

The following article has been accepted for publication and should be cited as follows:

Newson, L. (2022). Book Review. Thematic Analysis- A Practical Guide. Authored by Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke. Sage, London, UK. 2022. Reviewed by Dr Lisa Newson. *QMIP Bulletin*, 33. The British Psychological Society. <https://shop.bps.org.uk/qmip-bulletin-issue-33-spring-2022>

Book Review

Thematic Analysis- A Practical Guide

Authored by Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke

Sage, London, UK. 2022. Reviewed by Dr Lisa Newson

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Overview

This book (and the companion website) is a welcome addition to the qualitative textbook field. It offers new insight and reflections to those familiar and experienced with Thematic Analysis (TA). It also offers the novice, new qualitative researcher education on TA, with practical and informative insight on engaging with and conducting TA methodology and analysis.

Braun and Clarke suggest qualitative analysis may be '*messy and organic, complex and contested*'. They use metaphors throughout the writing to help the reader develop their understanding, methodological and analytical application. For example, they explain that qualitative research is an '*adventure and a journey of exploration and discovery*', and the book may be used as a guide to support this adventure. In essence, the book acts as a tool for the job, such as a '*map and a compass*' to support people through their journey by various routes to whichever destination.

Structure

The book is organised into two sections, and you could logically start at Chapter 1 and read to the end in order. However, a strength of this text is that Braun and Clarke have considered the needs of their varied audience and recommend specific chapters depending on the experience and position of the reader. For example, specific chapter recommendations are offered for those new to TA, undergraduate or postgraduate students, those experienced in TA and those who teach and supervise TA research. As such, I highly recommend you refer to page xxxi located in the pre-chapter called '*Scene Setting*' to determine which chapters you might personally find most helpful to start with.

However, regardless of which chapters you read or how experienced you are, each chapter is supported with reflective commentary, tips, alerts, and practice points.

The key concept boxes dotted throughout the chapters flag the summary elements of the text. While the alert boxes offer stand-out teaching points (which I can imagine saying these in class whilst teaching students to help them understand), or for those new to TA, these alerts offer a point to pause and reflect on understanding and discussion. Finally, the practice point boxes guide the reader to consider their own application of TA. As such, you can pick up this textbook and read a chapter at a time, add your own sticky notes and comments and reflect on your learning.

Example "Key concept" (page 52)

Codes are the building blocks of analysis in reflexive TA, capturing meaning relevant to the research question

Example "Alert" (page 18)

Our Assumptions always influence our research- it's not a question of *whether* they influence but *how* they influence.

Example "Practice Point" (page 129)

Start the analysis section with a brief overview of your themes- in the form of a narrative description, simple list, a table or even a thematic map.

Throughout, this text offers opportunities to practice the process of TA and reflect on your understanding and application. In addition, each chapter offers a summary section highlighting the key content and take-home messages.

The book is organised into two parts: "***Section 1: Venturing Forth! Doing reflexive thematic analysis***" and "***Section 2: Going deeper for tip-top reflexive thematic analysis: Theory, interpretation and quality***". In addition, contributions within the book are written by several co-authors (as highlighted in the chapter descriptions below), who offer their insight, experiences and reflections on the application and development of TA. The contributions of these sixteen authors are mentioned in chapters 1-6 & 8 and are also included on the companion website.

Section 1 provides the grounding of reflexive TA. It overviews the foundations and takes the reader through the practical process of the phased analytical approach. This is a great starting point for those new to reflexive TA and is based on the 'how to' elements. Briefly, chapters 1-5 cover the following:

1 Getting ready: What is reflexive TA; preparation and design

Provides a very clear explanation of what is Reflexive TA- specifically the *reflexive* element.

In addition, Rachel Graham (Counselling Psychologist, NHS) offers example extracts showcasing her reflexive journal entries created during her process of conducting TA for research contributing to her Professional Doctoral in Counselling Psychology thesis. This is a lovely example of open and honest journal writing, which has aided her development, process and quality of conducting TA.

2 Example data set and familiarisation: The Process

The chapter takes the reader through the process of familiarisation with a sample dataset.

This chapter also includes samples of work from Matthew Woods (Lecturer in Social Psychology) presenting his creative 'drawing text-image, doodles', which helped him make sense of his data and engage in the familiarisation process. I liked seeing these doodles, which acted as visual tools in his process. This entry highlights how TA analysis can be flexible, messy, and open, but it allows the researcher to become informed and familiar with the data itself.

3 Doing coding: a quick guide, type of coding, software coding, research reflection, evolving codes

A very well written chapter on the process of coding, informative and offers practice points throughout. Covers the dos and don'ts, offers examples and covers questions such as how do I refine codes, when do I stop coding?

This chapter includes researcher reflection commentaries from Ally Gibson (Lecturer in Health Psychology) and Gareth Terry (Senior Lecturer in Rehabilitation Studies) regarding their experience of coding through Qualitative Data Analysis software (QDAS) such as NVivo. They both offer very candid accounts of their experiences (which I appreciated having had similar experiences and reflections!)

4 Developing themes- key concept, development and mapping, revision, reflection, refining themes

Another informative and engaging chapter, covering the purpose of a theme, taking the reader through the process of converting the codes into the generation of initial themes, and the mapping, development and refining process. I particularly like the discussion of themes' visualisation and the consideration of subtheme development.

A super clear photograph to capture the physical process of theme development is provided by Lisa Trainor (Sport and Exercise Psychology Researcher). This visual process of developing themes is a similar approach I have used in the past, and printing out themes, and using post-it notes to create a physical movable board, in my opinion, is a great way to help the researcher make sense of the data and theme development process. However, Braun and Clarke give a range of examples and comprehensively take the reader through this step in the analysis.

This chapter also offers researcher reflections by Elicia Boulton (Counselling Psychologist) and Gina Broom (Qualitative researcher of sexuality and relationships). Elicia and Gina both reflect on the challenges they found with engaging in analysis, wondering if they were 'good enough' or dealing with anxiety and stress due to being

new to TA. They both highlight the value of supervision to help create strategies to cope and grow in their TA development.

5 Thematic Analysis report- writing the analytical story and reflection

This chapter is one of my top chapters of the whole book: *"Arriving home and telling a story about your adventure"*, which takes the reader comprehensively through the process of writing a TA report; it outlines how to present and structure the analytical findings, and offers the reader advice for the discussion and the interpretation of the findings. In addition, this chapter helps the reader review the strengths and limitations of the research. In my opinion, this is an essential read for those new to report writing, especially students. I will be making this a specific recommended read for my Master's students within the qualitative research analysis module.

Louise Davey (Counselling Psychologist) provides an extract showing an example of 'The analytical process' section within the methodological part of her TA report. This extract is a detailed and comprehensive example that would be expected without word limit constraints, which Louise submitted for her doctoral thesis.

Section 2 offers greater insight into the theory and the conceptualisation of reflexive TA, alongside consideration of the process of interpretation. This section helps the reader unpick the process and understanding of codes – themes and analytical development. Finally, there is an excellent chapter devoted to promoting the quality of TA analysis. Chapters 6-9 cover the following:

6 Reflexive TA- theory of

The conceptualisation of Reflexive TA covering theory, ontologies, and epistemologies. Ultimately examples are given throughout to help the reader understand the roots, position and grounding.

Several co-authors support this chapter with insightful researcher reflective commentaries provided by Rachel Graham (Counselling Psychologist, NHS), Matthew Wood (Lecturer in Social Psychology), Lucy Cowie (Clinical Psychologist), Jade Le Grice (Senior Lecturer in Psychology) and Michelle Ong (Assistant Professor of Psychology).

7 Interpretation- understanding and modes of

"Your analysis needs to give the audience a take-home message" with interpretation from the data. This chapter takes the reader through the process. It adds value to the practical process of analysis, offers examples and tips throughout, and encourages the reader to consider levels of interpretation and context of language, representation, and ethics.

8 Understanding- Reflexive TA vs other methodological approaches (including TA)

This chapter helps the reader to understand the similarities and differences of various qualitative methodologies. It considers variations in procedures, such as coding processes and differences in interpretation. This chapter also considers the value of other approaches.

Included within this chapter, Matt Sillars (Lecturer in Psychology, Photography and Culture Studies) provides a researcher reflection, offering an example of using TA with visual data. Here a photo of Inverness Castle illustrates the application of TA analysis with visual data. In addition, Gareth Terry (Senior Lecturer in Rehabilitation Studies) offers his insight on the value of combining Reflexive –TA with discourse analysis.

9 Quality- Strengths and common problems, quality checklist, the role of reflexivity

My second recommended section is Chapter 9, "*Getting your own house in order*". This chapter focuses on the understanding and application of quality in TA analysis. This is a refreshing addition to the qualitative textbook literature. So often quality is skimmed over or within published qualitative articles is limited in consideration by the authors. This chapter provides an opportunity for the reader to explore the strengths and weaknesses of reflexive TA. It showcases good practice examples, flags issues with analytical processes and offers a practical checklist. The chapter offers the novice TA researcher steps to consider and provides the more experienced researcher with alerts for attention for later publication or review of qualitative articles.

Some key features

This book is well written, and each chapter offers the reader a practical account. It is a text-heavy book – it is a jam-packed informative text, though, with the small font size, I recommend that you read it in chunks.

In addition to the core textbook, a **companion website** is available both for students and a separate area for instructors. This website contains more practice resources, including datasets, teaching resources and learning activities. The companion website provides more examples, more guidance and more opportunity to learn and reflect (it possible deserves a review all of its own!). The teaching resources include an additional chapter, '*Teaching, supervising and examining for quality TA*' – a very worthy read for academics both experienced and new to teaching TA. A range of materials, such as PowerPoint presentations and activities, are available specifically for targeted student groups, including undergraduate, postgraduate and specialist TA teaching and learning resources. The companion website is supported by contributions from additional authors, including reflexive researcher entries with annotated commentary on their TA research from Susy Anderson (Trainee Counselling Psychologist), Melanie Beres (Associate Professor in Sociology) and Panteá Farvid (Assistant Professor of Applied Psychology).

Moreover, Nikki Hayfield (Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology) and Gareth Terry (Senior Lecturer in Rehabilitation Studies) reflect on their position as researchers in the reflexive TA process. The website also offers practice guides for those new to TA and those experienced to evaluate and review published research that has used TA- this is a great tool to help students who need to read and take on board other's research, and they can also use this to help consider how to write a quality report. It is also advantageous to those who peer-review TA journal

articles and submit their research for publication. Finally, this website signposts the reader to additional resources.

This is an invaluable text and set of resources for those new and starting out in qualitative research, specifically reflexive TA. This book will become a core text on undergraduate and postgraduate taught degrees, which teach qualitative research. It offers tangible, informative and accessible information, and alongside has a '*how to*' focus, encouraging the reader to engage in activities and real datasets to try the approaches and learn from doing. I found this text informative, and it has helped me to re-consider my reflexive processes; and as someone who is experienced in qualitative methodology, who teaches advanced qualitative research methods to postgraduate master's students, supervises undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD students, as well as conducting qualitative research myself, this book will become part of my core references for TA and qualitative research. I will utilise the recommended resources to update my teaching practices and recommend this to my colleagues within psychology and beyond.

Some final thoughts

This book could be helpful for those starting on their qualitative journey as student researchers. It would also be an ideal guide for those who, like myself, are always looking for new ideas and clear guidance for improving and updating their research. In my opinion, this will become a core text in qualitative research methods. It updates the qualitative research methods field and offers a clear description of Reflexive TA. As a '*how to*' book, it has something for everyone.

References

Braun, V., Clarke, V., (Eds.). (2022). *Thematic Analysis. A Practical Guide*. Sage, London, UK.