 'ugly' thematic analyses confuse the issues either conceptually or methodologically and then end up with unsatisfying results. For instance, perhaps researchers try to get inter-rater reliability established when themes have been interpretively deduced. As meanings are seen to vary with interpretivist studies, this is a misguided project. Or researchers may claim to be taking a social constructionist approach while treating participants' language as a transparent reflection of their experiences and behaviours. Or researchers using a grounded theory approach (employing procedures like constant comparative analysis, line-by-line coding) claim to be engaged in Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019b; 2021). All such inconsistencies reveal confusion about the nature and possibilities of qualitative research.

While ideally researchers will be both clear and reflexive about their epistemological and methodological commitments, in practice they often fall short on both counts. Good papers will reveal a consistency of approach and methodological integrity throughout; weaker papers will be patchy and inconsistent. Mostly with weaker studies, the researchers do not seem to be aware that there are choices, and they take their method of analysis for granted and/or they fix it rigidly (what Braun and Clarke, 2021 refer to as viewing an approach to analysis as a "hallowed method").

Take the example of a piece of scientifically orientated research. Here, the researcher will automatically think in terms of validity, reliability, and generalizability. Even if they fail to explicitly state their post-positivist values, they are likely to reveal their stance in the kind of discussion or evaluation they engage in their paper. For instance, they will talk about "member checking", "participant validation", and "inter-rater reliability". They will discuss their participant sample and the extent to which the study's thematic findings can be "generalized". With these types of studies, the weaker ones tend to make assumptions that take a particular position for granted rather than explicitly discussing or problematising the issues. (For example, 'participant validation' cannot just be assumed to be a good and necessary step to proving the value of the research. This process doesn't guarantee quality, not least because it can confuse some participants.) Better studies have usually decided what kind of analysis needs to be engaged and how it should be evaluated before even embarking on thematic analysis. The analysis needs to fit the aims of the study; the themes will be theoretically coherent and consistent with the epistemological/methodological and conceptual framework adopted.

Once the researcher has established their design and commitments, they are ready to begin their data collection and analysis.

Stages and Processes of Thematic Analysis

While stages of thematic analysis can be identified or even prescribed, the process of thematic analysis is simultaneously systematic and intuitive, involving both 'craft' and 'graft'. This section will first identify the basic template procedures for thematic analysis; then variations will be elaborated.

Basic Procedures of Thematic Analysis

Any qualitative analytic process is probably strengthened if it remains fluidly responsive to the data rather than just being a mechanical application of protocol. Space needs to be left for

imaginative leaps of creative intuition as well as for a painstakingly, attentive, and systematic working through of iterative versions over time. Craft, graft, and artistry are all involved. The aspect that is valued and emphasised depends on the version of thematic analysis being applied. A hermeneutic phenomenological study may privilege intuitive seeing and seek evocative metaphors and moments of inspirational epiphany; a mixed methods study, in contrast, would emphasise a systematic scientific coding process.

While there is no one way to do thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019a; Clarke & Braun, 2013) have laid down an accessible, often-cited, six-phase framework for conducting a generic Thematic Analysis (TA). The phases are not meant to be linear; it may be necessary to return recursively to previous stages, particularly if complex data is involved.   They emphasise that their approach to coding is flexible, organic, and emergent through the coding process:

- Step 1: **Become familiar with the data** – The researcher needs to read and re-read the data/transcripts, writing early rough notes. This is the stage of immersion where the researcher becomes intimately familiar with their data.
- Step 2: **Generate initial codes** – Here the researcher starts to organise the data in a meaningful and systematic way. Succinct labels are put on the data to identify key features. Following the coding of each data item, all the codes and data extracts are collated.
- Step 3: **Search for themes** – In this phase the researcher starts to pull the codes and data together in order to describe patterns in the data. Data linked to each theme is collated and the researcher starts to be selective in grouping the categories of meaning together.
- Step 4: **Review themes** – Here the themes are modified and developed. It may be necessary to collapse themes together, split them further or discard ones that aren't central. The researcher checks that the themes work (in relation to the data and the other themes) and tries to tell a convincing story that answers the research questions.
- Step 5: **Define and name themes** – This is a more artful stage where themes are refined and crafted to reveal their essence. The researcher writes a detailed analysis of each theme, looking to tell a story about the theme and the data overall. This is also the time to find a concise and informative – and ideally punchy and interesting - title for each theme.
- Step 6: **Write-up** – In this phase, the researcher writes the themes into the wider report (including literature review, discussion etc.). This involves weaving the analytic narrative into a persuasive story that uses informative and vivid data extracts as evidence.

Braun and Clarke (2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013) are clear that these step-by-step procedures do not constitute an entire methodology that is tied to particular epistemological or theoretical commitments. Rather, they offer a basic *method* of data analysis. As such, they form an ideal 'starter' analytic method for novice researchers.
(For further details, discussions, and debates, see: https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/thematic-analysis.html)

The flexible procedures set out by Braun and Clarke (2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013) can be adapted for a range of theoretical frameworks, whether those requiring more scientific descriptive coding or those embracing artful interpretive modes. While these procedures can be used on their own as a data analysis approach (typically found in undergraduate and mixed methods studies), they can also be folded into other methodologies. Commonly, studies employing this method have a phenomenological orientation which thematizes lived experience. Otherwise, the thematic analysis can be engaged as part of engaging narrative analysis or discourse analysis, and so on. The inherent epistemological flexibility of TA is often misunderstood as a lack of rigour and clarity. In fact, this flexibility is its strength, particularly when the epistemological commitments of the researcher are made clear.

More recently, Braun and Clarke (2019a, 2019b, 2021) have extended and elaborated their method in an effort to distinguish their explicitly constructivist approach from approaches employing different variants of thematic coding procedures. The important element Braun and Clarke have added to the process is that of ***reflexivity***.

Reflexivity can be defined as researcher's critical self-awareness: the process by which they examine understandings of self/other and analyse the ways in which these preconceptions influence and impact the research (Finlay, 2016).   Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) thus interrogates, and makes transparent, the researcher's role in knowledge production. Braun and Clarke call for researchers to be explicit about their philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions and to ensure that these are consistently, coherently, and transparently engaged. For them, RTA is not about following procedures 'correctly' to ensure inter-rater reliability/consensus. Instead, they ask researchers to be thoughtfully and reflexively engaged with the data and the process.

(See, for instance, their comprehensive summary of their method on the University of Auckland website: https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/thematic-analysis.html.)

Varying Processes and Procedures for Different Methodologies

Different (though overlapping) procedures that find patterns in data and go beyond the basic steps described above are laid down by others. As Braun and Clarke (2021) note, it is important to distinguish between their approach to thematic analysis and that which is found in other methodological approaches. For instance, proponents of **grounded theory** (e.g., Glaser, 1962; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) specify their own version of coding procedures: an inductive, data-driven approach[4]. It starts with coding of the data/text line-by-line and analysing conceptual components as they emerge. This leads on to preliminary theorizing, using the "constant comparative method". The next stages of "memoing" and theorising merge into the final stages of integration and refinement using "negative case examples". The eventual analysis is written up into an emergent theory.

In the case of **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis,** Smith et al (2009) use a fluid, emergent approach whose starting point is similar to the thematic analysis steps laid down by Braun and Clarke. However, Smith et al (2009) recommend that each individual case (each participant's story) be analysed first to ensure that an idiographic element is grasped[5]. Here, the researcher attempts to bracket previous themes and keep an open mind so as to do justice to the individuality of each case. Later, interpretations are taken to deeper levels of analysis by utilizing metaphors or temporal references and by importing other theories as lenses through which to view the analysis. In practice weaker IPA studies look more like thematic analysis and miss the essential grounding in philosophy that would make it explicitly phenomenological.

Another phenomenological example is the **descriptive phenomenological method** laid down by Giorgi (2009), who argues that analysis needs to be engaged in an experiential, embodied way. Rather than simply following prescribed steps or applying set procedures,

1) The researcher assumes the attitude of the *phenomenological reduction,* bracketing past knowledge and holding back from assuming the reality of the phenomenon.

2) The description (transcript or written protocol) is read within the phenomenological attitude to get a sense of the whole.
3) Then the transcript is broken up into "meaning units" (phrases, whole passages) and each passage is reflected upon.
4) Psychological meanings contained in the participant's everyday expressions are extracted and elaborated.
5) The researcher synthesizes the analysis, determining the structure of the experience by rigorously applying "free imaginative variation" to determine which aspects are essential as opposed to particular or incidental.

Irrespective of the approach to thematic analysis adopted, the key point emphasised in this section is that themes must be actively worked with and woven together.

In the case of my own embodied writing process (Finlay, 2014), I write a theme and ask my sensing body to tell me if it feels right... I read it back, play with it, remould it... And I check again, asking my sensing body if it works... I return to the data and make more links...

The analytic process is one of grafting and crafting. Themes don't simply 'emerge'; they're not already 'in' the data 'waiting to be discovered' - like a pearl in a mollusc on the seabed. It does not do to sit waiting passively for themes to arrive or be discovered. Instead, there is painstaking process of gradually pulling the data together as themes are iteratively evolved, shaped, polished, and systematically evidenced. The researcher needs to be actively involved, searching, resonating, creating, crafting until just the right words/images are found.

To give an example of the iterative process, in one small pilot study on what it meant to psychotherapists to possibly become state registered in the UK, my colleague, Ken Evans and I (Evans & Finlay, 2009) started with 11 categories (of issues and meanings) arising in the data which we eventually narrowed down to 4 bi-polar themes: 'Feeling proud-feeling shame'; 'belonging-isolation'; 'credibility-ineligibility'; and 'fight-flight'. Our eventual analysis of the 'feeling proud-feeling shame' theme showed some layered complexity foregrounding the ambivalence felt by the participants and both researchers:

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[4] Braun and Clarke (2019a; Braun, Clarke & Terry, 2014) specify the key differences between TA and grounded theory are that: i. TA is not methodology and ii. although TA can produce conceptually-informed understandings of data, it does not attempt to develop a theory. See: https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/thematic-analysis.html

[5] Braun and Clarke (2019a; Braun, Clarke & Terry, 2014) recommend using TA to address research questions that are not first-person accounts of experiences and/or when working with larger samples. IPA often has small sample sizes and prizes idiographic insights; TA recommends much bigger samples to capture patterns across the data. See: https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/thematic-analysis.html

For all of us, the issue of registration is linked to a journey involving lifelong struggle and delight in achievements along the way. We seek to have our work finally valued and validated in a formal and public way. We care about the future of our profession and are proud of our place in it... Shame is both not being enough and not belonging enough. We believe ourselves to be flawed and so are unworthy of acceptance and belonging. While we may feel angry or resentful about being left out, the emotion is all too easily turned inward as we convince ourselves that we deserve the rejection and we marginalise ourselves. Yet even as we internalise our oppression, we hunger to gain validation from others that we are worthy; to begin to feel both acceptable and accepted. (2009, pp. 7-8)

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

A thematic analysis can be considered 'good' if it is clear that the researcher has been actively involved and reflexive and has made their research process transparent.

The coding process requires a continual bending back on oneself – questioning and querying the assumptions we are making in interpreting and coding the data. Themes are analytic *outputs* developed through and from the creative labour of our coding. They reflect considerable analytic 'work,' and are *actively* created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity. (Braun & Clarke, 2019b)

Instances of 'bad' practice in thematic analysis include studies where researchers have not shown thoughtful engagement or have failed to work systematically through iterations. Perhaps the themes are not sufficiently informative, clear, or distinctive. There also may not be enough evidencing quotations, while the process of obtaining them may lack the necessary reflexive transparency.

In such studies, themes may be insufficiently digested. Or perhaps there are too many themes, suggesting that further processing is called for. For instance, I once read a report containing 8 superordinate themes, each of which contained between 6-10 subthemes (63 themes in all!). The crushing weight of this superabundance of themes overwhelmed the research. The very phenomenon the authors were trying to describe was effectively killed off. The nuggets of insight – some real gems – were buried in the tsunami of insufficiently worked data.

Braun, Clarke, and Terry (2014) offer the following pointers regarding evidence of weak or unconvincing analysis:

- Too many or two few themes?
- Too many theme levels?
- Confusion between codes and themes?
- Mismatch between data extracts and analytic claims?
- Too few or too many data extracts?
- Overlap between themes?

The abortion study mentioned above offers a helpful example of the in-depth reflexive processing that can occur. In the first case study article, Finlay & Payman (2013) discuss what went into creating the theme of 'Monstrous (M)othering'. The following quote is from Barbara Payman's reflexive diary, where she processed her maternal counter-transference.

I felt highly *protective and supportive* of Mia as she told her story. She evoked my deep compassion, and I can see that I was monitoring throughout what was '*missing relationally*' for her; and feeling the impact of this 'absence' in an underlying feeling of sadness. Whenever I referred to sadness with her during the interview, she reported she wasn't feeling any, so it is not unlikely that I was 'holding' her suppressed sadness as well as my own 'internal tears of compassion'... I was very overtly aware of how an 'attentive and loving mother' would be responding to the various scenes I was hearing being described; I was feeling this strongly, and clearly, and probably with much protective 'maternal fervour' (!) (2013, p.166)

This reflection became part of the data we processed, and this led us to recognise that all three of our participants had troubling and damaging relationships with their own mothers. In our eventual thematic analysis, we suggested that at some level Mia, our case study participant, believed she had been:

a 'monstrous mother'; one who has birthed a 'monstrous other'. Yet, refracted in this subjectivity we find ghosted images of her own 'monstrous mother' and her own 'monstrous self' both as foetus and as a young woman who has chosen to have an abortion (Finlay & Payman, 2013, p. 162).

For me, the theme heading of 'Monstrous (M)Othering' and associated reflexive discussions make for a powerful thematic analysis, one that is ambiguously layered, poignant, haunting, challenging, and thought-provoking.

Judgements of what might be an 'ugly' thematic analysis are of course subjective; determinations of 'ugly' can only be in the

eye of the reader who has particular predilections and preferences. At the risk of sounding unduly harsh, I regard 'ugly' themes as ones which are:

i. Lacking in analytic thinking – For example, the analysis contains too much unprocessed fragmented detail which ends up simply being a superficial regurgitation of what participants have said. Or the analysis is burdened by an excessively complicated thematic structure.
ii. Banal because its insufficiently crafted – Banal analysis tends to be boring and offers little in the way of unexpected, interesting insights.
iii. Sloppy in presentation – Here, the writing may be unduly clichéd, may fail to flow, or is poorly expressed. Alternatively, it may be so full of indigestible jargon that little sense can be made of it.

Evaluating Thematic Analysis

Evaluations about whether a thematic analysis is good, bad, or just plain ugly, depend in part on the type of analysis, the methodology and also the values of the beholder. At a simplistic level, it would not be surprising for a scientifically-orientated academic to be dismissive of more artful presentations; similarly, those scholars who favour interpretive, artful forms might be less impressed by scientific reports they regard as dry and full of unintelligible jargon.

The quality of the thematic analysis also needs to be judged as a whole – it involves so much more than the 'tag line' of the thematic heading. Some papers have great theme headings, only for their thematic description or reflexive analysis to fall short. Perhaps the theme isn't explained sufficiently, or quotations don't link up sufficiently or the analytic trail isn't transparent. At other times, bland headings may disempower a write-up despite substantiating quotations that are vivid and powerful.

To evaluate the quality of a given thematic analysis, I recommend using established evaluation criteria (many recognised ones are available). Lincoln and Guba (195) propose four criteria to establish **trustworthiness**: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Yardley (2000) presents four broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance.

One convenient shorthand tool I employ is 'the 4 R's': *rigour*, *relevance*, *resonance*, and *reflexivity* (Finlay & Evans, 2009; Finlay, 2011). I see these as four slices of pie, but with the size of each slice subject to variation: quandrant sizes can become smaller or bigger depending on the type of research involved. For example, a scientific study would likely prioritise 'rigour' while a more artful one would value 'resonance' more highly. It's worth asking yourself what aspect you prize when you read articles(?) I particularly like resonant articles which present findings in interesting, non-jargonized ways. And when it comes to qualitative research, I look for a reflexive accounting as the researcher has played a part in creating the findings.

Rigour

Applied to thematic analysis, rigour asks if the analysis has been competently managed and systematically worked through. Do the findings match the evidence in a convincing way? Have the knowledge claims been tested and argued for? In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) studies, for example, rigour is established through the quality of the thematic descriptions:

> The analysis must…be sufficiently interpretative, moving beyond a simple description of what is there to an interpretation of what it means. Good IPA studies tell the reader something important about the particular individual participants as well as something important about the themes they share. (Smith et al, 2009, p. 181)

Smith et al recommend that each and every theme should be illustrated by extracts from participants' interviews. In the case of analysis based on smaller sample sizes, they suggest that extracts from all the participants should be presented.

Rigour is also established by visible evidence of systematic work. Weaker thematic analyses seem incomplete or unfinished; the analysis may not be sufficiently distilled and 'chunked' meaningfully. This is seen most obviously when there is confusion between codes, categories, and themes. It can also be seen in cases where there are an excessive number of bitty themes flying about, themes which should probably be grouped together[6].

Sometimes the problem of having too many themes is compounded by overly elaborate structures involving layers of 'domain summaries'[7], superordinate themes and subthemes. In such cases, researchers might be better advised to focus on

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[6] Braun and Clarke recommend having 2-6 themes for a single journal article or dissertation. They recommend researchers to be sparing when it comes to subthemes.

[7] Braun and Clarke state that a domain summary is a summary of an area of the data, such as everything the participants said in relation to one interview question without underlying concepts/themes that organise the analytic observations.

a few of the most significant themes rather than try to cover everything. It's as if they have become caught up in detailing the thematic structure instead of using it to say something about the findings.

An example I would put forward as a 'good' thematic structure involving superordinate and subthemes comes from Westland (2020). She interviewed six women who considered themselves problematically large (all of them had a Body Mass Index (BMI) of over 30. Engaging IPA as her methodology to explore their lived experience, she identified just 2 superordinate themes and 6 subthemes. Taken as a whole, the themes all clearly link together:

Superordinate Theme 1: Being a Monstrously Huge Body
• Despicable and disappointing form
• Demanding and all-consuming inescapable physical body
• Disownment
• Mis-fitting myself

Superordinate Theme 2: Feeling the Eyes of Others
• Shame
• Invisibly present

Westland followed these headings up with a powerful analysis. For instance, under the first theme, she included the following interpretive description, highlighting participants' own metaphorical statements which are offered as 'evidence':

All participants had an acute, intense dislike of their own bodies. They felt disgusted by their body's heaviness, look, restrictions and meaning. They used phrases such as "fat white grub", "kegs with leg"', "pea head, huge body", "roly-poly", "beached whale", "painful", "ugly", "repulsive", and "big fat ugly blob" to signify their rejection of this horrible object, this form-like thing as it moved of its own accord around in their world. (Westland, 2020, p. 7)

Rigour is also shown in Herron & Sani's (2021) survey results described above where they follow up their descriptive study with another survey of 178 participants who rated the accuracy of the definition established by the first survey. Their critical evaluation of both studies highlights the non-representative samples involved and indicates the limits of their knowledge claims:

First, being survey based, this research elicited relatively succinct accounts of first-person experiences of emptiness. Future research should aim at an in-depth exploration of phenomenological aspects of emptiness that emerge as important from our research, such as agency and embodiment, as well as aspects that are not touched upon by our participants but may be of relevance, such as temporality. Presumably, this could be achievable through the use of semi-structured interviews. Secondly, our research involved mainly British and Irish participants. Future research should seek ethnically diverse samples, to explore whether emptiness is culture-specific, or whether this represents a universally human experience. Third, we identified an important association between chronicity of sense of emptiness and suicidal behaviour, which is in line with existing literature (Blasco-Fontecilla et al., 2016). However, our research could not shed light on the nature of such relationship, or of the relevant mediating factors. Therefore, future work should aim to understand this link in the hope of contributing to suicide prevention strategy through identifying and intervening for those at high risk. A final important area for clarification following this research would be to further explore our suggestion that, emptiness is a transdiagnostic experience that does not vary in quality or form for those with differing diagnoses. Therefore, research aiming to assess emptiness in a diverse and verified clinical population, including those who have received a diagnosis of BPD, would help to determine the accuracy of this conclusion.

Relevance

Relevance concerns the value of the research in terms of its applicability and contribution. Does it add to our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Does it improve practice in some way? This is especially important for papers published in professionally and practice orientated journals like this *European Journal of Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*.

By way of illustration, consider the discussion offered in the abortion study discussed above:

We have sought to contribute to the field of feminist phenomenology by engaging a feminist-inspired relational-reflexive methodology to research a significant women's issue - abortion… We suggest that this case study illustrates the importance of recognising the individual and relational context of a (young) woman's abortion to gain any meaningful understanding of the degree of trauma experienced. It would be valuable also to hear other women's experiences too, taking seriously the point that traumatic experiences will be complexly varied and layered before jumping too quickly into labels and categories such as "post-abortion syndrome"… Applied to the psychotherapy field, this study highlights the value of careful, compassionate, slow phenomenological dwelling with the broader relational meaning context as a whole. If a client discloses she has had an abortion, it behoves us to explore what that means to her and for her world. Only

then can we help the client make sense of and work through the experience. (Finlay & Payman, 2013, pp. 171-172)

Westland's study of women with problematic weight provides another good example of how to grapple with 'relevance'. Under her discussion of clinical implications, Westland argues that much of the psychological help currently given to people to assist in weigh management creates a distance between the person's body and the world.

> The findings here suggest that this approach creates a distancing from oneself in the world, a state of disembodiment with little freedom to choose anything other than an ever -narrowing mode of existing that alienates the body, their authentic self, and stifles existential growth (meaning, purpose, choice, and possibilities, etc.). (2020, p. 11)

She follows this with some practical advice for therapists when working with clients who have problematic weight. Specifically, she recommends that therapists strive to help such clients enhance: their awareness of body as lived; their body ownership; and their sense of self. Helpfully, she gives examples of therapeutic exercises which might be undertaken for each of these goals.

Resonance

Resonance taps into the emotional and artistic dimensions of research. Is the thematic analysis poignant, powerful, evocative, touching, graceful, and/or vivid?

Thinking more specifically about how to bring a literary sensibility to thematic analysis, we might judge that theme titles such as "perception" and "body" are somewhat bland, uninteresting, and uninformative. Consider the contrast had the researcher entitled those same themes as: "lost in a fog" or "stuck in a hamster wheel" or "passing as normal" or "shapeshifting for illness to health and back again". These thematic headings work better because they draw on evocative imagery.

Instead of just "loneliness", how about using the metaphor of "Aching emptiness"? Why not apply a bit of alliteration, as in "Lost and longing"? Instead of having a theme heading entitled "anger", why not borrow a quotation from one of the participants to bring things to life? "I could have strangled him!" would be a particularly tantalising example.

Complexity and ambivalence can be captured using polarities such as 'struggling and adapting'; 'denying and accepting';

'retreating and battling' (the themes of a study by Fitzpatrick and Finlay, 2008).

The study by Westland (2020) described above is a good example of vivid, resonant, and powerful writing, and evocative use of participants' own metaphorical language:

> There was great disappointment in, and objectification of, their bodies; they looked down on it like a useless piece of garbage that was worthless to them.
>
> Anne described her body as "falling apart" and was constantly reminded of how it let her down and prevented her from getting on with life. Sarah also hated her body, reminding her of her past and the fact that she had to drag it around and look after it, as if it were a separate entity that was stopping her from doing what she wanted in life. "I am stuck in resentment" she said. Alison called her body a "big fat repulsive blob" and a form of horror that held tragic stories.
>
> This dislike and disappointment form the backdrop to their daily experiencing. (Westland, 2020, p. 7)

In her study of the experience of videoconferencing therapy (described above) Mitchell (2020) succeeds in injecting some resonance into her findings. The topic could have been dull and technical, but she manages in her use of language and choice of participants' quotes to pull out some of the therapists' discomforts and the ambiguity of the phenomenon. Therapist readers who themselves have struggled with learning to work online will identify with her description of grappling simultaneously with what is seen and what is hidden:

> For participants, a fundamental part of using videoconferencing psychotherapy was the notion of what is seen and what is not; what the therapists can see via the online lens and what remains hidden or invisible. The participants describe a physical closeness to the client. There is a sense of magnification which allow for close observation of clients' facial expressions but can also create the opportunity to mutually scrutinise or judge more closely. This closer scrutiny is both absorbing and distracting:
>
> > You are so face to face [smile] that actually people read you. They may not be aware that they're reading you quite so closely, but they are. (Claire)
> >
> > I can see when their jaw tightens... online, I can see if their pupils, the dilation of pupils is different, I can see if the skin colour is different... I suppose it depends how much of the person you can see. (Boris)…

Claire describes a heightened sense of exposure experienced that can feel excruciating at times. But it can also be something to embrace. Although parts of the therapist's body are hidden, the therapist can feel on display and disclosed:

> People actually make decisions about you very quickly based on that very close scrutiny of you... There is nowhere to go, really; you can't hide. (Claire)

Similarly, in the more scientifically orientated paper by Herron & Sani (2021), the authors still try to evoke the 'feel' of the participants' experience through the use of metaphorical quotations. Here is an excerpt from their study of their 'self and others' theme:

> Emptiness was typically experienced with reference to one's relationship to other people. Firstly, participants felt that they had nothing to give to others. They felt unable to make an impact, to give any real contribution to their personal relationships and communal life. Relatedly, they expressed a sense of worthlessness and a lack of inherent value, and depicted themselves as being a nuisance and a burden to others. Additionally, participants experienced a lack of recognition. They felt as if they were "invisible" to those around them. They felt that they were neither listened to nor noticed by others, including those one cared the most about, that they were a "missing person" despite being surrounded by others. This was associated with the sense of being objectified and expendable (e.g., treated like a "doormat," a "tool"). Participants also spoke of feeling alone, disconnected, cut off and distant from those around them. In general, components concerning this domain highlight a keenly felt sense of isolation and utter loneliness, an inability to connect, to join in, to be seen, and to be an integral part of the social world.

These extended examples highlight the importance of good writing. Rather than fall into the trap of thinking they simply need to 'report' their thematic analysis, researchers need to devote care and imagination to the way in which they present, describe and evidence their findings. This is the basis on which the results of thematic analysis can be communicated – and can have a wider impact.

As Halling (2002) notes, the challenge for researchers is to communicate effectively with journal readers at both an intellectual and personal level. A phenomenological text, for instance, is most successful when readers feel drawn in and addressed by its poignancy: "Textual emotion, textual understanding can bring an otherwise sober-minded person (the reader but also the author) to tears and to a more deeply understood worldly engagement" (van Manen, 1990, p. 129).

Reflexivity

Finally, reflexivity refers to the researcher's self-awareness, openness, and ethical sensibility (Finlay, 2016). To what extent have they taken their own subjectivity and positioning into account?

In the following extract, Westland (2020) reflexively and comprehensively processes her findings. Here, she recognises the limitations of her study, her own role, and the requirements of IPA studies:

> While this study did not aim to define what being large is like for all women, it did attempt a general summary of findings across all participants. There are obvious limitations in terms of the generalisability of the findings and the general claims that can be made on the basis of this sample size. The study might have benefited from a sample with a broader socio-economic demographic, one that (for example) included women of more varied socio-economic status and a greater diversity of ethnicity. Acknowledging the limitations of the sample, however, I want to suggest that the use of such criteria does not fit a phenomenological approach where the value of it comes in its methodological integrity and ability to evoke the lived experience.
>
> A deeper linguistic analysis and/or a narrative analysis could have provided further – probably different – insights. Since participants were eager to tell their stories from childhood to the present day, a narrative analysis might have probed their meaning-making more deeply, bringing out more fully what it is like to be problematically large and unsuccessful at losing weight.
>
> Since IPA acknowledges the influence of the researcher's experiences (both personal and professional) on the research process (Smith et al, 2009), it should also be acknowledged that another researcher, with a differing psychotherapy background to my own, is likely to have been drawn to, and seen different aspects of, the phenomenon, during interviews and the subsequent analysis, undoubtedly at the expense of other things, possible thereby producing a different analysis. It would also be fair to say that the interviews were impacted not simply by the phenomenon being explored but also by myself as the researcher. Participants found themselves face-to-face with an unknown individual who was slim, and despite my efforts to be empathic and non-judgemental, we had little time to build rapport. If I was doing the research again, it is possible that I might have worked

more relationally with the participants concerning the space between us and our mutual impact. (2020, p. 12)

To give another example, the abortion study (Finlay & Payman, 2013; Finlay, 2015) described above places the researchers' voices to the fore, just as their analytical reasoning is made transparent. For instance, in the extract below I reflect on my encounter with one of the participants, 'Eve' (a pseudonym). I recognise the way my presence enabled Eve to acknowledge her own grief. At the same time, in my post-interview reflections when I engaged the thematic analysis, I recognise how hard it was to keep hold of my presence and not lose it in confluence with Eve's trauma and horror:

> Transcription has been hard … I'm on my third day …I keep needing to stop. I recognize my sense of feeling disturbed, a fuzzy but tight spiralling anxious grip in my stomach. I want to stop. I tune into my felt-sense: I have that fuzzy feeling, all scrambled up in my tummy (the same feeling I get when my process is touched). I am finding it difficult to breathe – breathing shallowly. I push on with my Focusing while returning to the transcript. I'm at the point where she sees her dead blue baby. I feel that fuzzy tummy again. I ask it to speak to me. "This is hard. It's hard to breathe. I have no words"…There are some tears there; aloneness; an unspeakable horror. My tummy tightens some more. "I need to hold on; I need to hold in; I need to not cry, not speak." I reflect then on these words. I wonder to what extent they reflect Eve's experience and how she had to hold on to her emotions and push down her words. (Finlay, 2014, p. 13)

When reported like this, reflexivity may or may not be interesting in itself. However, it should not be an excuse for narcissistic navel gazing or emoting. The point of 'good' reflexivity is to deepen the analysis and evaluation and to make the research process more transparent. The example above was part of my attempt to take the research to deeper levels. This reflection prompted me to undertake further thematic analysis about the nature of complicated and entrapped grief and coping (Finlay, 2015). The eventual article engaged reflexivity and the stories of the three participants more deeply. Four additional themes were created: 'a shameful silence', 'self-persecutory guilt', 'coping through dissociation' and 'a toxic context'.

The reworking of the themes from the abortion study was a useful and pertinent reminder that there is always *more.* The social world of human experience can never be fully captured or fixed. Thematic analysis – and qualitative research more generally – is never definitive. Findings remain always tentative and emergent. There will always be *more* that could be said.

Conclusion

In this article, I have emphasised that there is no one way to do thematic analysis. There is no magic formula. Thematic analysis comes in many shapes and guises. Importantly, the form of analysis engaged depends on the research and methodological context as well as on the type of data collected, the researcher's own preferences, and what is required by others (e.g. the journal, examiners).

Is the aim to have descriptive themes which represent the manifest content of data? Or is the aim to offer an interpretive revisioning? Have the themes come about through scientific rigour and a systematic working through of the data? Or have they arisen out of more intuitive, fluidly dynamic, reflexive processes? Whatever the variant of thematic analysis, themes do not simply emerge from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019a; Braun, Clarke & Terry, 2014). Meanings have to be searched for; themes need to be painstakingly shaped and polished in iterative versions. Like Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 44), I want to discourage the "widespread thoughtless uptake" of thematic analysis and instead promote it as an approach that involves "thoughtful and deliberate practice" (2021, p. 44).

There is, of course, a place for different sorts of thematic analysis and writing depending on the audience/readership. A research article destined for a scientific journal needs to engage more with scientific rigour and address concerns to do with reliability, validity, and generalizability. Articles written for an arts-based qualitative research journal need to show additional layers of artistic or literary creativity and craft.

For me, '**good**' thematic analyses are powerful and persuasive. The have lively, punchy theme headings and/or contain descriptive-interpretive analyses which are rich, compelling, and distinctive. Such analyses may well challenge taken-for-granted assumptions. A good analysis is informative – it teaches us something and gives us a fresh perspective. Good themes hang together well; they tell some sort of a story; and they have sufficient data to support and substantiate them. The good analysis also appropriately addresses the aims of the research and is fully in step with its methodological and epistemological stance. While my own preferences lead towards evocative, literary presentations of themes, I also value those scientific studies which provide a solidly rigorous accounting, particularly if they are well and clearly written.

A '**bad**' thematic analysis is one which is insufficiently anchored in theory -- and also in its own data. The end result is an analysis that doesn't quite cohere, or where the methodological integrity of the research is conceded. Here the researchers seem to be unaware of contrasting ways to do

thematic analysis and haven't committed to their methodological position. In these weaker studies, the thematic analysis may also be compromised by the presence of too many fragmented or insufficiently processed themes. Weaker analyses also ones which are insufficiently evidenced (for example, by having insufficient substantiating quotations from participants).

From my perspective, '**ugly**' thematic analyses are those that are hard to follow or are dull and lifeless. They include papers where the researcher has devoted little care to the crafting, presentation and writing of themes, which are left devoid of literary resonance. The overall impact of the findings is thereby compromised.

When you next sit down to engage thematic analysis, try to be clear as you can about what is required, *given your research aims and methodological commitments*. These questions may prove helpful towards ensuring a rigorous, rich result:

1. What kind of thematic analysis method is called for given my overarching methodology? Does my analysis do the job? (See Braun & Clarke, 2021 to distinguish between different versions)
2. Does my thematic analysis hang together, cohering around the central ideas of the research and data?
3. Has my thematic analysis been rigorously and reflexively engaged, and systematically evidenced?
4. Are my themes (titles and description) informative, relevant, and rich (as opposed to being obvious, irrelevant, or bland)?
5. Have the thematic descriptions been written so as to be sufficiently resonant, memorable, interesting and/or evocative? (Braun and Clarke, 2019a, b)

I want to end this article with a touch of artistic flourish (fitting *my* particular methodological preference). Below are the thoughts of one researcher as she writes about the process of engaging her qualitative analysis. For me, what she has to say captures the spirit, delicacy, and ongoing challenge of our task as qualitative researchers. We are reminded that thematic analysis is an attempt to capture something *more*, something beyond simply repeating and summarising participants' words into categories. I feel touched by her words - and perhaps you will be, too:

> So I eye the stacks before me… and surrender my will to the will of the data's story waiting to be told. I quiet my voice and close my eyes in hopes of heightening my capacity to listen to the data, to hear the words and space around the words, to be as quiet as a snow covered field while unique, one-of-a-kind, crystallized expressions of experience land on my tongue…, and I discover in the midst of it that I must remain very still so I can bear witness to their melting, taste them, and thus know them as best as a recipient can… I feel

> its story rumble beneath my palm, a quivering breath of life, transmitted from teller to listener, an essence, touching the very stuff of life, itself—a question, a struggle, a view, an experience, the craving for resolution, a human story. (Rockwell, 2013, pp. 90-91).

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