Thematic analysis without paradox: sensemaking and context

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Abstract

Purpose

In this paper, we underpin thematic analysis with a philosophical and methodological dimension and we present a nuanced perspective on the application of thematic analysis in a data-driven context. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method; it is perceived as a transparent approach that offers single meaning. However, through Husserlian descriptive phenomenology we introduce issues regarding subject/object and multidimensional meanings and realities.

Design

In most extant studies, thematic analysis has become a prescriptive approach. This emerging qualitative approach has been applied to a range of studies on social and organisational issues, knowledge management and education. However, despite its wide usage, researchers are divided as to its effectiveness. Many choose quantitative approaches as an alternative, and some disagree as to what counts as the definitive framework and process for thematic analysis. Consequently, we provide a level of validity for thematic analysis through emphasising a specific methodological approach based on ontological and epistemological positions.

Findings

Contrary to the common mantra from contemporary qualitative researchers who claim thematic analysis is often based on a static and enduring approach, the current paper highlights the dynamic nature of a thematic analytic approach and offers a deeper understanding of the ways in which researchers can utilise the right approach to understand the emerging complex data context.

Originality/Value

Several insights regarding the literature on thematic analysis were identified, including the current conceptualisation of thematic analysis as a dynamic approach. Understanding thematic analysis through phenomenology provides a basis on which to undertake a whole range of inclusive approaches that were previously undifferentiated from a quantitative perspective.

Introduction

Though rarely acknowledged, thematic analysis has been widely used as a qualitative analytic method. However, the method has come under criticism for its limited underpinnings and effectiveness and some researchers are unsure how to apply thematic analysis effectively to make sense of qualitative data (White, Oelke and Friesen, 2012; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017). The method has been applied within various studies (see Dark and Carter, 2019; Kitchen, 2013; Mughal, Gatrell and Stead, 2018; Naeem, 2020; Magrath, 2017; Berry and Simmons, 2019; Calvard, 2016; Millar and Price, 2018). Misgivings about thematic analysis are often based on inadequate understanding of its methods and how researchers' insights can be accommodated within a phenomenological framework (Ho, Chiang and Leung, 2017). The advent of big data collection and analysis are significantly compounding these misgivings in pluridimensional data environments (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013). Several studies have called for a more experiential qualitative data analytic approach, particularly a thematic analytic approach, to understand the emerging streams of data and the lifeworlds (Dowling, 2007; Matua, 2015). This situation is exemplified by Sundler *et al.*'s (2019, p. 734) comment that 'there is a need for understandable guidelines to take thematic analysis forward. Useful approaches are required to provide researchers and students guidance in the process of thematic analysis'. Researchers situated in various theoretical frameworks can utilise the thematic analytic method to make sense of burgeoning technologically rich and socially rich environments. In pursuit of greater understanding of descriptive phenomenology and the thematic analytic approach, this paper identifies a problem with the validity of thematic analysis and provides a descriptive phenomenological underpinning in an attempt to respond to such criticisms.

A major element that can determine the effectiveness of thematic analysis is the researcher's choice of research paradigm for the study. The complexity of qualitative research adds further difficulty to the task of understanding how to effectively approach thematic analysis due to the diverse types of analysis of qualitative data that are available. Bernard (1996) and Guest,

MacQueen and Namey (2012) found that researchers can also choose to measure qualitative data using quantitative methods.

When interpreting textual data, the major concern is usually the 'bigness' of data, and turning complex textual data into 'simplexity' (Calvard, 2016). As Franzosi (2012) noted, the larger the body of text to be analysed, the more researchers will turn to automated and quantitative approaches. However, such methods mean that the analyst might not understand the nature of the data, and this is often a necessity for social science studies. Habermas (1987) characterised subjectivist studies as 'historical-hermeneutic', meaning that the researcher tries to understand a text and data by finding the meaning intended by the original author/participant. Researchers who use quantified analytical methods for qualitative data may not retrieve sufficient in-depth information to carry out a detailed interpretation of the data, which could have an impact on the research outcome. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying and describing ideas within data rather than quantifying words and phrases. However, issues with thematic analysis include how to ensure validity and how to conduct effective thematic analysis.

Boyatzis (1998) depicted thematic analysis as a bridge between quantitative and qualitative research and suggested that an analysis of both types of data can add more validity. Guest *et al.* (2012) applied thematic analysis within a positivist framework, emphasising the need to define and quantify data items rather than textual analysis. Guest *et al.*'s (2012) study was powerfully driven by a pre-existing set of theories, rather than theory emerging from a simple reading of the texts. The application of thematic analysis to a quantitative paradigmatic straitjacket leads to a very narrow vista and constrains the richness and context-driven orientations proffered by qualitative approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This overemphasis on the procedure and a lack of familiarity with the data indicate that the researcher's

interpretations of the text are less important (Nelson, 2017). In phenomenological research, the object of research is to understand phenomena in terms of their patterns and idiosyncratic tendencies, and to formulate explanations of our experiences (Heck, 2011; Moghadam *et al*., 2019; Priya, 2017). An individual's perception is decentred and fragmented according to whatever context they inhabit at a particular moment. Braun and Clarke (2006) refused to accept the scientifically oriented and positivistically inclined approach of thematic analysis. They proposed a concept to maintain the flexibility of thematic analysis so it could be used across different research methods and paradigms. They provided a six-step process for conducting thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's approach radically progresses our knowledge to better understand the fluid nature of analysis in these contexts. In this regard, what is refreshing in their work (2006, 2016) is their acknowledgment that themes in thematic analysis are constructed rather than discovered. Central to the changing landscape of contemporary qualitative research, particularly in terms of emerging and increasing computing capabilities, Braun and Clarke's study is an exciting advancement in qualitative study and offers some insights to help comprehend the rapidly growing interest in this field.

In its simplest form, thematic analysis is an approach to research which, through coding procedures relating to the data, develops ideas, meaning and understanding. Indeed, thematic analysis is a flexible systematic approach which identifies, examines and recounts patterns. However, criticisms of the approach include limited depth when exploring the subject areas under analysis, a leaning towards unsubstantiated subjective bias relating to in-depth interpretations, and rich description omitted or not realised (Vaezi *et al*., 2015; Braun and Clarke, 2016). Gibson and Brown (2009) clarified these deficiencies in terms of the interpretation of 'other' through subjective perspectives as well as the limitations of language in defining and comprehending the world. This paper recognises the deficiencies or difficulties outlined and considers that descriptive phenomenology deals with the issue of the interpretation

of 'other' through developing a means of ameliorating the distinction between subject and object through intentionality and deals with deficiencies in language through an in-depth description of the phenomenon.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to develop an approach to thematic analysis underpinned by a phenomenological perspective. Contrary to the key mantra of contemporary qualitative researchers that is often based on a static thematic analytical approach, we define thematic analysis in relation to descriptive phenomenology as a continually evolving constellation of meanings constructed through data segmentation. Thematic analysis of the type described here develops, and coding and themes are reviewed among a multitude of emergent activities, which result in higher order, valuable information.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows: in the first section, we review previous research on descriptive phenomenology and the thematic analytic approach. In the second section, we contextualise thematic analysis. In the third and fourth sections we examine the goal of thematic analysis, presenting a range of ontological and epistemological assumptions of descriptive phenomenology and the need for a transitory and flexible application of thematic analysis. In the fifth section, we develop a dynamic model presenting affinity between descriptive phenomenology and the thematic analytic approach. The sixth section outlines the key theoretical contributions. A conclusion and some further research directions are given in the seventh section.

Contextualising thematic analysis

Thematic analysis has been applied to a range of studies in the context of social issues and environments (Mughal *et al.,* 2018; Sheiner and Lahav, 2020; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017; Magrath, 2017; Waller *et al*., 2020). It has specifically been applied to organisational

knowledge management and education (Berry and Simmons, 2019; Calvard, 2016; Millar and Price, 2018). However, despite its popularity, researchers are divided as to its effectiveness and often choose quantitative approaches as alternatives. There is even some disagreement as to an objective framework and process for thematic analysis (Guest *et al.,* 2012; Fugard and Potts, 2015**;** Braun and Clarke, 2016).

This paper acknowledges the requirement for philosophical and methodological underpinning for thematic analysis. Consequently, we aim to provide an explanation of phenomenology as a philosophical perspective and methodology as well as define the relationship between this approach and thematic analysis. Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective primarily posited through the works of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau Ponty and in relation to these different perspectives a means by which methodological approaches can be derived. 'Phenomenology provides us with interpretations regarding the distinctions between the internal and external world as well as levels of objectivity and subjectivity … there is a general comprehension that there is a relationship between mind and world' (Howell, 2013, p. 55).

Husserlian descriptive phenomenology or eidetic (as seen by the mind) descriptive phenomenology describes the general characteristics of a phenomenon and brackets experiences rather than incorporate them in the research process. Descriptive phenomenology describes phenomenon as they appear to consciousness through intentionality; time and space are isolated or bracketed and the focus is on consciousness not the context. Through intentionality, there is a relationship between subject and object because 'acting concerns action, doing concerns the deed, loving the beloved' intentionality is the consciousness of something (Husserl, 1969, p. 243). Sundler *et al*. (2019) made the case for underpinning thematic analysis with descriptive phenomenology or the Husserlian branch of the philosophy and noted that different strands and nuances exist within the distinct traditions.

> *Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought. Inquiry is cognisant to an*
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> *entity both with regard to the fact that it is and with regard to it being as it is … Inquiry*
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> *itself is the behaviour of a questioner and therefore an entity, and as such has its own*
>
> *character of being.* (Heidegger, 1962/2004, p. 24)

Meaning and interpretation derive from pre-understanding; so, any analysis and particularly thematic analysis is guided by the perspective of the inquirer. Data analysis in this type of phenomenological research constantly reassesses data in relation to interpretations and pre-understandings in relation to the lifeworld. In this way, research questions change or evolve as the research progresses; data collection and analysis are synthesised. Phenomenological researchers understand these complexities and that qualitative work does not privilege or achieve absolute truth, but acknowledges and accommodates personal biases, values and interests (Creswell, 2003; Toma, 2011; Ozuem, Howell and Lancaster, 2008).

The first major element to note about thematic analysis is the link with qualitative data (Girei, 2013). Phenomenology uses qualitative approaches to undertake data collection; Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argued that qualitative researchers use interpretation to make sense of natural settings and meanings about individuals within various and different environments (lifeworlds). Similarly, Skinner, Tagg and Holloway (2000) noted that qualitative approaches focus on people's experiences and the meanings they place on events, processes and the structures of social settings and lifeworlds. These perspectives emphasise that qualitative analytical strategies are phenomenological. In addition, Langley and Klag (2019, p. 535) indicated that researchers,

> *are always inevitably part of the story whether we mention it or not. At minimum, we*
>
> *make choices about which angles to take and about which particular phenomenon on*

which to focus; these choices are at least partially dependent on our roles and perspectives in the field.

Meaning-making in phenomenological research identifies and renders explicit the researcher's ontological and epistemological orientations. As King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019, p. 236) noted:

phenomenology places emphasis on looking closely at lived experience in specific settings ... the rich detail of the phenomenological method provides a depth of understanding missing from quantitative studies.

One notable and important contribution of thematic analysis underpinned by a descriptive phenomenological approach is its creative and dynamic aptitude for exploring how human beings make sense of their lived experience. Thematic analysis in this paper is a tool for developing in-depth understanding of a phenomenon through interpretations of pre-understandings and the lifeworld.

The goal of thematic analysis

Phenomenological research is normally inductive or abductive and based on qualitative data which is non-numeric and less structured and more flexible than quantitative data. Nkwi, Nyamongo and Ryan (2001) suggested that there is no generalisation using qualitative research, which allows for the inclusion of various types of data collection strategies and analytical techniques that can be associated with phenomenological research. Therefore, describing phenomenological research without associating it with specific data collection methods has influenced a redefined view of qualitative data analysis that distinguishes between the data itself and the analysis performed to investigate the data. Bernard (1996) articulated that researchers need to make the distinction between types of data and analysis. Husserlian or descriptive phenomenology is premised on experience as perceived by subjective human

consciousness. That said, preconceptions and pre-knowledge should be bracketed in an attempt to deal with preconsciousness and biases so as to achieve transcendental subjectivity through continual assessment of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Bracketing holds the impact of the researcher in abeyance. Bracketing involves seeing things as they really are; through dealing with presuppositions 'we get to the core' of the phenomenon (Howell, 2013, p. 61). When bracketing, there are three main tenets: (1) identification and retention of phenomenon, (2) imagination of variations and (3) integration through synthesis of experience. 'Such a process leads to understanding and description of the essential structures of the phenomenon' (*ibid*.). Indeed, the basis of knowledge involves 'the lived experience in the lifeworld' (Howell, 2013, p. 62). Through the notion of horizons or the outlooks of other individuals at a point in time and the transient nature of this, we understand one another through empathy. Each individual is caught up in their own horizon and given preconceptions, which indicates that research can never be completely free of preconceptions and past experience, which points in the direction of hermeneutical phenomenology (Wilson, 2012). Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 36) pithily put it this way:

> *The reality of everyday life is organised around the 'here' of my body and the 'now' of my present. This here and now is the focus of my attention to the reality of everyday life. What is here and now presented to me in everyday life is the* realissimum *of my consciousness.*

Thematic analysis is based on notions of phenomenology in terms of human experience and perceptions which involve the notion of other. A theme can be semantic (surface meaning) or latent (underlying ideas and assumptions). Themes encompass meaningful essences that permeate the data and are part of the overall topic of the research (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ozuem *et al*., 2008). Themes synthesise the research and identify the social process and being-

in-the-world (Heidegger) or inalienable presence (Merleau-Ponty) where the purpose is to elicit meaning or the essence of experience. The experiences of the authors of the text are contextualised and summarised in themes, which provide the phenomenological story or narrative that is transferable rather than enables generalisability. This study uses phenomenology to underpin thematic analysis; phenomenology argues that experience and understanding are the basic structures of human existence and are necessary elements of our very being or becoming (*Dasein*). 'We are always taking something to something. That is the givenness of our world orientation and we cannot reduce it to anything simpler or more immediate' (Gadamer, 1970, p. 87). Rather than the deliberations of the objective observer, research or data, interpretation is not a rule-based procedure but the very essence of being human. Thematic analysis involves projection; 'questions do not emanate from nowhere – they are not born out of total ignorance, they already exist within what is to be studied and self' (Howell, 2013, p. 163). Phenomenological hermeneutics clarifies how thematic analysis develops understanding and involves preconceptions; it permits phenomenological procedures and the development of interpretations and understanding of experience (Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Howell, 2013; Gadamer, 2004, 2008; Sitz, 2008).

Thematic analysis: from static to dynamic

Phenomenology attempts to expose lived experiences and provides meaning and understanding of human existence. Themes may be considered structures of experience and may be understood as foci of experiences and a means of capturing and understanding a phenomenon (Van Maanen, 1990; Roulston, 2001). Van Maanen's approach identified four analytical steps for exploring the lifeworld to gain a deep and rich understanding of the meaning of lived experiences. These are: (1) exposing thematic phenomenon, (2) identifying and isolating thematic statements, (3) composing linguistic transformations, and (4) constructing thematic

descriptions. Phenomenology investigates how mutual understanding and communication between human beings transpires and how concepts of meaning, motives, acts and object of action ends correspond with a structured consciousness and inner time. Human beings interpret meaning in others through self-interpretation and pre-interpreted experiences (Shutz, 1975). Themes emerge through the interpretation of experiences from the lifeworld and through an interaction between self and other through meaningful communication. Consequently, phenomenology identifies not only how themes emerge but the very essence for them existing at all.

In this way, thematic analysis goes beyond the activity of quantifying words or phrases that stand out as more significant based on the frequency they are mentioned. Instead, it focuses on identifying and describing ideas within the data, known as themes (Guest *et al.*, 2012). It is used to identify, analyse and report themes within the data; it describes the dataset in rich detail (Braun and Clark, 2006). Thematic networks are web-like illustrations that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text, providing an understanding of phenomena of interest' (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic analysis explores the connections between statements and the meanings regarding people's claims (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic analysis explores the data, but it involves a process of understanding different ideas or relationships that are not necessarily about validating data or claims.

According to Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis allows researchers who employ the interpretive approach to give a description of social 'facts'. Additionally, positivist social scientists can provide assistance to interpretive social science studies by providing an understanding of the distinctive qualities of observations through thematic analysis. In other words, both groups can assist each other's studies by providing data, either through text-based analysis or numeric calculations of codes. These can be used as the basis of the research questions. For example, themes that emerge from hypothesis testing in positivist research can

be explored through interpretive studies, and phenomenological studies can motivate positivist social scientists to explore findings through qualitative or quantitative hypothesis testing (Boyatzis, 1998, pp. 145–146). This indicates that researchers who typically use positivist or phenomenological approaches can benefit from each other's findings, which have been generated using thematic analysis. Overall, the thematic analysis process that researchers adopt will depend on their research questions and the kind of data they aim to collect and analyse. Whether this is achieved through calculating the codes numerically or conducting a word-based analysis, all researchers from various research paradigms will agree that interpretation of the findings is the major goal of thematic analysis.

Though thematic analysis is widely used in research, there is no clearly acknowledged method in terms of how to approach it. An early model of a thematic analysis process was developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). The model consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involves choosing, focusing, simplifying, building and transforming data. The data display stage involves visualising the data through, for example, quotations, figures and narrative text. The researcher identifies the similarities and differences and relationships between different information and data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The researcher validates interpretations through supportive evidence. The final stage involves providing clear findings of the results from the displayed data. This model provides a basic illustration of the process of thematic analysis, however, Miles and Huberman's (1994) model provides limited guidance on how to deliver a detailed thematic analysis. Thematic analysis does not practise a detailed theoretical approach compared to constructionist thematic analysis or discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, with no specific theory to link to and no fixed structure in the procedure, it is implied that researchers can be flexible in applying thematic analysis to their research. However, with no

limit to the model's flexibility, researchers have no guideline, which can lead to inconsistency and incoherent theme development (Nowell *et al*., 2017).

Guest *et al.* (2012) and Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that thematic analysis could be applied to different research paradigms. Braun and Clarke (2006), in particular, proposed a theoretically flexible approach to thematic analysis as a suitable method for critical psychology. They noted that there is no single theoretical framework or method that can be generically applied to conducting qualitative research; the choice of method and theoretical framework depends on the researcher's objectives. Thematic analysis therefore differs from other analytic methods, such as grounded theory and its search for patterns in data that are theoretically structured (Al-Habil, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Goulding, 1998). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is linked to phenomenological epistemology (Smith and Osborn, 2003), which focuses on human experience subjectively (Guest *et al.*, 2012). IPA involves understanding individuals' or groups' everyday experiences of reality in greater detail. Thematic analysis does not require researchers to have prior knowledge of theoretical or technological approaches, as grounded theory does (Braun and Clark, 2006); it therefore offers a more accessible approach to analysis, which is helpful for inexperienced researchers.

For Braun and Clarke, the 'keyness' of a theme is not essentially dependent on numeric measures, but on the quality behind the theme and whether the theme contributes to the research questions. While Braun and Clarke place emphasis on the flexibility of the method, they also promote the need for consistency in conducting the analysis. Compared with grounded theory and IPA, thematic analysis is not specifically linked to any theoretical framework, indicating it can be used within different theoretical frameworks provided they are an appropriate match. If researchers seek to adopt the technique as part of their research analysis, they must offer a clear theoretical position from which they have applied their analysis; this will increase the perceived validity of the data and the transparency of the thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke

(2006) distinguished between top-down or theoretical thematic analysis, guided by specific research question(s), and a bottom-up or inductive analysis, which is guided by the data itself (Azungah, 2018; Kanger, 2016). According to Bloor (1978), the main requirement for inductive analysis is that sufficient data must be available to enable the researcher to examine all possible relevant aspects of the research problem. Additionally, the research problem should be precisely defined before data are collected. As regards the coding of themes for the inductive approach, if the data are collected specifically for the research question, the themes identified may have a weak connection to the questions the interviewed participants were asked. A pre-existing coding frame and the researcher's theoretical interests are excluded from this form of thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006), whereas a theoretical thematic analysis is driven by the researcher's theoretical interest and focuses more on detailing the analysis of the data rather than the data itself.

Braun and Clarke (2006) also distinguished between two levels of themes: semantic and latent. Xiang, Gretzel and Fesenmaier (2009) applied semantic coding to their analysis of the textual data they obtained. The steps included identifying words that focused on the central words that linked with other words in the text. This indicates that researchers who adopt the semantic approach are not looking for anything beyond what has been said or written. Such researchers often compare their findings to previous literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In contrast, themes at the latent level explore the basic meaning, ideas and assumptions that shape the semantic content. Madden and Dillon (1982) illustrated the use of latent structure analysis to test causal theories. They found two latent factors to explain the linkages in a communication hierarchy of effects model. In other words, the latent themes aim to identify the features of themes already theorised, which involves a great deal of interpretative activity (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The difference between the different themes identified by Braun and Clarke indicates the need for flexibility in thematic analysis to ensure that researchers apply it

appropriately to interpret the different types of themes emerging from the text. However, such flexibility when applied to a technique without an attendant theoretical framework causes the researcher to have no clear direction.

Braun and Clarke (2006) provided a detailed step-by-step guide for doing thematic analysis which adds to the previous thematic analysis model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Braun and Clark's thematic analysis guide consists of six phases: (1) familiarising yourself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that researchers can apply thematic analysis across a range of research questions as coding can evolve throughout the process. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted the possibility of using thematic analysis in a wide range of qualitative studies. This is an exciting advance in the qualitative approach and may help researchers reach a partial understanding of multifaceted phenomena; however, their study offered limited insights into the dynamic and complex nature of the qualitative landscape. Thematic analysis has been applied within a positivist framework: Guest *et al.* (2012) is a notable example of this. In contrast to Braun and Clark's (2006) concept of keeping coding flexible, Guest *et al.* (2012) placed less emphasis on word-based analyses in thematic analysis and more emphasis on defining the data items. Their approach to thematic analysis involved the use of a 'code book' and calculated measurements, such as interrater reliability, and offered a monolithic approach to thematic analysis. Although the mode of descriptive phenomenology is grounded in understanding people's lived experiences, thematic analysis should not be merely employed as a mechanical tool to capture their complexities. Ho and colleagues (2017, p. 1760) advised:

'There-

'Themes reside in the researcher's thoughts and we, as researchers, link our thoughts (presuppositions) to the data and manifest our interpretations by means of themes. Thematic

analysis helps us to reflect on daily taken-for-granted understandings and to unravel the surface of these realities, which we use to explain phenomenon under metaphysical traditions'.

The argument put forwards by Ho *et al.* (2017) is that thematic analysis is intended to move researchers towards understanding and to unravel their thoughts by textually manifesting the lives of those they study by means of themes. The juxtaposition of researchers' accounts and people's lifeworlds needs to be embraced holistically to capture its complexity. Given that the aim of this paper is to develop and consolidate the conceptually fragmented approaches to thematic analysis, the following section discusses a step-by-step process of dynamic thematic analysis.

Step-by-step process of dynamic thematic analysis

This section discusses a step-by-step process of conducting dynamic thematic analysis. Dynamic thematic analysis offers an interdependent approach to meaning-making with fluid data. Dynamic constellations of meaning-making are less stable and consistent. The approach encompasses: (1) scoping and excavation, (2) data segmentation, (3) manifestation and categorising the segmented text, (4) developing and refining categories, and (5) meaning-making and consolidation (see Figure 1).

Dynamic thematic analysis framework
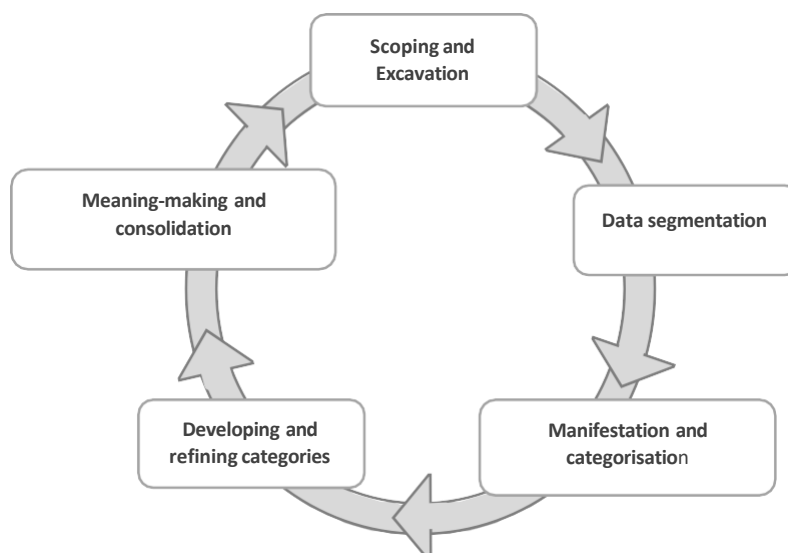
Figure 1: Dynamic thematic analysis

1) **Scoping and excavation** – It is important that researchers understand their data, but simply reading and taking notes does not necessarily mean that researchers will obtain an in-depth understanding. This stage encourages researchers to search for the meaning of the data beyond the surface meaning and to excavate complex bodies of the qualitative data being analysed in order to find meaning. This step is known as the immersion stage, where researchers examine some portion of the data in greater detail. For this stage, we recommend that researchers identify key terms from previous literature as well as immerse themselves to develop main themes. Every individual may have their own socially constructed 'reality' based on their view of the world. Therefore, realities can be unique rather than universal. Subjective realities can also be linked to previous literature, which can add validity to the interpretation of the primary qualitative data, which researchers can use to explore specific connections between the participants' statements and the meanings of their claims and the literature that supports them.

2) **Data segmentation** – For this step, the focus is on segmenting qualitative data. Qualitative data segmentation is often approached more topically than numerically. Qualitative research focuses on the participants' lived experiences; the effective suggestion is to divide qualitative data into short paragraphs at the point where a new topic starts. Therefore, although researchers are not completely independent of the data analysis, they are focusing on the content of the data. After the in-depth exploration of the data in the first stage, the researcher can, at the second stage, segment text from various sources that may have differently worded language, but similar messages.

Previously segmented literature can be drawn on to make connections with primary qualitative data claims. By segmenting the data before categories, the researcher is able to obtain not only a deeper understanding of the text, but also the ability to separate it based on topics discovered in the text. Categories and key words can then be developed based on the clearly separated findings.

3) **Manifestation and categorisation** – With the data segmented and thoroughly analysed, it is now possible for researchers to code data under specific categories. For each coding category, there should be a basic definition, exemplars and strings of language to be placed with the category. This stage is the starting point for further analysis; it provides the analyst with categorised data chunks related to the themes. This stage may allow analysts to explore patterns among the categories and minimise the time taken to interpret the categories and any interlinked connections, as the themes have been identified from the text in the scoping and segmentation stages. They can also apply the collected existing literature to the themes to support their validity and to add to the discussion and interpretation of the categories and themes.

4) **Developing and refining categories and themes** – This stage involves ensuring that the themes are consistent with both the primary data collected and the literature collected for the ensuing discussion. At this stage, the researcher returns to their review of previous literature to assess whether their new primary data aligns with or contradicts the reviewed literature. If it contradicts the literature, they may either re-research previous literature or simply summarise new findings that contradict the findings of previous literature. Another purpose in reviewing the themes is to ensure they differ from each other, and to assess whether links can be identified between the codes and themes. The purpose of the coding is to identify something of significant interest and

patterns relating to the themes. Researchers have to make sure they do not repeat similar themes and codes that could be perceived as invalid by the readers.

5) **Meaning-making and consolidation** – At this stage, the analysis extends beyond describing the data links to the categories, to discussing and interpreting the categories and themes and how they link to the research question(s). For this stage, the analyst will illustrate arguments or scenarios of the categories and themes to support their arguments within the study and provide answers to the research questions. Special forethought should be given to the significant impact of themes and the subtler varieties of significant patterns. Graphical representation of themes and delineating the relationships potentially provides novel insights and evidence to substantiate choices in the development of a conceptual framework. The researcher's conceptual framework can be developed cycling between emergent data, concepts, themes, the researcher's insights and the relevant literature (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012). Through engagement with data, concepts or theory, meanings are constructed rather than found (Braun and Clarke, 2016). The act of conceptually consolidating the themes and linking these to the research questions could enhance 'conceptual depth criteria'.

Nelson (2017, p. 12) diligently mapped conceptual depth criteria into five main streams: (1) a wide range of evidence can be drawn from the data to illustrate the concepts; (2) the concepts must be demonstrably part of a rich network of concepts and themes in the data within which there are complex connections; (3) subtlety in the concepts is understood by the researcher and used constructively to articulate the richness in their meaning; (4) the concepts have resonance with existing literature in the area being investigated; and (5) the concepts, as part of a wider analytic story, stand up to testing for external validity.

Key contributions

This paper demonstrates that conducting a thematic analysis that attempts to capture the lifeworld is more complex than anticipated and can negatively impact analysts' final conclusions if not conducted effectively. The discussion of thematic analysis in this paper indicates that applying a dynamic approach to thematic analysis can be useful for qualitative researchers. We posit that the resulting combination of thematic analysis and descriptive phenomenology can enhance understanding of how researchers and practitioners can constantly reassess data in relation to interpretations and pre-understandings and in relation to the lifeworld (Tomkins and Nicholds 2017). Indeed, the framework introduced in this paper brings in elements of descriptive phenomenology and highlights the dynamic, complex and data-driven nature of thematic analysis. Theoretically, the present study makes a significant contribution to the field and has the potential to provide some insights to practitioners and researchers in the rapidly growing data-driven context. Based on a phenomenological perspective, this paper proposes that researchers who aim to understand the social construction of shared realities and the influence behind actions, events and even people's perspectives and beliefs should apply a critical dynamic approach to thematic analysis. Braun and Clark's (2006) framework was meant to be flexible and valid for any research paradigm approach. In contrast, Guest *et al.*'s (2012) approach was inclined more towards quantifying qualitative data using a positivist research perspective. Boyatzis's (1998) method of thematic analysis was introduced as a bridge between positivist and phenomenological analyses. Though these authors consider thematic analysis to be an important analytical tool for qualitative data, they provide little guidance for researchers aiming to critically understand their research from a phenomenological and social constructionist perspective. This study places emphasis on scoping and excavating the qualitative data and segmenting it before developing categories, to

obtain a richer understanding of the social realities identified from within the research in order to make consistent categories and themes.

Conclusion

In the present paper, our framework adopts the perspective of descriptive phenomenology because in order to understand the multidimensional data in the burgeoning technological environment, we need to understand how our lifeworlds and contextual characteristics can be reassessed through our experiential interpretations. This is an exciting advancement in the fields and may offer foundations of comprehensive understanding and the confluence of descriptive phenomenology and thematic analysis. Against this backdrop, we explicate the conceptual confluence between thematic analysis and descriptive phenomenology, which is a theoretically rich construct for understanding and making sense of qualitative data (Howell, 2013). An interesting angle for further research might be to look at how thematic analysis could be applied in mixed methods studies, descriptive phenomenology and postmodern perspectives. Further studies should explore a critical approach to thematic analysis, particularly for social constructionists. Such research could provide guidance on methods where the aim is to scope qualitative data and segment it.

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