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Handle With Care; Considerations of Braun & Clarke's Approach to Thematic Analysis

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Handle With Care; Considerations of Braun & Clarke's Approach to Thematic Analysis

Abstract

In 2006, Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun published *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology*. In the years that followed, the popularity of the paper was clear from the number of citations and readers. However, Thematic Analysis continued to develop as Braun and Clarke further evolved their thinking, responded to feedback and continued to learn. Users of Thematic Analysis seemingly continue to cite Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis whilst repeatedly contradicting the guidance of their work. This paper considers aspects of the work that has been done around Thematic Analysis to guide future potential users. The flexibility, recipe-like use and ease of Thematic Analysis are discussed, along with guidance being offered to avoid the seemingly common trip hazards of navigating the approach. Researchers with the intention of applying Thematic Analysis are advised to consider the theoretical framework of their work and how differing ontological and epistemological standpoints influences their approach to Thematic Analysis.

Keywords: Thematic Analysis, Ontology, Epistemology, Qualitative Research

Handle With Care; Considerations of Braun & Clarke's Approach to Thematic Analysis

Introduction

The world of qualitative research has evolved significantly through recent decades in response to changes in thinking, changes in perception of the craft and due to “dissatisfaction” (Madill & Gough, 2008) with approaches being used at various times through scientific history. Patton and Patton (2002) and Bryman (2012) suggest that qualitative research evolved in phases/moments, beginning with a “traditional” (Bryman, 2012; Patton & Patton, 2002) phase (pre World War II) and slowly evolving and expanding as differing methods, approaches and more creative data gathering techniques came into play. Qualitative research is seen as an approach that offers a “point of view of participants” (Bryman, 2012) and Patton and Patton (2002) explain that qualitative research explores descriptions of life, opinions, accounts of experience and interpersonal interactions. Bryman (2012) considers comparisons between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research and captures the basis of quantitative research as capturing a snapshot of “social reality” (Bryman, 2012) with qualitative considering more of the “connections” (Bryman, 2012) between people and the social world in which they inhabit. If quantitative research investigates the presents of a phenomena, then qualitative research strives to understand why the phenomena exists through “in-depth” investigation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Qualitative research is a complex world with an “array of methods available” (Madill & Gough, 2008) with the added challenge of opposing epistemological and ontological frameworks in which research is framed. Qualitative researchers struggle against the constant wave of criticism from quantitative purists claiming that research of a qualitative nature is too easily influenced by the researcher, is too impressionistic or that it lacks transparency and repeatability (Bryman, 2012). On top of this, the qualitative researcher must also contend with the polarising diversity of epistemological and ontological values across the spectrum of social research. In contrast, the qualitative research realm also offers the ability to bend and flex a study in order to delve deeper and deeper into the context and what is to be uncovered (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

The challenge of positioning oneself within the epistemological and ontological spectrum is seemingly a difficult one. Haig and Evers (2016) suggest that this may be due to a lack of attention to the “philosophy of science” and a general narrowing of education and training around methodology, which is leading to a ‘indoctrination’ of thinking (this is given as a counter argument to the perceived movement away from Realist thinking). When we consider that ontology is the theory of the nature of reality and epistemology is the knowledge of said reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013) then it should be obvious that our commitment to beliefs of these two concepts is crucial for us to truly explore the interpretation of the world and phenomena within the world. Haig and Evers (2016) suggest that science strives to bring the “existing state” of the world as we know it, towards a “desired state” and that this effort is possible through better understanding of the problems that prevent the closing of this gap. It is suggested that we can only achieve the closing of this gap through more “accurate” (Haig & Evers, 2016) understanding of the world. The world as we know it is the key aspect of the statement above and is where ontology and epistemology converge in the development of scientific inquiry.

In 2006, Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun published *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology* and in the years that followed, it became “one of the most cited academic papers of recent decades” (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Braun & Clarke developed the paper as a result of the belief that there was a gap to be

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3 closed in the guidance that supports those choosing to conduct Thematic Analysis (TA). The paper was
4 developed in the hope that the content would be more accessible to “students and those not particularly
5 familiar with qualitative research” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) felt that TA should
6 be viewed as a “foundation method for qualitative analysis”; which connected well with the intention to
7 support students and new researchers. TA is explained as a method that does not “tie itself” (Braun &
8 Clarke, 2006) to theory or epistemology and explained that this offers a flexibility within the method that
9 should be seen as a strength for those looking to employ TA. Within the paper, there is a description of
10 the way in which theoretical frameworks must be outlined by researchers, including directions for best
11 practice. It is offered that TA can take on various frameworks with Realist, Constructivist and
12 Contextualism listed. Braun & Clarke (2006) offer that the paper seeks to “provide a vocabulary and
13 recipe for people to undertake thematic analysis” and goes on to provide a “step by step” six phase
14 approach to conducting thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) offer TA as a method that requires
15 less “detailed theoretical and technical knowledge” than some other qualitative methods and suggest that
16 TA is “easy to conduct” .
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20 In the years that followed, Braun and Clarke published books and articles about TA as well as
21 featuring in conversations and interviews related to what became their approach to TA. In these accounts
22 the authors adjusted, corrected, clarified and expanded on TA and their original paper as a result of people
23 wanting “more details” (SAGE Publishing, 2022). In these later accounts, Braun & Clarke acknowledged
24 the “complexities” (Braun & Clarke, 2016) of qualitative research methods describing qualitative research
25 as a “sea of uncertainty” (Braun & Clarke, 2016). It was explained that they may have “taken for granted”
26 (Braun & Clarke, 2019) the level of knowledge and understanding that existed in the wider community in
27 regards to research methods in qualitative science. It was also suggested that the popularity of their
28 original paper may have resulted in some citations coming about as a result of writers trying to legitimise
29 their work, having been directed to the paper by supervisors; even suggesting that the paper may not have
30 even been read at times but still cited (Braun et al., 2022). Whilst some of the developments within the
31 guidance from Braun & Clarke seem contradictory in nature, it is explained that TA has developed over
32 the years as a result of more work, training, experience and thinking around the method (SAGE
33 Publishing, 2022).
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37 This paper aims to explore TA beginning, as most seem to, with the 2006 paper by Braun & Clarke
38 (Thematic Analysis in Psychology) in the hope that considerations can be offered to support those
39 thinking of following the work of Braun & Clarke. The language and naming conventions of TA have
40 changed across the work of Braun & Clarke over the years and many more approaches to TA exist now
41 than did at the time of Braun & Clarke originally posting. However, within this paper, TA should be
42 assumed as the approach described by Victoria Braun and Virginia Clarke. This paper is written for an
43 intended audience that is familiar Thematic Analysis as described by Braun & Clarke, particularly the
44 2006 paper. There is no intention within the sections below to guide readers on how to conduct TA but it
45 is hoped that the considerations that are offered will support potential users of Thematic Analysis to make
46 use of the approach by provoking deeper thinking around aspects of Thematic Analysis that may have
47 been overlooked, misunderstood or ignored.
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51 **Flexibility of Thematic Analysis**

52 An aspect of TA that could be considered to be a foundation of the method is the fact that it has been
53 identified as having flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2016, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell
54 et al., 2017). However, this should also be considered to be the first hurdle for aspiring TA researchers to
55 vault. The flexibility of TA is explained by Braun & Clarke (2006, 2013, 2017) in relations to the fact that
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3 their approach to TA does not ‘tie’ itself to any theoretical or epistemological position even going as far
4 as to say that, in their attempts to develop some demarcation of TA, they wish to maintain the “flexibility
5 in relation to how it is used, so that it does not become limited and constrained, and lose one of its key
6 advantages” (Braun & Clarke, 2006); they reaffirm this when it is claimed that TA is “unbound by
7 theoretical commitments” (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The double-edged sword of TA flexibility must be
8 considered carefully by anyone making contemplating the use of this approach to TA.
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10 This “hallmark” (Clarke & Braun, 2017) of TA comes with a sting in its tail, if and when it is
11 overlooked or misunderstood, as it is a factor that could undermine the approach to an entire study. When
12 using TA, the author/researcher is tasked with ensuring that the theoretical position of the study and their
13 epistemological framework is clearly articulated. If this is not done, Braun & Clarke (2006) warn that
14 studies are “often (implicitly) framed as a realist/experiential method”; a realist stance that carries an
15 assumption that all observations are a mirror of truth (Braun & Clarke, 2013). And yet, the authors then
16 go on to acknowledge that they themselves do not align with a “naïve” realist method (Braun & Clarke,
17 2006, 2013). Nevertheless, the danger remains for any researcher that fails to honour this requirement (to
18 outline their own epistemological standpoints within their TA process), as they run the risk of developing
19 an incoherent, confused or contradictory story of their process, findings and conclusions (Nowell et al.,
20 2017). When there is no theoretical framing of a study, the reader is left to make their own assumptions,
21 and these may not align with the intentions of the author/researcher.
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25 In their later paper Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2019) Braun & Clarke reframe the
26 concept of flexibility a little by adding the description that TA is “theoretically informed and constrained”
27 and, in 2016, Braun & Clarke also warn that the “Claimed theoretical independence of TA is often limited
28 by unacknowledged theoretical assumptions”.
29

30 Unfortunately, for most authors guided by the work of Braun & Clarke, their research is grounded in
31 the original 2006 paper but the epistemology and theoretical framework guidance within the paper is
32 missed, misunderstood or dismissed. This leaves the theoretical position of the research (along with their
33 epistemological framework) to the assumptions of the reader; leaving the work open for
34 misunderstandings and potential criticism.
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36 What is more astounding about this common error across TA work is the fact that Braun and Clarke
37 (2006) offer up the work of Taylor and Ussher (2001) as a “good example” of effective practice, directing
38 readers to the “method section” of Taylor and Ussher’s work (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Any aspiring TA
39 researchers would be well served to follow these breadcrumbs from Braun & Clarke (2006) as Taylor &
40 Ussher’s (2001) paper does a lot more than simply outline their epistemological beliefs as they also
41 describe a rejection other beliefs and even briefly outline how opposing epistemologies might view the
42 same phenomena. Taylor & Ussher (2001) reject a ‘reductionist and essentialist’ theories of past work in
43 the domain of the study as they describe as sense that this merely “substantiate pre-existing theory” and
44 reflects “observers’ personal prejudice”. They then go on to explain that they “eschew the reductionist
45 and essentialism” and that they believe there is no “singular....truth”; that “realities are viewed as
46 constructions” and truth is “multiple and subjective” (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Readers of this work are
47 left with a clear understanding of the way the authors view the world and how they construct meaning
48 and, therefore, the narrative of their paper, how their discussions have been shaped as a result and the root
49 of any recommendations made.
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53 In contrast, Radey, Langenderfer-Magruder and Brown Speights (2021) published a paper regarding
54 the decisions made by single mothers during times of COVID around school provisions for their children.
55 They explained that they “used Braun and Clarke’s six-phase, thematic analysis to analyze patterns” in
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3 their data. This is a good example of Braun and Clarke's TA being claimed to be in use, but in essence,
4 there is simply a following of the six phases of Braun & Clarke's 2006 approach to decipher the data of
5 the study. There does not seem to be a full alignment to the guidance that Braun & Clarke have offered
6 and championed either in the 2006 paper or any of the subsequent work. Radey et al. (2021) outline no
7 epistemology for their paper and the step-by-step process for their data analysis is devoid of any
8 epistemological or ontological framing. The closest we get to an acknowledgement of a theoretical
9 position is the claim that "we generated initial codes separately through a theory driven approach" (Radey
10 et al., 2021), with no mention of an actual theory. Followed by an acknowledgement that they were
11 "bound" by their "purpose of understanding mother's lives during COVID". If only the claim of
12 "understanding" (Radey et al., 2021) is considered here, it is problematic for a knowledgeable reader. As
13 the authors of this paper develop the themes of their study, we have no concept of the lens through which
14 the data has been viewed or the way in which they "interpret patterns of meaning" within the data that
15 they have collected (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It could be that there is a feminist stance from the
16 researchers in this study; the paper is focusing on single mothers rather than single parents after all. Is this
17 research underpinned by a Realist belief in a singular reality that is to be understood based purely on what
18 is said by the participants? Or, maybe it is to bring to light a more Relativist sense of truth, found in the
19 varying perspectives of each of the single mothers in the study. As Radey et al. (2021) fail to outline this
20 for their readers, we are left with our own assumptions; which could be completely contrary to the
21 intentions of the researchers.

22 **Reconsidering the flexibility of Thematic Analysis**

23 If the flexibility of TA is to be maximized, then it may well be that researchers have to start thinking in
24 a slightly different way. Maybe TA should be seen as the researcher's blank canvas and before the lines
25 and shapes of one's study can be painted, the foundation must be laid down to set the tone, shade and
26 background of the work. As it is with a painting, the foundation of research cannot be applied later in the
27 process and the influence of the foundations can be either over-powering or subtle. A researcher using TA
28 must outline their research foundations at the start of their process. They must consider their research
29 question in relation to the use of TA and whether it is a suitable approach to meet their needs. A start
30 point for all researchers should be to establish an ontological stance for a body of work as this is
31 increasingly being "overlooked" (Archer et al., 2016) by social scientists. When researchers fail to
32 consider what they believe reality to be, it seems obvious that there would be issues with the way in
33 which reality is investigated. To support the understanding of flexibility a little further, we can look at the
34 ways in which differing ontological foundations underlay approaches to TA.

35 **Realism.** Braun & Clarke (2006) dismiss a Realist approach to TA, adding that Realist approaches
36 "simply give voice" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). But, their paper openly acknowledges an intention to guide
37 students and new qualitative researchers, this dismissal of a Realist ontology may taint the ideologies of
38 readers and make it seem as though Realism cannot act as the foundation for TA. At a basic level,
39 Realism assumes that there "is a real world that we are part of" (Haig & Evers, 2016) and that "reality is
40 entirely independent of human ways of knowing about it" (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Haig & Evers (2016)
41 also explain that, as Realists, it is believed that there are both observable and unobservable aspects of the
42 world and the pursuit of knowledge comes via "appropriate scientific methods". It would be remiss not to
43 acknowledge that there is far more to a Realist view of the world with "varieties" (Schwandt, 2007) of
44 Realism to be considered but this is far more than this paper has the capacity to discuss.

45 When considering TA, a Realist ontology would support a more semantic approach to data as it is
46 taken that there is no deeper meaning of what is being explained by participants and what is observed is a
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3 mirror of what is in the world (Braun & Clarke, 2013). An example of this can be found in Malik and
4 Coulson (2008) in which they acknowledge both their Realist framework and explain that as a result of
5 this framework their “themes were therefore identified at a semantic level” (Malik & Coulson, 2008). As
6 mentioned earlier, Braun and Clarke (2006) criticises the “giving voice” aspect of Realist inquiry, but in
7 the case of Malik & Coulson (2008) the study set out to establish that men experienced emotional
8 responses to infertility and their study found that “rather than simply being disappointed....these men
9 clearly were experiencing a range of negative emotions” (Malik & Coulson, 2008). The Realist approach
10 had, in the opinion of the authors, answered the research question that had been posed.

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13 **Relativism.** Relativism offers an opposing view of truth and the knowledge of truth to that of Realism.
14 A Relativist view of truth suggests that reality “differs across space and time” (Braun & Clarke, 2013)
15 and that reality is constructed in some way rather than existing beyond human thought and perception.
16 This is captured well by Patton & Patton (2002) “No truth or true meaning about any aspect of existence
17 is possible, at least not in any absolute sense; it can only be constructed”. Through the Relativist lens,
18 individuals create their own reality or reality is “socially constructed” (Patton & Patton, 2002).

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20 The example of Taylor & Ussher (2001), that is given by Braun & Clarke in their original TA paper
21 operates within a Relativist position. Taylor & Ussher (2001) are clear that “there is no search for a
22 singular, objective, empirically valid, universal truth, existing out there in the world” (Taylor & Ussher,
23 2001) and as a polarity to this, they further state that “we actively and purposefully construct and interpret
24 our own realities from the meaning that are available to us”. Within a TA study it is also essential that,
25 under the Relativist stance, the researcher is very much part of the perceived constructed reality. Taylor &
26 Ussher (2001) acknowledge this in their paper as part of the reflexivity of their discussion. With this
27 involvement of the researcher, the reflexivity becomes a critical aspect of the process to ensure that
28 readers are able to see for themselves how the authors have participated in, or influenced the construction
29 of reality.

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32 The dismissal of reality beyond what is perceived to have been constructed by individuals may be a
33 point of challenge for those exploring an approach to TA within the Relativist realm of knowing and
34 knowledge. Taylor & Ussher (2001) seem to offer an insight into an epistemological dilemma of this type
35 within the discussion section of their paper when they state that “one is left feeling that there is something
36 real, some essence beneath these layers of constructed meaning”. They further indicate a thirst for
37 something beyond individually or socially constructed meaning in the closing remarks of the paper when
38 they sign off with “Clearly, SM, whatever it is, is not merely discursive”. In 2014, Roy Bhaskar offered
39 that Critical Realism is a “philosophy concerned with ontology” (Bhaskar, 2014) and this could be the
40 way in which the “essence beneath the layers” (Taylor & Ussher, 2001) is brought into play and is
41 discussed below.

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44 **Critical realism.** Critical realism is a philosophy that is concerned with ontology and bringing a
45 thinking about social research that brings ontology back into the conversation (Bhaskar, 2014); Critical
46 Realism sits between the Realist and Relativist stance on reality. Critical Realists acknowledge that there
47 is an objective reality, but our knowledge of this reality is subjective, fallible, evolving and contextual
48 (Archer et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2012; Haig & Evers, 2016). Archer et al. (2016)
49 captures the essence of Critical Realist inquiry when they explain that “Critical realists hold that it is
50 possible for social science to refine and improve its knowledge about the real world over time, and to
51 make claims about reality which are relatively justified, while still being historical, contingent, and
52 changing”.

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3 Wynn & Williams (2012) explain that Critical Realist inquiry brings about “theories” of the real world
4 via examinations of the “mechanisms” that bring about “events” that are observed. The job of the
5 researcher is to consider “what must reality be like in order for this event to have occurred?” (Wynn &
6 Williams, 2012) and any theory that is offered about reality is imperfect. The imperfection of knowledge
7 is due to the acceptance of a more relativist epistemology (overlying a realist ontology) and, therefore,
8 knowledge that is “socially-located” (Braun & Clarke, 2013), changing over time (Archer et al., 2016) but
9 is our best representation of reality based on existing knowledge (Wynn & Williams, 2012).

10
11 A Critical Realist approach to research asks more of researchers as reflexive practitioners and would
12 require justification of approaches, considerations of how any researcher prior knowledge could taint
13 knowledge claims, how data is gathered via questioning of participants and, more specific to TA, the
14 creation of themes. Critical Realists accept that the a perfect match of theory to reality is not likely and
15 precision of accounts is questionable (Wynn & Williams, 2012); the demand for the researcher then
16 becomes to justify one account over another (Archer et al., 2016). The researcher accepts that there is
17 “something real, some essence beneath these layers of constructed meaning” (Taylor & Ussher, 2001) in
18 Critical Realism, but our knowledge of this reality is as faulty as the humans that are trying to view it and
19 communicate their understanding of it.

20 **There is no recipe for Thematic Analysis**

21
22 In 2022, Braun and Clarke stated that “because we lay out phases it’s often understood as a step-by-
23 step approach” only to follow on with an explanation that they are trying to “disrupt” that thinking (Braun
24 et al., 2022). Readers of their 2006 work can be excused for making this mistake; especially when a
25 section of the 2006 paper is titled “Doing thematic analysis: a step-by-step guide” (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
26 and then, in 2013 they go to describe their approach as a “how to do” (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is fair to
27 point out that Braun and Clarke (2006) do further explain that “analysis is not a linear process of simply
28 moving from one phase to the next”. Braun and Clarke also explain that they feel that their (2006) paper
29 has been used as an “authority, rather than dialogue” or “recipe” by researchers (Braun et al., 2022) as
30 well as acknowledging that their approach is “just a method” with no theoretical position, epistemological
31 or ontological framework (Braun & Clarke, 2013); but this seems to does little to dampen the flames of
32 confusion amongst readers of the 2006 paper. Guest (2012) adds to this potential confusion by claiming
33 that ‘What has been lacking.... Is a practical and simple, step by step guide’ when referring to inductive
34 thematic analysis. This all adds to the, already confusing, world of qualitative research, for a “student” or
35 someone “not particularly familiar with qualitative research” (Braun & Clarke, 2006); the demographic
36 that are apparently targeted by Braun and Clark’s original 2006 paper. Braun & Clark (2006) tell readers
37 that “we aim to fill....a current gap – the absence of a paper which adequately outlines the theory,
38 application and evaluation of thematic analysis, and one which does so in a way accessible to students and
39 those not particularly familiar with qualitative research” (Braun & Clarke, 2006); it can be no surprise
40 that the paper has been grasped as a guide to and followed as a recipe.

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42 According to Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2022), the Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology paper
43 had more than fifty five thousand google scholar citations at the time of them publishing (September
44 2019) and, as of March 2022, the article was listed as having been viewed over three hundred thousand
45 times. Sadly, the popularity of the paper could be tainted by the misuse of the contents of it. It is even
46 suggested that some people may not even read the paper and are simply citing the work of Braun &
47 Clarke as they have been advised to consider their method or have been redirected to the paper for further
48 learning (Braun et al., 2022). It is impossible to follow the guidance of TA as a recipe and, as mentioned
49 earlier, maximise the flexibility of the approach as the flavour of one’s underlying theoretical positioning
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3 along with epistemological and ontological frameworks is required and influences the process. The
4 development of themes should be done with a narration that allows readers to follow the breadcrumbs of
5 the researchers thinking, processes and beliefs of reality. All of this comes with a solid foundation of
6 knowledge, understanding and learning; which some may not (cynically) be willing to invest the time into
7 or (more forgivingly) realise the importance of.

8
9 The factors outlined for consideration below should be considered as possible reasons that lead to
10 researchers taking a systematic, recipe-like, step by step approach to TA and may help potential users
11 avoid such an approach.
12

13 **Qualitative research process can be hard to grasp, and recipes help**

14 Madill & Gough (2008) describe qualitative research as “best conceptualized as a fuzzy set” and
15 explains that the qualitative realms of research have methods that have overlapping features and also
16 methods that seemingly have “no obvious features in common” finally explaining that it is not uncommon
17 for qualitative research to be defined as “not quantitative” (Madill & Gough, 2008). Is it any wonder that
18 students and researchers that are new to the “sea of uncertainty that is qualitative research” (Braun &
19 Clarke, 2016) are left grasping for something by way of guidance and structure. Braun & Clarke (2016)
20 even acknowledge that the “complexities” (of qualitative research methods) can be hard to fully
21 understand and that simple models of ‘how to do things’ (quotations used in original text) can appear to
22 “offer reassuring certainties” (Braun & Clarke, 2016).
23

24
25 If the challenges and difficulties of starting out in qualitative research are accepted then it is
26 reasonable to consider that novice researchers and students will latch on to terms that offer them
27 something to follow, guidance, structure or a how to document. Statements such as “this paper seeks
28 to..... provide a vocabulary and ‘recipe’ (quotations used in original text) for people to undertake
29 thematic analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or a whole section titled, “Doing thematic analysis: a step-by-
30 step guide” (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will certainly help to satisfy the cravings (for guidance) of a hungry
31 novice researcher.
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34 As writers, researchers and members of the qualitative research community, Virginia Braun and
35 Victoria Clarke should be acknowledged for their ongoing efforts to define, redefine and reflect upon
36 their approach to TA. In 2022, Braun and Clarke engaged in a conversation with Nikki Hayfield about TA
37 and in this conversation, they addressed many of the factors that have undermined what they had intended
38 from their 2006 work. As already mentioned, it was very clearly noted that there was never an intention
39 for the six phase approach to be seen as “an authority”, “recipe” or “step-by-step” approach to TA (Braun
40 et al., 2022). Also, in 2019 Braun & Clarke published Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis in
41 which they acknowledge the assumptions that they had made regarding the qualitative research
42 community. Firstly, the popularity of the paper was underestimated and they believed that 2006 paper
43 would “be of interest to a fairly small audience of people who ‘got it’ (quotation in original paper) and
44 who shared our understanding of qualitative research” (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Second, they accepted
45 that they had underestimated the impact and quality of their own educational experiences around
46 qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019). They outlined that they had been privileged to have been
47 guided and mentored towards a deeper understanding of qualitative research; an understanding that had
48 seemingly been assumed of everyone reading their work.
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51 When the original 2006 paper was written by Braun and Clarke, there were assumptions made by the
52 authors that were not articulated regarding the level of knowledge and learning that existed amongst
53 students and new researchers in the qualitative research domain. Unfortunately, it seems as though this
54 led to the use of their guidance in a way that was not intended. This is certainly a key consideration that
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3 future researchers should heed and ensure that the growing catalogue of work by Braun and Clarke is
4 reviewed before claiming to be utilizing Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis.
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6 **Thematic Analysis is easy**

7 As already mentioned, Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology was introduced as a paper that would
8 be "accessible to students and those not particularly familiar with qualitative research" (Braun & Clarke,
9 2006). Nowell et al. (2017) offer that "thematic analysis does not require the detailed theoretical and
10 technological knowledge of other qualitative approaches" and even claim that those unfamiliar with
11 qualitative research "may find that thematic analysis is easily grasped" (Nowell et al., 2017). This is a
12 view that is shared by Braun & Clarke (2013) as they explain that "TA offers the chance to learn basic
13 data handling and coding skills, without having to delve deep into theoretical constructs".
14

15 Some of the language used above could well be the reason that researchers gravitate towards TA as a
16 method to support their qualitative processes. It has already been noted that Braun and Clarke (2019) had
17 admittedly "taken for granted" the general levels of understanding of qualitative research and how many
18 people "got it" (Braun & Clarke, 2019). It may well be that the procedural aspects of TA do not require
19 deeper knowledge of qualitative research or theoretical knowledge. However, Braun and Clarke (2019)
20 contradict the perception shared by Nowell et al. (2017) that theoretical knowledge is not needed as they
21 highlighted the importance of researchers locating and acknowledging their own epistemological and
22 theoretical stances; this is far from an easy process. "Wrestled with" is the way in which Braun and
23 Clarke (2019) describe the process of exploring their own methodological questions; this is not the way in
24 which an easy process is described. This lack of deeper thinking within the qualitative research
25 community was suggested when Braun and Clarke explained, when questioned about TA, that they
26 received "logistical and procedural" (Braun & Clarke, 2019) rather than theoretical lines of questioning.
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30 Researchers being drawn to TA as an easier method to operate should be cautious with this assumption
31 as it could well lead to the use of the method without the nuanced, but essential, deeper and more difficult
32 thinking around theory, epistemology, ontology, research questions, theme development and actually
33 whether TA is the appropriate method to utilize (Braun et al., 2022).

34 If we are to reflect on the considerable issues that can arise from a lack of epistemological and
35 ontological transparency of a study, as mentioned earlier in this paper, then it is unfair to outline TA as an
36 approach that does not require "detailed theoretical knowledge" (Braun & Clarke, 2013), is "easily
37 grasped" (Nowell et al., 2017) or void of the need to delve into "theoretical constructs" (Braun & Clarke,
38 2013). It is far from easy for a novice researcher, or student, to develop a firm grasp on the varying (and
39 often opposing) epistemic and ontological positions that exist; never mind swearing fealty to one as they
40 analyse data, develop themes and offer narration around their work and findings. It is likely that the
41 claims around TA being an accessible process to conduct are aimed more squarely at the management of
42 the data rather than the theoretical framing of one's work. It is acceptable to acknowledge that the
43 physical process of grouping qualitative data during TA might be simpler, especially with some of the
44 supportive technologies that now exist for researchers to utilise. Shifting imagery, dictations, notes or
45 snippets of text from engagements with participants as part of the journey to theming of the data could be
46 done without the consideration of one's beliefs of reality and how we investigate reality. However,
47 describing this process, communicating thinking and justifying the way in which themes are "identified"
48 (Guest et al., 2012), "actively created" (Braun & Clarke, 2019) or "constructed" (Braun & Clarke, 2016)
49 requires a much better grasp of the way in which thinking and considerations of data is influenced by
50 epistemological and ontological alignment.
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52 **A desire to be taken seriously**

53 The value, reputation and recognition of qualitative research has grown (Nowell et al., 2017) but
54 qualitative research still faces the challenges of being seen as "too impressionistic and subjective"
55 (Bryman, 2012) and may still be overlooked by some publications or "prestigious outlets" (Madill &
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3 Gough, 2008). This is likely to play a part in the way that qualitative researchers approach their work;
4 even more so for those new to research or students. Korstjens and Moser (2018) describe qualitative
5 research as an “in depth” investigation of a phenomena and the pursuit of a “rich narrative” (Korstjens &
6 Moser, 2018). However, Bryman (2012) warns that qualitative research is often seen as having an over
7 reliance on researchers’ “unsystematic” views of what is important or relevant within a study and notes
8 the perception of a lack of transparency. There is even an acknowledgement of TA not being viewed as
9 sophisticated enough to be taken seriously as an approach to research leading to it being “mashed-up”
10 with other approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2019). When criticisms such as studies not being “systematic”
11 (Bryman, 2012; Lawless & Chen, 2019) or that claims that are made by researchers should be based on
12 evidence rather than story telling (Guest et al., 2012) then we begin to see that we are actually, once
13 again, arguing beliefs of reality and the investigation of reality; so we are brought back to our
14 epistemological and ontological stance.
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16 Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) call for an approach that has an “emphasis on methodological
17 rigour”, even going as far as to claim that a “step-by-step guide” is something that is lacking in the world
18 of TA (Guest et al., 2012). Similarly, Smith and McGannon (2018) offer ways in which TA can increase
19 reliability and, in essence, offer a truer reflection of what is being portrayed by participants of studies.
20 Patton and Patton (2002) explain that “you worry about validity, reliability and objectivity” when
21 operating in a Realist oriented state of inquiry. These viewpoints are contrasted to those that are outlined
22 by Braun and Clarke, who point to more of a Relativist ontology and, therefore, different requirements
23 during the research process. When approaching TA under a more Realist umbrella the concept of
24 “ensuring credibility of findings” (Guest et al., 2012) aligns much more accurately as the researcher is
25 attempting to show accuracy of the way in which a singular reality has been investigated. Guest et al.
26 (2012) go on to explain that they believe credibility is delivered via “systemacity” when considering
27 methods and, under this concept a recipe, step-by-step guide or play book would certainly help.
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29 Readers of Braun and Clarke’s catalogue of work should understand that they (Braun and Clarke) do
30 not align with a realist viewpoint of the world (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This rejection of a Realist stance
31 impacts the way in which Braun and Clarke call for TA to be conducted and reported. It is openly
32 acknowledged that Braun & Clarke encourage users of TA to engage in the process in a way that is much
33 more open than procedural, even describing the process as “a thought-out adventure” (Braun & Clarke,
34 2019). Braun and Clarke go further with this idea and challenge readers to avoid proceduralism and to be
35 a “thoughtful researcher; do not just slavishly follow what methodology writers say” (Braun & Clarke,
36 2021). A researcher that undertakes a study in a way that rejects the demands of a Realist ontology must
37 accept that “Data analysis is about telling ‘stories’, about interpreting and creating, not discovering and
38 finding truth that is either out there and findable from, or buried deep within, the data.” (Braun & Clarke,
39 2019). The rigor of a Relativist study such as this would come via actions such as accepting and
40 acknowledging the fact that “value free inquiry is impossible” (Patton & Patton, 2002) but the researcher
41 makes efforts to recognise and record their bias to “mitigate the influence of yourself in your research”
42 (Patton & Patton, 2002).
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46 If researchers are concerned with their studies, research and findings being taken seriously, then it is
47 imperative to avoid a confusion between approaches, epistemology and ontology. Conducting research
48 with an interpretive, Relativist intention and then conducting Realist based procedures to ensure
49 objectivity, accuracy and reliability of findings is almost certain to result in the study not being taken
50 seriously. Guest et al. (2012) capture this well when they explain that “It’s what you do with qualitative
51 data, and not the methods themselves, that define whether you are engaged in research endeavour that is
52 interpretive, positivist, or a hybrid of the two”. Braun and Clarke also outline this very clearly for those
53 that read more of their work than merely the 2006 paper as they explain that TA requires full
54 acknowledgement of “underlying research values and assumptions” and that differing approaches to TA
55 “reflect different philosophical assumptions” (Braun & Clarke, 2019).
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Conclusion

This paper has been developed to raise awareness around the use of TA as per the approach defined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke in their 2006 paper Using thematic analysis in psychology as the start point of discussion. The work of Braun & Clarke has clearly struck a chord with the qualitative research community with the 2006 paper attracting thousands of readers in the years since publication (Braun et al., 2022). However, critical aspects of this approach to TA has evidently been overlooked, ignored and/or misunderstood, leading to poorly developed, confusing or contradictory work being carried out by researchers claiming to make use of Braun & Clarke's approach to TA (Braun & Clarke, 2016, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). The misuse of Braun & Clarke's work has been attributed to various factors ranging from blindly citing the work of Braun & Clarke, possibly without having ever even read any of their papers (Braun et al., 2022) to a basic lack of knowledge, depth of understanding and training in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

A factor that has continuously arose throughout this paper is the need for those using TA to have a secure knowledge of "their position" (Braun & Clarke, 2019) in regards to theoretical frameworks, epistemology and ontological stance of the writer. This consideration is likely to stem from the original paper being acknowledged as a paper to guide students and those new to qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006) coupled with an assumption of knowledge amongst the same demographic and an underestimation of the wider popularity of the work (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2016, 2019). The targeting of students and novice researchers, along with statements claiming TA to be an approach that does not require detailed knowledge of theory (Nowell et al., 2017) has likely led to a lack of respect for the process amongst those making use of Braun & Clarke's approach. It is also possible that the procedural perception of Braun & Clarke's approach to TA has compounded this misuse of TA further as a more systematic, step-by-step, recipe-like method rather than once that is steeped in epistemological thinking.

The vast array of theoretical frameworks that can shape qualitative research (Guest et al., 2012) and ways in which reality can be interpreted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) means that the identification of a stance that a researcher aligns to is anything but a simple process and is certainly not something that should be underestimated by anyone embarking upon a TA process. However, for the flexibility of Braun & Clarke's TA to be truly impactful, researchers must take the time to understand and reflect upon the ontology and epistemology that they align with. This alignment must then be outlined within their work and, most importantly, honoured as a golden thread throughout their work.

One of the most exciting aspects of engaging with TA is that fact that Braun and Clarke have openly invited the "conversation" (Braun et al., 2022) to continue around the use of TA and the development the approach within the qualitative research community. As TA researchers, we are encouraged to treat TA as an ongoing dialogue, an adventure and to engage in a more thoughtful way when conducting our inquiries (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This brings about the prospect of us (future users of TA) contributing knowledge within the scientific community from a content perspective (the focus of our study) and from a method perspective (how we conduct our study using TA).

Probably the most important piece of advice for any budding TA researchers with a desire to follow Braun & Clarke's approach to TA, is to take the time to review as much of their work as possible. Braun & Clarke have now authored many articles/books and feature in numerous videos covering interviews and talks; all providing additional guidance to support the process of conducting TA. As stated by Victoria Clarke, "our ideas changed over the years" (SAGE Publishing, 2021) so it is certainly not possible for someone to read the original 2006 paper and then claim to be following the approach of Braun & Clarke. The very concern that "some people don't even read the paper" (Braun et al., 2022) from the authors should be enough of a warning sign to all of us that we have to do a better job of reviewing the work of those that came before us if we are to cite it as guidance for the way that we operate. The clearest message comes from Virginia Braun when we are told "there is more out there"(SAGE Publishing, 2022) and she goes on to discourage people from using their approach to TA unless they understand it and it aligns with their approach to research.

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3 Braun & Clarke are clear throughout their work that we are all invited to join the conversation, join the
4 development of practice, add to the knowledge of TA and contribute to the ongoing growth of qualitative
5 research. But we must do so with knowledge and understanding of what has come before and we should
6 take the time to review the development of the method over the years. We must also ensure that we have
7 an understanding of our own beliefs of knowledge, knowing and reality before making informed
8 decisions about how we conduct our own studies and research.
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