PREFACE

My own mentor in qualitative research once told me that there were only four problems in working with students on a qualitative study: getting them into the field; getting them out of the field; getting them to start analysis; and getting them to stop analysis. At the starting point it, is easy to see why students would hesitate because they just don't feel ready for the challenges of meeting participants. Then, once they do get into the field, there is always the feeling that there is more to learn, that you just don't have enough yet.

But this book is about the last two problems: beginning analysis and ending it. Too often, students would rather stay in the field than face the uncertainties of analysis. This hesitation typically comes from a fear of not knowing what to do and a worry about doing things wrong. Then, once you are caught up in analysis, there are the continuing concerns that you haven't quite got it yet and that there is more to learn before you can possibly stop.

The answer this book offers to these issues of "analysis paralysis" is to concentrate on producing results that can be summarized as a set of themes. This process of thinking thematically is the core of my message, based on the realization that once you know where you are going, it is much easier to get there.

CHAPTER ONE. WHAT IS A THEME?

The analysis of the data revealed three underlying themes.

We identified four broad themes during the analysis.

The results are presented in terms of five key themes.

How should you organize the analysis of your qualitative data, and once you finish that analysis, how should you present it? Often, as illustrated above, the outcome from analyzing qualitative data is stated as a set of themes, yet the concept of themes is frequently taken for granted. Hence, this opening chapter will not only present a definition of themes but also consider the purposes that they serve in qualitative research. Overall, it will show the value of themes as a way to capture the meaning of qualitative data.

The analysis of qualitative data typically involves working with a great many pages of transcripts or field notes, and you must ultimately communicate the significance of all that data to a set of readers. In many ways, this is a process of data reduction, with the goal of generating a set of key insights that capture the most important aspects of a much larger volume of data. Over time, many researchers in the field of qualitative research have settled on *themes* as a common way to express the most meaningful aspects of the data.

This shared agreement on the effectiveness of themes as a way to summarize the essential meaning of data makes them one of the most frequently used tools in the qualitative analysis process. The quotations at the top of this chapter all occurred as opening statements in the Results sections of qualitative articles, indicating that findings from the analysis will be presented as three (or four or five) major themes. Themes thus reduce the complexity of your results by compressing large amounts of data into a much smaller set of reporting units, which organize the presentation of the research results.

Developing a Definition of Themes

The first step in working with themes is to develop a definition, and the literature contains numerous statements about what themes are. Here are some dictionary definitions: “The theme in a story is its underlying message, or “big idea.” Or, “A theme in a piece of writing, a talk, or a discussion is an important idea or subject that runs through it.” In a more

formal exercise, DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) performed a systematic review of the use of themes in the nursing literature, which produced this definition: "A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole" (DeSantis and Ugarriza, 2000, 363). Other, less formal definitions typically include an emphasis on patterns:

> "Something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

> "Recurring patterns…or 'gestalts' which pull together many segments of the data" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 246).

> "A pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii).

To produce the current broad-based definition of themes, I began in the same way as DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) by collecting a set of definitions from across a variety of disciplines. Next, rather than trying to subjectively synthesize all of the substantive content from these 20 definitions, I found that the most common words in the full set were the following:

Data	13
Meaning or meaningful	12
Pattern	9
Recurring or Repeated	7

Combining these shared elements, leads to an initial definition: "*A theme is a meaningful, recurring pattern in the data.*" Although this basic definition does capture the idea of themes as a data reduction device, it needs to be expanded in two different ways. First, the idea that themes are "in the data" implies that they already exist, waiting for the analyst to discover them. As part of my analysis of the definition of themes, I also examined a long series of articles to see how the authors presented the origin of the themes they reported, and the two most common statements were that themes either emerged or were identified. This poses an interesting contrast, since the idea that themes emerge implies that they are already present in the

data, waiting for the analyst to discover them, while the idea that themes are identified points to a more active role for the analyst. This recognition that researchers work with the data to produce themes, rather than expecting them to emerge, is not new (e.g., Braun & Clarke 2006). Still, it is seldom directly incorporated in the definition of themes. So, it is essential to acknowledge that we ourselves actively create themes as part of the analysis process, which leads to: "*A theme is a meaningful, recurring pattern that researchers develop from the data.*"

What is still missing, however, is any sense of the goals that themes serve, so that they are not just consciously created, but created for a reason. This requires emphasizing the role that themes play in communicating the results to readers. This second additional element in the definition points to the need for themes that bridge the gap between your understanding of the data and the message that reader receives. Awareness of this goal for using themes is even rarer in existing definitions of themes (but see Thorne, 2016, p. 281). Thus, themes should go beyond being your personal summary of the data and instead operate as a device that makes it possible to communicate with your audience. Incorporating this goal orientation leads to a final definition: "*A theme is a meaningful, recurring pattern that researchers first develop from the data, and then use to interpret that data for an audience.*"

Overall, this definition points to your role as a self-conscious analyst who is performing a task to meet a goal. The presentation in this book thus builds on the researcher's dual role in both developing themes as meaningful, recurring patterns in the data and communicating those patterns to an audience.

Box 1.1 and Box 1.2 present examples of themes as they were summarized in the abstracts from two articles. In the first case, Richards et al. (2020) speak about their "construction" of themes, and they provide rich summaries of each theme (e.g., not just "problems with infrastructure," but "working with limited and inconsistent infrastructure"). In the second case, Gustafsson and Hemberg (2022) demonstrate the use of rich, highly meaningful themes.

BOX 1.1 An Example of an Abstract That Is Based on Themes

The purpose of this study was to understand the unique stressors faced by physical educators working in New York City schools. Participants included 34 New York City physical educators who participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences teaching in an urban context. Qualitative

(Continued)

data analysis resulted in the construction of four themes: (a) working with limited and inconsistent infrastructure, (b) navigating student diversity, (c) coping with marginalization and advocating for quality practices, and (d) managing the sociopolitics of teaching. These themes highlight the intersection between discipline and teaching context and are discussed through the lens of occupational socialization theory.

BOX 1.2 A Second Example of an Abstract That Is Based on Themes

BACKGROUND: Nurses who are constantly exposed to patients' suffering may develop compassion fatigue. There is a gap in the latest research regarding nurses' experiences of compassion fatigue. Little is known about how compassion fatigue affects the nurse as a person, and indications of how it affects the profession are scarce.

AIM: The aim of this study was to explore compassion fatigue experienced by nurses and how it affects them as persons and professionals.

RESEARCH DESIGN, PARTICIPANTS, AND RESEARCH CONTEXT: A qualitative explorative approach was used. The data consisted of texts from interviews with seven nurses in various nursing contexts. Content analysis was used.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION: Ethical approval was sought and granted from an ethics committee at the university where the researchers were based, and written, informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

FINDINGS: Five themes were discovered: Compassion as an empathic gift and compassion fatigue as a result of compassion overload, Compassion fatigue as exhausting the nurse as a professional and private person, Compassion fatigue as a crisis with potentially valuable insights, Compassion fatigue can be handled by self-care and focus on self, and Compassion fatigue is affected by life itself and multifaceted factors.

DISCUSSION: Compassion stress and overload can lead to compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue affects the nurse's ability to show compassion, and the caring is no longer experienced in the same way; the nurses experienced it as being deprived of the gift of compassion. Compassion fatigue implicates a crisis with potentially valuable insights.

CONCLUSION: Compassion fatigue can be symbolized as bruises in the soul, hurtful, but with time it can fade away, although it leaves a sense of caution within the nurse, which can affect the suffering patient.

On course no example is perfect, and I would note that Box 1.2 says the themes were "discovered." This is a problem because, as I explained earlier, themes are not already in the data, just waiting to be discovered. So, a better wording might be, "We located five themes . . ." Or, "We selected five themes . . . ," both of which indicate that it was the researchers themselves who chose these particular themes.

Although illustrations such as these are helpful, the most useful way to practice thinking thematically is to examine examples from your own field. I located these examples by searching the Social Sciences Citation Index for "themes" and you can do the same in that source or in databases such as Scopus, EBSCO, and so forth while also including keywords related to your own interests. Alternatively, you could search for "themes" in sources that are specific to your field, such CINAHL, Eric, Medline, PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and so forth.

Things That Are Not Themes

Codes are the first thing that needs to be distinguished from themes. In general, codes are smaller, more discrete segments of data, which play a start-up function in most analytic processes. In contrast to generating three to five broad themes that communicate the core content in the data, it is not uncommon to generate dozens of codes that mark potentially meaningful pieces of the raw data. Once you have a set of codes, you compare and contrast them as the next step in creating themes by bringing together a number of smaller codes to create categories that each have similar content. But it is also important to differentiate simple categories from themes (Morse, 2008). In many approaches to analysis, categories play an intermediate role, standing between codes and themes, so that you use descriptive categories as the basis for generating a set of more enlightening themes.

Finally, topics are another example of data-based reporting that fall short of being true themes. Like codes and categories, topics are essentially descriptive—they tell what is in the data, rather than capturing an analytic explanation of what is most meaningful in the data. Too often, summarizing the data in terms of the topics the participants discussed does little more than replicate the interview questions that produced those responses. Instead of a descriptive outline of the data, you want to create themes that penetrate more deeply into what was most meaningful to the participants.

Another trap to avoid in creating themes is avoid statements that are overly general. For example, themes such as emotions, power, knowledge, and so forth are too general to capture the experiences and perspectives that were most important to the participants. The examples in Boxes 1 and 2 show

themes that are rich statements of what mattered most. By moving beyond basic statements, you can generate themes that are powerful ways of sharing the results of the data analysis with the reader.

The Practical Value of Thinking Thematically

One of the key advantages of a thematic approach to qualitative research is the wide variety of data sources which you can use. The most common sources are individual interviews and focus groups, but this kind of analysis also works well with almost any form of text data, such as diaries, documents, and online downloads. Properly documented case studies are another option, and some version of theme-based analysis can be used with participant observation and ethnographic research, as described in Chapter 4.

One other advantage is the flexibility of theme-based analyses and their compatibility with a range of philosophical or paradigmatic frameworks. This ability to accommodate different perspectives on qualitative research arises from the adaptability of these methods as ways to analyze data. For example, if you are working within a post-positivist set of philosophical assumptions, then it is possible to emphasize the accuracy of coding and objectively describing theme-related data. Alternatively, if you are relying on a constructivist philosophy, then you can emphasize the meaningfulness of the themes that you create through your subjective interpretations of the data. And, if you are using pragmatism as your philosophical framework, then you can concentrate on the differences between making one choice versus another in how you put your methods into operation.

Overall, however, the most important advantage of thinking thematically comes from knowing both where to start and complete your data analysis, because pursuing that analysis is much easier when you have a well-defined understanding of the goals you need to reach. Typically, the core of your Results section in a qualitative analysis will be organized as a set of themes, so that producing those themes should be the target for the analysis process, right from the start. Often, researchers who are engaging in their first analysis of qualitative data have a deep sense of being lost in the data. Concentrating on themes is a way out of this dilemma. If you know the end point of your journey, then it is easier to determine the intermediate steps that will help you reach your desired goal. Thus, thinking thematically shapes your analytic efforts around a coherent goal that will guide you throughout the analysis process.

This reliance on themes as the end points for analysis helps explain why they have become such an important part of qualitative research. Rather than the vague goal of "making sense of the data," themes help steer the

enterprise of qualitative data analysis in ways that emphasize both the interpretation of that data and the communication of its meaning to a set of readers. Thinking thematically is thus an important step forward in mastering the skills that are necessary for effective qualitative data analysis.

Conclusions

When you know that you will be presenting the results from your research as a set of themes, then you have a clear goal that can drive your analyses. Without such a well-defined goal, it is tempting to pursue poorly defined purposes such as showing what participants felt or experienced, or "finding meaning" in the data. These are certainly part of what you want to capture through qualitative research, but they do not have the advantage of specifying how to describe and interpret what you learned from your data. The search for themes thus provides a guiding light that allows you to find your way from the beginning of the research process to the end.

Ultimately, *the most important things that themes do are to capture and communicate meaning*. One the one hand, they capture what mattered most to the participants in regard to the research questions. One the other hand, they communicate your interpretation of what the reader needs to understand about the participants' lives in regard to the research questions. Once you pursue these goals, you should have a direct path forward in analyzing the data, as you seek out the themes that connect the worlds of your participants and your readers.

CHAPTER TWO. CONCEPTUALIZING THEME-BASED ANALYSIS

This chapter begins by locating theme-based analysis near the midpoint on a continuum that ranges from purely descriptive analyses to intensely theoretical accounts of data. It then proceeds to distinguish theme-based analysis from two other approaches: content analysis, which tends to be descriptive, and Grounded Theory, which is oriented to generating theory. Ultimately, theme-based analysis gives you a choice among several different options for achieving a range of goals within qualitative research.

As Figure 2.1 indicates, there are several possible goals for qualitative research, ranging from description at one end of the spectrum to theory at the other end. The figure places the interpretive goals of theme-based analysis at the midpoint of this continuum. The essential point is that qualitative research can pursue any of these goals—description, themes, or theory—as well as anything in between.

Descriptive research concentrates on defining *what* the data contains. It is thus, as described in the previous chapter, oriented to the topics that make up the data (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012). As such, it is particularly useful in exploratory research situations where you know little about the research area. In terms of the results you produce, a good description is useful for reducing a complex situation into a set of well-ordered concepts. One major limitation of descriptive research, however, is that you may capture little more than the surface aspects of what is available in the data, with only minimal interpretation. Of course, this is not a problem if telling the reader what the data contain advances knowledge by mapping unfamiliar territory.

At the opposite pole in Figure 2.1, theorizing concentrates on explaining *why* the data are the way they are. Theorizing is most useful in relatively mature fields where the basic issues are well known, and the next step is to account for the processes that produce them. In particular, a good theory will not just clarify the key elements of the data, but also integrate those core concepts into a coherent whole. One major limitation of theory-oriented research, however, is that arriving at a theory can be an unrealistic goal.

Figure 2.1 The Range of Goals for Qualitative Research

This can be especially so when you are attempting to present one to readers within the relatively brief length of a typical journal article. This limitation often results in the production of substantive theories that provide insights into how a specific research area operates, rather than larger theories that attempt to account for a broad range of phenomena.

Figure 2.1 gives theme-based interpretation an intermediate position on the spectrum of possible goals for qualitative research, placing it between the relatively concrete goal of description and the more abstract goal of theorizing. At one level, thematic interpretations are indeed descriptive, because you develop a set of themes to summarize what the data contains. At another level, they are also theoretical, because you present this content in a conceptual and interpretive fashion.

The figure also features arrows that link thematic interpretation to both description and theory. This represents the idea that these research goals exist on a continuum and are not three discrete positions. Theme-based analyses that are oriented toward the descriptive pole explore more of the meaning behind the elements that make up the data than a purely descriptive analysis would. For example, Thorne (2016) describes what she terms "interpretive description," which would occupy the space between description and thematic interpretation. Similarly, thematic interpretations can be oriented toward the theoretical pole. Analyses in this position on the continuum often provide a framework for connecting themes in a way that Chapter 6 will label a model, which is a step short of a full-fledged theory.

Theme-based analyses strike a balance between the limitations of descriptive and theoretical approaches to qualitative research. Compared to descriptive analyses, producing themes requires exploring below the surface-level subject matter of the data. Compared to theoretical analyses, relying on themes presents more compact accounts of the core aspects of the data. However, theme-based analysis encounters limitations when it tilts too far in either direction. On the one hand, it may offer too little interpretation and give a relatively shallow account of the data. On the other hand, it may offer a more elaborate portrayal than is justified for a given data set. While theme-based analyses certainly can lean toward either descriptive or theoretical goals on the continuum, it is essential to maintain a balance that is clearly centered on thematic interpretation.

Content Analysis and Theme-Based Analysis

There have been two opposing perspectives in the literature on content analysis and theme-based analysis. One position, represented by Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman (2017), argues for a broad field of qualitative

content analysis that encompasses both more descriptive and more interpretive approaches. Alternatively, Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (2013) use essentially the same criteria to argue that qualitative content analysis and theme-based analysis are two distinctive approaches. Figure 2.1 spans these two perspectives by recognizing that they form a continuum, while also treating the two end points of this continuum as clearly distinguishable.

BOX 2.1 Quantitative Content Analysis

In addition to the two positions laid out above, there is also a quantitative version of content analysis. The main thing that separates quantitative from qualitative approaches to content analysis is an emphasis on counting codes. To maintain consistency in what is being coded and how codes are used, quantitative content analysis begins with a fixed *codebook* that supplies detailed instructions for applying each code. Thus, according to Neuendorf (2019), the coding system rather than the investigator is the research instrument. In addition, quantitative content analysis "unitizes" the data into sentences or statements related to a single thought, so that codes are applied to pre-determined portions of text. This combination of attaching a definitive set of codes to a body of well-defined text segments is especially useful for comparing the work of separate coders. Specifically, if the coding system drives the analysis, then there should be few differences between coders' in their use of it, and those differences should be essentially random. This leads to a number of different formulas for calculating the degree of agreement between coders, which is formally known as interrater reliability.

The continuum described in this section corresponds to the left half of Figure 2.1, which represents the range of options that lie between purely descriptive versions of content analysis and the more conceptual midpoint of theme-based interpretations. Table 2.1 compares these two alternatives along four dimensions. I have chosen these dimensions (each of which will described in detail below), because there is considerable consensus about the importance of each. Both Graneheim et al. (2017) and Vaismoradi et al. (2013) rely on these four dimensions. Note, however, that the polarity between the two columns in Table 2.1 is an "ideal type," in the sense that any given analysis may not fit all four dimensions perfectly. Instead, there are likely to be *tendencies toward* one end of the continuum or the other.

Descriptive and Interpretive Goals

As described in more detail below, qualitative content analysis pursues descriptive goals through a deductive approach to coding manifest content,

Table 2.1 Distinguishing Qualitative Content Analysis from Theme-Based Content Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis	*Theme-Based Content Analysis*
Descriptive Goals	Interpretive Goals
Deductive Approach to Coding	Inductive Approach to Coding
Manifest Content	Latent Content
Categories as End Product	Themes as End Product

with categories as the end product. In this process, the goal of description drives the application of the other three dimensions. In particular, description implies a degree of accuracy that requires you to avoid imposing your own explanations on the data, which then produces a systematic catalog of the data's contents.

At the other end of the continuum, thematic content analysis pursues interpretive goals through an inductive approach to coding latent content, with themes as the end product. Here, following interpretive approach fits with the remaining three dimensions. In particular, each of the others requires you to use an interpretive mindset to find and label the content, and then to reduce it to a small number of highly insightful summaries.

Deductive and Inductive Approaches to Coding

One of the most frequently mentioned distinctions between more descriptive and more thematically oriented types of content analysis is the difference between deductive and inductive approaches to coding. In the deductive version, codes derived from prior theory or the literature are determined prior to the start of analysis and then applied to the data. This process of moving from theory to data in a "top-down" fashion makes this approach deductive. The essential logic is to begin with a predefined set of codes that can be systematically applied to describe the content of the data. Box 2.2 provides the abstract from an article (Beck, 2020) that used a deductive approach to content analysis, based on pre-existing coding categories.

BOX 2.2 The Use of Preexisting Theory in a Deductive Approach to Coding

Secondary traumatic stress can be the cost for clinicians when caring for persons who have been traumatized. Secondary traumatic stress is a syndrome of symptoms similar to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

AIMS: To conduct a secondary qualitative data analysis of three primary data sets of secondary traumatic stress in nurses.

METHODS: Cross validation was the type of qualitative secondary analysis used to compare qualitative findings across these multiple data sets. In the three primary studies, the data were analyzed for themes. In this secondary qualitative analysis, a different defining unit was chosen. This time, the four categories of PTSD symptoms (intrusions, avoidance, arousal, and negative alterations in cognitions and mood) were used to analyze the data sets using content analysis.

RESULTS: For all three groups of maternal-newborn nurses, the intrusions category was ranked first and the negative cognitions and mood category was ranked second. The remaining two symptom categories were where their rankings differed. The labor and delivery and neonatal intensive care unit nurses ranked arousal symptoms third and avoidance symptoms fourth. For the nurse-midwives, the rankings for these two categories were reversed. The neonatal intensive care unit nurses comprised the one group that did not report any avoidance symptoms.

CONCLUSIONS: This secondary qualitative analysis confirmed the presence of PTSD symptoms that maternal-newborn nurses struggled with as a result of caring for either critically ill infants or women during traumatic births. Hospital preventive strategies and interventions for secondary traumatic stress in nurses are discussed.

This example uses a deductive approach because it uses four predetermined categories of symptoms as the basis for coding the data. In contrast, inductive approaches to coding do not specify any codes at the start of the analysis. Instead, you use analysis of the data to generate the codes, and it is this "bottom up" approach that makes this process inductive. This version of content analysis relies on the emergent development of codes to produce the final codebook, which you then use to develop more interpretive themes.

An obvious limitation of deductive approaches is that you may miss important topics that were not part of the a priori coding scheme. The corresponding limitation of inductive approaches is that you may produce a large number of codes that require considerable effort to sort out. There really is no way out of either of these limitations, so Box 2.3 lays out a third option that builds on the strengths of the two.

BOX 2.3 Hybrid Content Analysis

Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2005) present a third option for deductive and inductive coding that they term hybrid code development. This option is a compromise in which the analysis begins with an initial set of deductively generated codes that are subsequently supplemented and modified through an inductively driven analysis of the data. Another name for this approach is abductive coding (Graneheim et al, 2017), because it moves "back and forth" between deduction and induction; however, I have avoided this terminology because hybrid content analysis only moves from deductive to inductive coding, rather than back and forth.

Manifest and Latent Content

The next dimension for distinguishing between more descriptive and more thematic approaches is the difference between codes that are based on either manifest or latent content. Coding for manifest content involves looking for easily labeled segments of text. This approach usually relies on short text segments, that are assigned names closely corresponding to their content. Note that this kind of descriptive coding overlaps with the more quantitative approach to content analysis because it uses easily recognized codes, which may make it well suited for calculating interrater reliability.

In contrast, coding for latent content seeks to capture the underlying meaning in a passage. This approach usually gives more expressive names to the codes that it generates. By going beyond the immediate words on the page, coding for latent content begins the interpretive process that underlies theme-based analysis.

The chief limitation of coding for manifest content is that you may do little more than recreate the topics and interview questions that guided the original data collection, while in latent content coding there is a risk that your preconceptions will determine what is considered important. As might be expected, there is once again a compromise, which Thorne (2016), as noted above, has called interpretive description. The idea that interpretive description represents a midpoint position, rather than a different approach to content analysis, underscores the continuum represented in Table 2.1.

Categories and Themes as End Points

The fourth and final dimension in Table 2.1 distinguishes between the production of category systems versus themes as the final product of your analysis. In particular, Morse (2008) considers the difference between categories and themes as essential to distinguishing alternative approaches

to qualitative analysis. In more descriptive approaches to content analysis, relying on a prior coding system to label manifest content typically produces a set of well-ordered categories. This ordering often forms a hierarchy in which a few larger categories are divided into subcategories, which may themselves be further subdivided.

In contrast, producing themes corresponds to the fundamental goal of this book, which is to capture a more conceptual interpretation of the underlying data. Without this interpretive orientation, the codebook itself may well to serve as the basis for reporting the results. Instead, in theme-based content analyses, your goal is to provide a coherent, interpretive account of the data that the participants provided.

The main potential limitation of descriptively oriented versions of content analysis is that they may produce complex sorting systems that yield little more than a straightforward summary of the data. The matching limitation for theme-based analysis is the production of an equally complex but highly abstract account of the data. In each case, the best solution is for you to develop a high degree of self-awareness related to the central goals of the approach you are using. For descriptive content analyses, this means choosing a limited set of core categories that carve the data into organized subsets. For theme-based analyses, this means creating a small number of key concepts that combine to offer a more meaningful interpretation of the data.

Objectivity and Subjectivity as a Fifth Distinction

If I were to add another row to Table 2.1, it would compare an emphasis on the researcher's objectivity or subjectivity. An emphasis on objectivity requires minimizing your own influence on the analysis process. The implication is that if anyone else had followed the same procedures, they would have reached the same or very similar conclusions. This approach is often based on a set of post-positivist assumptions, which presume the existence of a fixed external reality. This viewpoint accepts that you as a researcher are inevitably influenced by your own assumptions and perspectives during the research process. So, the pursuit of objectivity is designed to keeps those influences to minimum. As noted in Box 2.1, procedures for achieving these purposes include using a well-defined codebook and obtaining a consensus among multiple coders. Ultimately, the goal of an objective approach to thinking thematically is to ensure the accuracy of your analyses.

In contrast, a subjective approach to theme-based analysis readily accepts that you will bring your own perspectives to the research process. This viewpoint is frequently summarized in the saying that in qualitative research, the researcher is the research instrument. Accepting the role of

subjectivity is often based on a set of constructivist assumptions, which acknowledges your active role in producing the research results and conclusions. Subjectivity is thus not something that could or should be eliminated; instead, it should be understood and used appropriately. Classic procedures for addressing subjectivity include being as reflexive as possible, so that your own beliefs states are well recognized.

These five dimensions (descriptive varus interpretive goals, deductive versus approaches to coding, manifest versus latent content, categories versus themes as end points, and objectivity versus subjectivity) effectively distinguish between more descriptive and more interpretive approaches to content analysis. That still leaves open the comparison of theme-based analyses and analyses that aim at theory construction, which is the subject of the next section.

Grounded Theory and Theme-Based Analysis

Grounded theory is undoubtedly the most well-known and long-standing approaches to generating theory in qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Specifically, Grounded Theory typically aims to produce substantive theories that account for an observable set of empirical phenomena, rather than abstract or "grand" theories. This interpretive orientation creates many similarities with theme-based analysis, as well as a number of important differences, both of which will be the topics of this section. Although this section will treat Grounded Theory as a unified approach to qualitative research, the more than fifty-year history of this tradition has produced several variations (e.g., Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Holton & Walsh, 2016). What they all share, however, is a devotion to generating theory, which is the central concern here.

Similarities Between Grounded Theory and Theme-based Analysis

Among the dimensions in Table 2.1, one of the major elements that Grounded Theory and theme-based analysis have in common is an inductive approach to data analysis. This means that they each work from the bottom up, using the data to reach their interpretive conclusions, instead of starting from a preconceived system. This mutual reliance on developing the underlying meaning in the data is one of the main things that separates both Grounded Theory and theme-based analysis from more deductive approaches to qualitative data analysis. One interesting difference is that Grounded Theory expresses its summaries of the data in terms of conceptual "categories," rather than using the word themes. In practice, however, this is largely a matter of terminology.

Another dimension from Table 2.1 that unites Grounded Theory and theme-based analysis is a stress on latent content. Rather than remaining as close as possible to text as stated, both of these methods use an interpretive approach that gets at the meaning in the data. Of course, when there is a well-stated summary of the underlying content within the data itself, there is considerable value in capturing that interpretive statement in the participant's own words (what Grounded Theory calls an "in vivo" code). Still, the preference is for getting at the deeper significance of the data, rather than being limited to surface content.

A procedural dimension that Grounded Theory shares with Braun & Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis (the subject of Chapter 3) relies on coding as an essential means of producing its interpretive summaries of the data. In both cases, inductive coding of the latent content in the data is a central element in generating interpretive summaries of the data. In contrast, Iterative Thematic Inquiry (the subject of Chapter 4) uses coding at a later stage in the analytic process, where it serves the limited purpose of assessing the previously generated themes.

The main feature that the Iterative Thematic Inquiry (Morgan & Nica, 2020) variant of theme-based analysis shares with Grounded Theory is an emphasis on memoing. In both of these methods, writing analytic memos occurs throughout the research process and plays a central part in the development of themes and conceptual categories. In contrast, Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (2006) only includes memoing as a part of the coding process that occurs later in the overall process, after data collection is completed. Indeed, as the next section argues, this separation of data collection and analysis is one of the crucial features that distinguishes Grounded Theory from Braun and Clarke's version of theme-based analysis.

Unique Features of Grounded Theory

Among the procedural differences between Grounded Theory and most versions of theme-based analysis, one of the most notable is an alternation between data collection and data analysis. In particular, Grounded Theory emphasizes coding the data as it is collected, along with memo writing throughout the analysis process. By comparison, in Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis, coding does not begin until all the data is collected. And, although Iterative Thematic Analysis (Morgan & Nica, 2020) does alternate between data collection and memoing, it relies on an entirely different approach to coding.

A second procedural difference is the explicit coding formats advocated by Grounded Theory. Even though the specifics of the coding

process vary somewhat across different approaches to Grounded Theory, they all begin with more descriptive forms of open coding and proceed to more focused versions of theoretical coding. This evolving set of codes is one of the primary techniques for producing theory in Grounded Theory methods.

A final procedural element that is central to Grounded Theory but seldom found in theme-based analysis is theoretical sampling, in which the composition of the sample evolves with the emerging theoretical insights. So, as the analysis proceeds, the preliminary insights that it produces determine the choice of future data sources. The thing that makes theoretical sampling "theoretical" is its objective of assisting with theory development, during the ongoing analysis process. This is, of course, not possible when analysis does not take place until after data collection has been completed.

In the end, however, it is the goals of Grounded Theory rather than its procedures that create a key difference with theme-based analyses. Most Grounded Theorists would not be satisfied with the production of a set of conceptual categories as a research product, because this would fall short of the goal of generating theory. Instead, they would seek a more tightly integrated account of how those categories are related to each other in a holistic fashion. This kind of integration is possible in theme-based research that generates models (see Chapter 6), but even then, these models are seldom driven by the same emphasis on theory production as the ultimate goal of analysis.

BOX 2.4 Comparing Theme-Based Analyses to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Another approach which occupies the interpretive middle of the continuum from Figure 2.1 is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). Among the analysis methods considered here, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is unique for being firmly rooted in a single a philosophical tradition, phenomenology. As such, it is based on detailed accounts of "lived experience" (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Further, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis typically begins with an intensive analysis of the themes in a single case and then moves on to a comparison of that case to a second case, and so on (Smith & Osborn, 2012. Given the demanding nature of this process, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is usually limited to a small of cases. Thus, although Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is based on themes, it is distinctively different from other forms of theme-based analysis.

Conclusions

Overall, the main point of this chapter is to locate theme-based analysis in an intermediate position between more descriptive and more theoretical approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. It should go without saying that descriptive, thematic, and theoretical goals are all acceptable in qualitative research. If little is known about a topic, then a detailed, in-depth description can be a distinct contribution. If a topic has been reasonably well described, then the development of a set of interpretive themes can provide a deeper understanding. And if a thoroughly integrated understanding of a topic is desired, then a theoretically oriented analysis will be appropriate. Ultimately, it is your research goals that should determine your choice of the approach to analysis.