Experiencing thematic analysis to answer a specified research question

Alisdair Jones, University of Exeter and Melanie Nind, University of Southampton

We each facilitate a thematic analysis workshop with second year social science undergraduates. We do this in different disciplines in different universities and in in different ways. But our reasoning is very similar, showing the commonality in what we do and why. And essentially our core aims are the same – we want our students to 'get it' - to get what analysing qualitative data in this thematic way is about, what it looks and feels like, what role the research question plays, and the importance of the human social researcher in the process. We do this through facilitating structured and hands-on data analysis practice.

Alasdair: For this 2-hour workshop for approximately 50 human geography students I use real interview data accessed from the dedicated Timescapes project teaching data set (Weller, Davidson, Edwards, & Jamieson 2019). The students work in small groups (of typically 3-4 students) to code a 4-page excerpt from an interview transcript, for which background information for the study from which the interview was derived (as well as demographic information about the interviewee) is provided. This additional information does the important work of contextualising the transcript for the students, bringing them closer to the experience of independent study and mitigating the pitfall of abstracted methods training. In addition, students are given a pre-specified research question – *How do mothers of primary-school-aged children in the UK experience motherhood?* – which they use to guide their analysis of the interview excerpt. This research question provides an important lens through which students can start to identify, select and organise themes. As preparation for the workshop, students are required to read Jennifer Attride-Stirling's (2001) *Thematic Networks* article as they will be using her coding approach (which I summarise in the workshop plenary) to code the interview excerpt.

I provide the groups with a set of physical handouts– comprising the interview excerpt (and background information), a blank codebook and instructions for the workshop activities. A pre-selected interview excerpt is provided to students so that they are coding the same data (in

relation to a predefined research question), which aids learning in the plenary discussions which facilitate collective sensemaking. I explain the task to the students, emphasising the significance of the research question provided as a guiding framework for their coding. I also recap a discussion of analytical deduction and induction from that week's lecture (to help reinforce the learning and reassure students about the parameters of the exercise), bringing that more abstract discussion to bear on the task at hand. I allow time for students to do multiple readings of the excerpt (first for a broader sense of it, then more inductively [looking for prominent themes in the data], and then more deductively [looking for themes guided by the research question and informed by their theoretical understandings]). I use examples from a study of my own, summarising the findings of different papers derived from the same data, to illustrate how thematic analysis can comprise both induction and deduction.

While coding their data, I encourage the students to iterate – to use paper, pen and highlighters to revise, refine and rehash their codes as they familiarise themselves with the data and develop their analysis. This is something the members of the teaching team (two human geography colleagues and I) focus on as we circle between the groups, looking to seed through dialogue the light-bulb moments where students identify a code or conceptualise a higher-order theme that neatly captures some of their codes while also answering the research question. This process can itself be seen as inductive – using the students' emerging ideas to think with them about how these can be labelled (as codes) and brought together (as themes). Students often start with 'responsibility' as code – it's the seventh word in the interview transcript concerned with experiences of motherhood – which starts a discussion of the different sorts of responsibility (financial, social, educational…) they've spotted in the text and of how responsibility can be conceptualised as a theme. The satisfaction students feel as they disaggregate the text and reassemble it as themes that address the research question is palpable, and evidenced by the contributions students make to the following plenary discussion of themes they have identified. In that closing plenary, among other things we reflect on the iterative nature of coding (and on how initial manual coding of data helps us understand and visualise coding as an iterative process), on the value of reading the excerpt multiple times, and on the role of reflexivity in our thematic analysis practice (noting, for instance, how students would often reflect on their own experiences as they grappled with the data).

Melanie: For a 3-hour workshop for approximately 50 education students, I use pictures of shoes instead of interview transcripts. For their assignment they will analyse their own interview data but first I want them to play with the idea and practice of labelling, clustering, and developing themes. As their English language abilities vary enormously, visual data to work with is freeing. I got the idea of practising with something playful without serious or ethical implications from observing a session for the video-stimulated recall, reflection and dialogue part of the NCRM Pedagogy of Methodological Learning study (Nind, Kilburn & Wiles, 2015). I got the idea of shoes from someone who used her collection of real shoes! For me, the pictures of shoes are still fun, less rich in texture and smell, but still evocative and easier to manage.

We work in small groups around large tables on the initial 3 phases from Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes. They enjoy sorting through the images and instinctively begin placing some with others (men's shoes/women's shoes, smart shoes/casual shoes); here they are finding that grouping data comes naturally. I prompt them to write descriptive labels (tag-like codes) on sticky notes to attach to the pictures – bringing a verbal process to what the eye sees (men's/ women's/ smart/ casual). I circulate round the groups, interested in what they find. Some are drawn to the materiality of the shoes and have labels of leather/canvas/satin. I have included many everyday shoes, but some are in in the mix to trigger more thought (hiking boots, ballet shoes, wedding shoes, and a pair of odd shoes). What to call these shoes is easy but how to group them is not. I give them bigger sticky notes on which to write their initial themes as they move into formalising their groupings.

Part way through the buzz of the activity I pause all the groups to help them to come together to (metaphorically) hover above themselves and their tables and see that they have been analysing data, using codes and initial themes. I ease them towards appreciating that they did not have *a priori* codes, but they did have social and cultural knowledge of the phenomenon of shoes and the human capacity to put this to use. I point out that there were higher rates of agreement on some tables than others! We share in the pleasure of the awareness that they have been working as social researchers. I then inject a huge BUT to spark the lightbulb moment that they have been working without a research question (they have engaged previously in work on what makes a good research question). I give them a research question –

What is the function of shoes? – and they return to work on re-labelling and theming their shoes.

At the end we have the deliberative plenary discussion about the patterns that recurred in the data, the various coding options that were possible, and the ones of these that were most useful. We reflect on how they became increasingly sensitised to looking for patterns that were meaningful and how group dialogue helped or challenged them to think differently. We reflect on how they could have begun with a set of codes rather than devise them for themselves in interaction with the data. I remind them that the next stages in thematic analysis are reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming them; and producing the report of the process and findings.

Running the workshop this way takes some of the fear out of idea of doing data analysis. The experience, guided by prompts to reflect, sparks insights into the process and primarily that making sense of data is inherently pleasing. They take this with them into analysing their interview data the next week.

As these examples attest, thematic analysis is a technique that can be applied to many forms of data. It is also, however, a technique that students benefit from learning about in relation to quite specific data sets and guided (at least some of the time!) by specified research questions. In the examples, there are shared lightbulb moments – when students start to see the value of a research question as a guide for their analysis – and more dispersed ones, as, often through dialogue and (re)writing on paper or sticky notes, students distil, conceptualise or organise codes and themes. There are others still when abstract terms like ‘induction’, ‘deduction’ and ‘reflexivity’ take on a more embodied meaning – as students see how their own positionings, assumptions and experiences inform their analysis. The two kinds of data offer the familiarity of an everyday object or life experience together with the opportunity to step back from the familiar to identify patterns, explore themes and become analytical. And they get it that making meaning this way is one of the more satisfying things that social researchers do.

References

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