

# Common challenges in Thematic Analysis & how to avoid them with Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke

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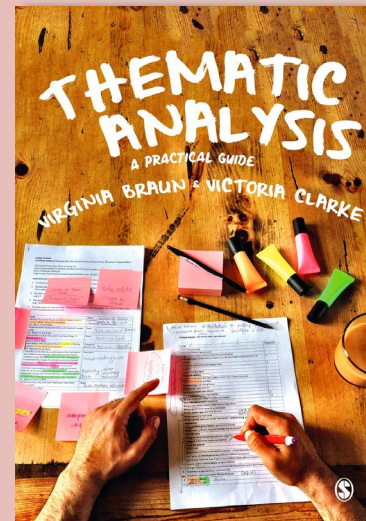
# By Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke

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# Common challenges in thematic analysis research, and how to avoid them

Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Nikki Hayfield and Gareth Terry



# Common problems

- Treating TA as a homogenous/singular method
- Citing without reading!
- Methodological incoherent “mash-ups”
- Mischaracterising TA – atheoretical, realist, phenomenological/experiential, descriptive
- A weak or no rationale for the choice of TA
- Failing to theoretically locate TA or swimming (unknowingly) in the waters of positivism
- Failure to research and report reflexively or confusing researcher reflexivity with researcher “bias”

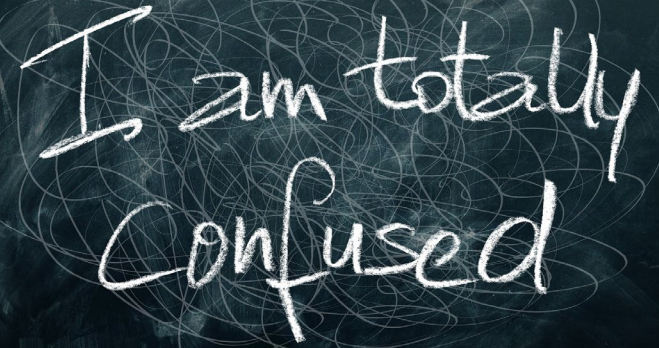
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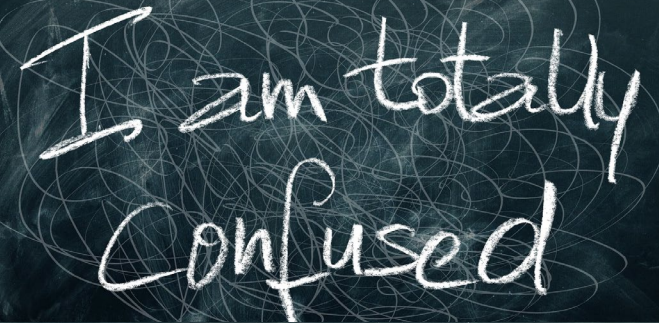
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# Common problems

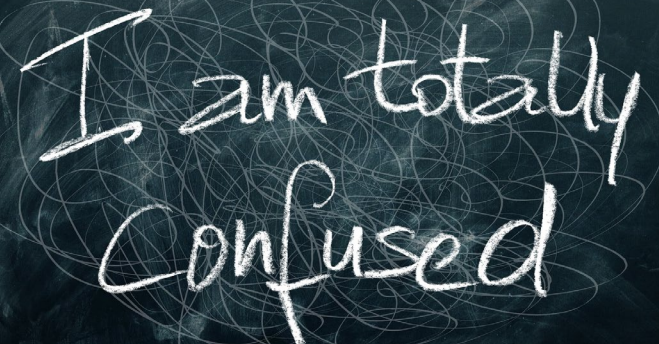
- Lack of transparency and detail in the description of the analytic process
- Confusion over what constitutes a deductive orientation
- Confusing topic summaries and themes (and poorly naming themes)
- Treating themes as “real”
- Too many themes, too few observations = an overly fragmented thematic structure!
- Confusing codes and themes
- Theoretically incoherent quality practices and standards



I am totally  
Confused



I am totally  
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I am totally  
Confused



# The TA *family* of methods

- The diversity within TA is often poorly understood.
- TA is often assumed to be a singular method, with one set of clearly identifiable and widely agreed on procedures, or the differences in procedures are not thought to be particularly consequential.



# TA – “scientifically descriptive” or “artfully interpretative”? (Finlay, 2021)





# Treating TA as a homogenous/ singular method

- Often unclear which approach to TA is used.
- TA implicitly treated as a singular entity (e.g. references to “standard TA procedures”).
- Braun & Clarke (2006) frequently cited but not always clear why - merely as a reference for TA? Or for a particular TA process or practice (e.g. familiarisation)? Or because the specific procedures and sensibility we outline were engaged with?





# Mischaracterising TA

- Flexibility and diversity of possibilities TA offers rarely recognised – rationales provided for combining TA with other approaches are particularly telling here.
- TA is only descriptive.
- TA is both inadequately inductive and inadequately deductive.
- TA is inadequately rigorous – ‘Tain’t what you do (It’s the way that you do it)!
- TA doesn’t allow for both inductive and deductive analysis.
- TA doesn’t allow for developing relationships between themes.



# A weak or no rationale for the choice of TA

- Common rationale involves citing generic characteristics or strengths (e.g. flexibility) of TA – rare for authors to explain *how* these were relevant to or harnessed in their research.
- Pragmatic and practical rationales rather than ones related to the design and purpose of the research.
- Rationales so generic they could apply to almost any analytic approach.
- But – reality check – methods are often selected for pragmatic reasons (familiar to me or my supervisor), and many aren't trained in a cornucopia of methods. Should we reveal more of the *mess* of research?





# Failing to theoretically locate TA or swimming (unknowingly) in the waters of positivism

- The “many questions of TA” with regard to philosophical theory (or other types of theory – explanatory etc.) often not addressed.
- Not content editors and reviewers deem important?
- Misunderstanding TA as atheoretical? (*No method can be atheoretical!*)
- Lack of understanding of the diversity of TA? Defaulting to positivism/realism.
  - Researcher bias
  - Coding bias, accuracy, reliability, objectivity



# Unknowing positivism?

- “many psychologists swim in the waters of logical positivism, empiricism, realism, quantification without knowing they are wet.” (Marecek, 2003, p. 53)
- Discussions of theoretical assumptions don’t have to be hugely detailed:
- “A critical realist approach underpinned the analysis; it is thus acknowledged that the reality behind the findings exists independently of the researchers, but also that we as researchers have a role in constructing knowledge (Ormston et al., 2013). This study seeks to explain a number of phenomena related to appearance-focused interventions to reduce UV exposure, and not merely describe them, a key aspect of realism (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010; Ritchie, Lewis, & Nicholls, 2013). The critical realist position does however acknowledge that knowledge is produced by social structure, and as such, cannot be considered truly objective (Willig, 2013).” (Persson et al., 2019, 1491)



# Failure to research and report reflexively or confusing researcher reflexivity with researcher “bias”

- “Personal reflexivity” (Wilkinson, 1988) most common – professional or personal details of the researcher, noting a reflexive journal was kept.
- Researcher subjectivity often framed in terms of positivist notions of “bias” or as a *potential* influence.
- Some authors reference both researcher bias and reflexivity (as some quality standards do).
- Third person writing “effectively write[s] out the presence of the researcher and renders them invisible – there is no “I” in such reports” (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020, p. 162).
- Is this a knowing practice?



# Linking researcher positioning to reflexive practice

- “Approximately, half of the interviewees asked about the interviewer’s interest in the topic, and she responded by disclosing her ED history – most made their enquiry after the interview although one made it before. [...] N.R. led the analysis and discussed each stage in the process with the second (N.P.M.) and third (V.C.) authors (a counselling psychologist with a history of BN [bulimia nervosa] and a qualitative psychologist with a history of compulsive overeating, respectively) who also read and familiarised themselves with all 12 manuscripts. As such, the authors encouraged one another to develop, clarify and refine their thinking, thus optimising the rigour and quality of the analytical process. [...] All the authors have some history of eating difficulties with two having received treatment for such (one inpatient); being to some extent ‘insiders’ (Labaree, 2002) to the phenomenon under investigation was managed in various ways, including keeping a research journal, the systematic and collaborative process of analysis, and the attempt to bracket off personal experiences and perceptions during the analysis.” (Rance et al., 2017, p. 586)



# Lack of transparency and detail in the description of the analytic process

- How was TA used and how was the analysis developed?
- Minimal descriptions (e.g. citing the six phases of reflexive TA, not discussing *how* the researcher engaged with the process).
- Researchers “cite existing methods or models for analysis as brand names, but without offering any further details. When reading the analysis, the reader may be given only a general understanding of the method used; the specific and unique application that is relevant to the study is not, however, presented” (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017: 130).



“The interdisciplinary research team shared a critical realist epistemological position. Data analysis followed two distinct stages. Initial analysis [...] This focussed upon identifying inductively derived themes (see Braun and Clarke, 2006). [...] This level of thematic analysis related to a realist and inductive (e.g. bottom-up) reading of the data and drew upon a hermeneutic of empathy in which, broadly speaking, what is ‘real’ to the participants was taken more or less at face value. Second, data relating specifically to ‘personal flu management’ and ‘self-management’ were analysed using ‘theoretical’ thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) which focussed upon identifying key areas of resonance between the participants’ inductively derived constructs and theoretical frameworks which seek to explain health behaviours. This second level of analytic focus required a hermeneutic of suspicion in which the data were interpreted and interrogated for their dialogue with pre-existing theoretical constructs and frameworks. In lay person’s terms, we sought to question what was superficially present within the data. As a result, the analysis presented drew upon both the strengths of experientially oriented, participant-led data collection and also theories useful to health psychology. This dual approach aimed to understand the behavioural domain through exploration of participants’ perspectives, and simultaneously advanced psychological theory of PIB.” (Flowers et al., 2016, p. 761)



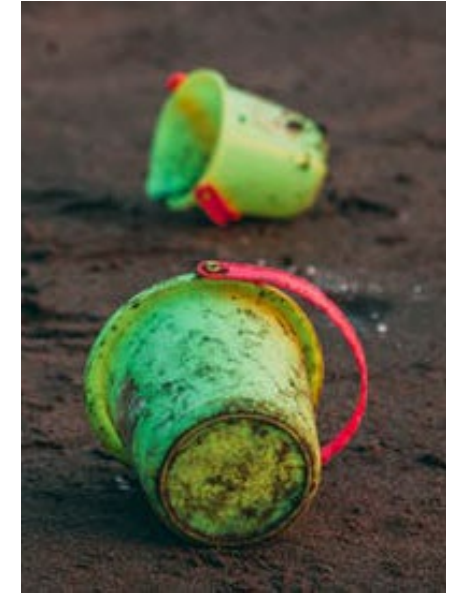


# Confusion over what constitutes a deductive orientation

- Lack of understanding of different conceptualisation of deductive TA?
- Mash-ups – reflexive TA + data collection questions as themes, using pre-existing theory to create a coding frame, using predetermined themes, determining the analytic focus in advance.
- “the data were interpreted and interrogated for their dialogue with pre-existing theoretical constructs and frameworks” (Flowers et al., 2016, p. 761).

# Themes – buckets, diamonds or meaning-unified stories?

- Themes as topic summaries – all data relevant to a topic chucked in a bucket!
- Themes as diamonds in the sand – exist in data fully formed, the researcher’s role is to “identify”, “discover” or “find” the theme; or the theme might just “emerge” on its own!
- Themes as interpretative stories – rich and multifaceted patterns of shared meaning organised around a central concept or idea, and created by the researcher through intense analytic engagement.



# Confusing topic summaries and themes (and poorly naming “themes”)

- One of the most common problems – mashing up reflexive TA and topic summaries.
- Often “themes” a summary of responses to a data collection question.
- Often “themes” signal a topic area and shared meaning is only evident at the level of the subtheme, and there is no overall story around the subthemes.
- Sometimes shared meaning themes are poorly named – one-word theme names, just naming the topic, best avoided.





# Treating themes as “real”

- Themes treated as real, they are “found”, “identified”, “discovered” or simply “emerge” from data.
- This is why we are no longer “searching for themes” but “generating initial themes” in reflexive TA.



# Themes as meaning-unified interpretative stories

- Ratwatte and Mattacola (2019) - exploring the messages evident in the audio of *YouTube* “fitspiration” videos - three themes (with two sub themes nested under the first theme):
- *Fitness as beauty* captured the way fitness and physical appearance were presented as synonymous (with the subthemes “*I look good in muscles*” capturing the appearance-oriented nature of fitness goals and *Demonisation of fat* capturing the emphasis placed on fat loss).
- *Trust me – I’m a YouTuber* captured how YouTubers cultivate trust with their audience by sharing personal information.
- *Health for the right reasons* captured the overt emphasis on pursuing health for fitness reasons not because of appearance.





# Too many themes, too few observations = an overly fragmented thematic structure!

- Lack of a clear overview of the thematic structure - making it difficult to determine how many themes are reported, the relationship between themes or even what or where the themes are.
- Some authors indicate X number of themes were developed but then additional headings are used in the analysis and it isn't clear if these are subthemes.
- Generally speaking, a large number of themes are often reported relative to the space available. So, the analytic narrative does little more than minimally and descriptively string together some data quotations.





# Theoretically incoherent quality practices and standards

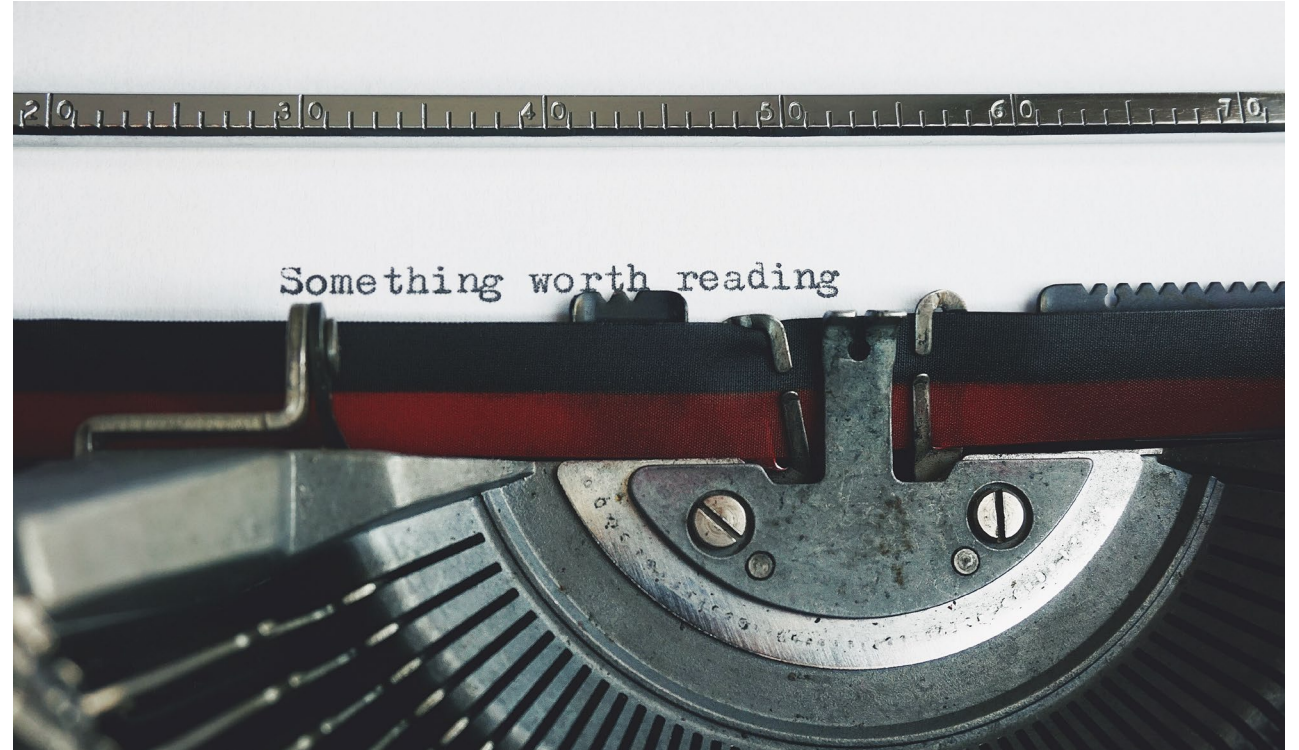
- Quality practices and standards are rarely theoretically neutral!
- Many common practices – member checking, saturation, triangulation – are realist and not methodologically coherent with reflexive TA.
- Practices like measuring intercoder agreement, consensus coding etc. are positivist and not methodologically coherent with reflexive TA.
- Lincoln and Guba (1985) often cited without acknowledgement that they subsequently abandoned a foundationalist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; see also Smith & McGannon, 2018).







# Recommendations for academic journals

- Qualitative researchers need more words!
- Qualitative researchers need new styles!
- Qualitative researchers need more *knowing* reviewers!





## One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?

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### ABSTRACT

Developing a universal quality standard for thematic analysis (TA) is complicated by the existence of numerous iterations of TA that differ paradigmatically, philosophically and procedurally. This plurality in TA is often *not* recognised by editors, reviewers or authors, who promote ‘coding reliability measures’ as universal requirements of quality TA. Focusing particularly on our *reflexive* TA approach, we discuss quality in TA with reference to ten common problems we have identified in published TA research that cites or claims to follow our guidance. Many of the common problems are underpinned by an assumption of homogeneity in TA. We end by outlining guidelines for reviewers and editors – in the form of twenty critical questions – to support them in promoting high(er) standards in TA research, and more deliberative and reflexive engagement with TA as method and practice.

### KEYWORDS

Codebook; coding frame; coding reliability; consensus coding; framework analysis; inter-rater reliability; qualitative paradigm; reflexivity; template analysis; theme

### Quality in thematic analysis: what matters?

“The authors should discuss how they attempted to avoid bias in their analytic process.”

We received this comment in an anonymous review of an empirical paper we had submitted to a specialist qualitative journal, and in which we used our *reflexive* thematic analysis (TA) approach, which we first outlined in this journal in 2006 (Braun and Clarke 2006). The reviewer’s comment reflects a number of problematic assumptions around TA, and indeed qualitative quality criteria, which we contextualise, unpack and expand on in this paper. As the use of TA has expanded, and diversified, since the publication of that paper, the coherence and integrity of published research does not always hold. We use ten problematic practices and assumptions evident in published TA as a tool for thinking about quality in TA, and to support scholars in doing excellent, cohesive TA. These problematic practices reflect confusions and misconceptions about TA that we seek to clarify with clear ‘take away’ recommendations for quality TA (some of which may apply to qualitative scholarship more broadly, and thus have relevance beyond TA). In order to support editors and reviewers in their role as quality custodians, we

**Table 1.** A tool for evaluating thematic analysis (TA) manuscripts for publication: Twenty questions to guide assessment of TA research quality.

These questions are designed to be used either independently, or alongside our methodological writing on TA, and especially the current paper, if further clarification is needed.

#### *Adequate choice and explanation of methods and methodology*

1. Do the authors explain why they are using TA, even if only briefly?
2. Do the authors clearly specify and justify which *type* of TA they are using?
3. Is the use and justification of the specific type of TA consistent with the research questions or aims?
4. Is there a good ‘fit’ between the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the research and the specific type of TA (i.e. is there conceptual coherence)?
5. Is there a good ‘fit’ between the methods of data collection and the specific type of TA?
6. Is the specified type of TA consistently enacted throughout the paper?
7. Is there evidence of problematic assumptions about, and practices around, TA? These commonly include:
  - Treating TA as one, homogenous, entity, with one set of – widely agreed on – procedures.
  - Combining philosophically and procedurally incompatible approaches to TA without any acknowledgement or explanation.
  - Confusing summaries of data topics with thematic patterns of shared meaning, underpinned by a core concept.
  - Assuming grounded theory concepts and procedures (e.g. saturation, constant comparative analysis, line-by-line coding) apply to TA without any explanation or justification.
  - Assuming TA is essentialist or realist, or atheoretical.
  - Assuming TA is only a data reduction or descriptive approach and therefore must be supplemented with other methods and procedures to achieve other ends.
8. Are any supplementary procedures or methods justified, and necessary, or could the same results have been achieved simply by using TA more effectively?
9. Are the theoretical underpinnings of the use of TA clearly specified (e.g. ontological, epistemological assumptions, guiding theoretical framework(s)), even when using TA inductively (inductive TA does not equate to analysis in a theoretical vacuum)?



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# Any questions on **challenges in thematic analysis research?**

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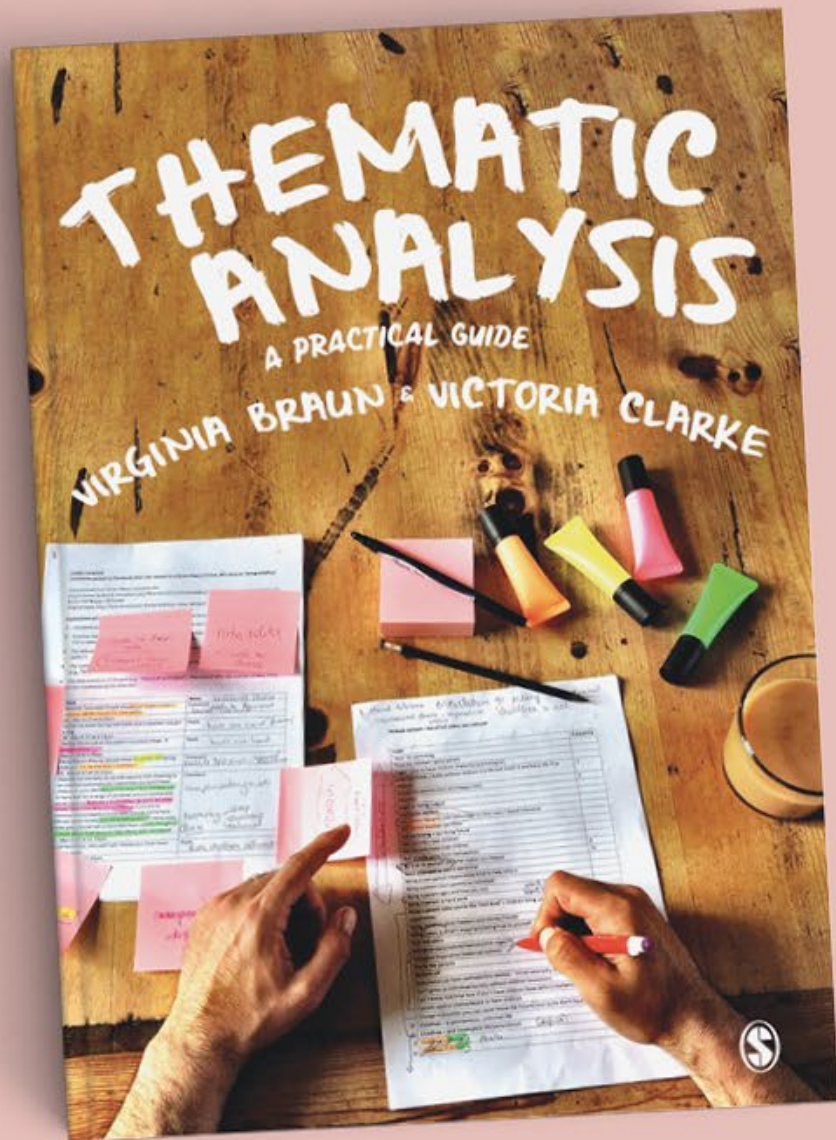
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