

Reflexive thematic analysis and men's embodiment following injury or illness: A worked example

Gareth Terry¹  | Nikki Hayfield²

¹School of Psychology, Massey University/ Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa, Auckland, New Zealand

²Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

Correspondence

Gareth Terry, School of Psychology, Massey University/Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa, Auckland, New Zealand.
Email: g.terry@massey.ac.nz

Abstract

Reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA) originated within psychology and the social sciences and has become an increasingly popular qualitative analytic method across a range of disciplines. In this article, we offer a brief methodological guide for researchers hoping to use the method, suitable for beginners through to those experienced in qualitative research. Reflexive TA can be used to analyze data generated via a range of methods. Reflexive TA is highly flexible, and we outline the choices that researchers need to address when conducting their research. These choices relate to the theoretical approach (realist through to relativist/experiential to critical), their orientation to analyzing the data (inductive to deductive), and the depth in which they analyze their dataset (semantic to latent). We offer an accessible but comprehensive discussion of the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis and how best to produce a rigorous analysis. Starting with familiarization of the dataset as a foundation for analysis, data are then coded, before using these codes to generate initial themes. These early themes are then reviewed and developed, before the researcher moves to defining and naming them. The final phase of analysis is the writing up of the research, at which point final changes may still be made to the results. Written from the basis of our experience of using, teaching, and training reflexive thematic analysis within psychology and the social sciences, we see it as useful for those working across a range of disciplines.

KEYWORDS

bodies, disability, men's health, qualitative research, reflexive thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Thematic analysis (TA) is a broad umbrella term for methods that support the analysis of qualitative data, producing themes as the analytic output, as a part of a qualitative research project. Reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA) is one version of TA, with an orientation to interpretative work that supports the construction

of meaning-based patterns from data.^{1,2} Key features of reflexive TA include an emphasis on increasing engagement with a dataset through the scaffolding provided by a six-phase process, an orientation to the researcher's subjectivity as a resource rather than a problem for analysis, and flexibility—enabling use of the method across a broad range of projects, data sources, and theoretical frameworks. Braun and Clarke,¹ drawing on Kidder and Fine,³ refer to these

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characteristics as a Big Q orientation—where qualitative solutions and philosophy are applied to qualitative research. They compare this with small q research, which while broadly qualitative is fundamentally informed by (post)positivist (and quantitative) sensibilities, with concerns about mitigating the “influence” of the researcher on findings, and claims to objective or reliable analyses that access some degree of truth about the world and people's experiences.³

Various versions of “thematic analysis” exist, sharing some elements of practice with reflexive TA, but also some important differences. These differences led Braun and her colleagues⁴ to differentiate between three “schools” of TA: coding reliability forms of TA, codebook approaches (including framework analysis (Ref. [5], see also this issue) and template analysis⁶), and the reflexive approach they (and we) advocate. This differentiation helps reduce the answerability of one school to another, especially in the context of reviewer, editor, or examiner expectations or misunderstandings.^{7,8} For instance, expectations of statistical agreement are located within coding reliability forms but are not essential to other schools, and the use of a codebook to both coding reliability and codebook approaches, but not to reflexive TA. Choosing to do reflexive thematic analysis from among various options should be a consequence of alignment with a researcher's methodological values and the benefits of the practices associated with the method, which we will outline further in this article.

It may be that some view reflexive TA as attached to particular kinds of research—whether this be “phenomenological,” or “constructivist,” or even “descriptive.”⁹ However, reflexive TA can be applied across a huge range of theoretical and methodological possibilities and is explicitly designed to handle this variation. We have seen and supported the successful use of reflexive TA in projects closer to the postpositivist end of the theoretical spectrum, all the way to poststructuralist research. We have also supported and been involved in projects using reflexive TA that has been done individually and with teams. In contrast to some forms of TA (e.g., coding reliability), reflexive TA builds on the ways that different members contribute to interpretation of the data, rather than confirming agreement between coders (including via inter-coder reliability scores) in an attempt to access objective truth about the data.

Reflexivity is a key tenant of reflexive TA, where researcher subjectivity is valued rather than it being seen as a problematic bias to be treated with suspicion. There are both classic texts and a growing body of contemporary literature focused on reflexivity. Briefly, reflexivity begins with researchers considering their positionality as a starting point. Positionality is not simply a navel-gazing exercise; instead, it allows the researcher to identify the ways their biographies interact with those of their participants. In other words, are they an insider or an outsider to the group they are doing research with¹⁰ and what are the implications of this? Positionality becomes reflexivity when researchers can develop insights into how they shape the entire research process—from conception to design, data generation, and critically, data analysis and reporting. Within most forms of qualitative research, this is not to eliminate “bias” but rather orients to an appreciation of the active involvement of the researcher

BOX 1 Example project: Men's embodiment following injury or illness.

The worked example used in this article comes from a study related to men's accounting for their experiences of chronic physical impairments caused by injury or illness. Men have been framed as a subject of public concern with regards to their health in the last three decades.¹² This is often understood through a deficit lens, where men are seen to be uncaring or uninvested in their health—mental or physical.^{13,14} This project sought to explore social resources men drew upon to make sense of their changing relationship to their bodies following an acquired impairment. Fifteen participants who had experienced some form of intensive physical rehabilitation were interviewed for between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Topics they covered included changes to their bodies, the intersections with masculine identities, the ways they understood their relationships, work, and lives, and how notions or labels of disability applied to them. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using reflexive TA. Familiarization notes, codes, and thematic construction processes used in this article are drawn from the materials associated with the project, with extracts used illustratively to give pointers for analysis. Ethical approval for this project was received from Auckland University of Technology. This project was led by Gareth Terry, an ostensibly abled man with a chronic health condition that is currently managed with medication. He is an insider to some of the experiences of participants, as a cis, Pākehā (white New Zealander), man who has engaged extensively with the health system as a patient and through changes to his embodiment. He is an outsider to the men's experiences as he has not experienced the need for extensive and/or chronic rehabilitative care, although he has experienced acute care in the form of physiotherapy. He sought to develop this project to better understand the ways men (and the masculinities they perform) shape their practices and those of healthcare practitioners who care for them. As an experienced researcher in men's health, this project draws on his knowledge of masculinities theory, rehabilitation studies, and critical disability studies.

in research, as both productive and meaningful—as Braun and Clarke argue, the “engine” of analysis¹ (see Box 1 for Gareth's reflexivity statement regarding the project used for the worked example). In the context of a team, this kind of reflexive practice ensures that insights into the data by different team members are understood as situated and coming from a particular context and subjectivity, which all actively contribute to insights into and interpretation of the data. In this way, reflexivity is generative, rather than constraining certain kinds of insights through agreement. We would recommend

Trainor and Bundon's excellent article as a full worked example of reflexive practice in reflexive TA.¹¹

In this article, we will explore how reflexive thematic analysis can be applied to qualitative research, using a worked example. We will introduce the parameters of the project, touch on some of the decision-making and reflexive practices a researcher needs to engage with, and detail the phases of reflexive TA and how they can support analysis. Examples used in each of the phases will draw on materials and resources used in the original project (see **Box 1**). This article is not intended to be an exhaustive explication of reflexive TA, but rather a brief introduction. However, we will point the reader to various supportive resources associated with this particular method where appropriate.

THEORY AND REFLEXIVE TA

A defining feature of reflexive TA is its theoretical flexibility.^{1,2} This contrasts with some other forms of qualitative analysis where theory comes as part of a package and is therefore built in, dictating the flow and decision making in very prescribed ways and specific to one kind of theoretical orientation.¹² The flexibility of reflexive TA means that those engaging with it make choices about the ontological and epistemological approach they take, which makes it especially important to explicate the theoretical foundations of your analysis. Although reflexive TA began as a method developed by critical constructionist researchers,⁹ it was designed to be accessible and applicable to more than just this group. This does not mean it is atheoretical though.

Broadly speaking, researchers within the social sciences tend to conceptualize methodological theory on a continuum. This continuum could be said to have an empiricist/realist approach at one end (where an observable reality is broadly understood to exist and be discoverable), through to a constructionist/relativist stance at the other (where there are understood to be multiple socially constructed realities and where knowledge is continually produced and co-produced in relation to these realities). In between these two sits critical realism, where material realities are understood to be co-constituted within a socially complex wider world—for those used to the philosophical language: At the ontological level, there is assumed to be a tangible reality that exists irrespective of our ability to access it, and at the epistemological level, the sociocultural environment (including language) mediates our experience of this reality and ability to produce knowledge about it.^{1,13}

The example data for this paper were analyzed using a form of critical realism—we note that there are multiple expressions of critical realist theory and practice.¹⁴ This theoretical lens is particularly suited for research on bodies where a researcher is keen to acknowledge the materiality of a particular condition (for instance, changes to the body and its capabilities), while also recognizing a person's lived realities as embedded within a wider social context that mediates meaning.¹⁵ Within this framing, changes to ability can often be constructed as tragic or at risk of producing a lack of fit with

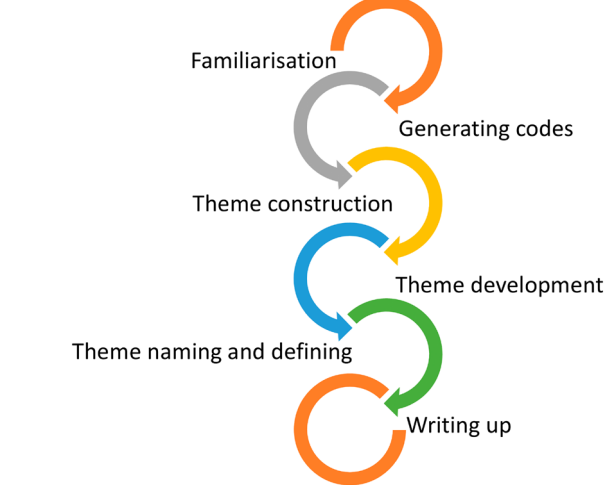


FIGURE 1 Phases of reflexive TA.

a world designed for abled people.¹⁶ In other words, the body and the social are seen to be co-constitutive, entangled with each other, producing certain kinds of experiences and ways of making sense of these. Given the flexibility of TA, this would mean that the theoretical framing of critical realism (and the philosophical underpinnings) is then applied to the dataset as an analytic lens. We draw attention to this precisely because ontological and epistemological concerns are important within reflexive TA, and the theoretical approach will inform the coding, the themes generated, and the best way to tell the story of the dataset.

PHASES OF TA

In this section, we discuss the phases of reflexive TA (see **Figure 1**), using the worked example to illustrate the kinds of processes that can be used to guide your analysis. The phases act as a scaffolding, rather than a set of rules or steps, ultimately enabling increasing engagement with your dataset(s). These phases are iterative (building on one another), recursive (not always linear), and have different analytic “mindsets,” each deepening understanding of your data. Although there is a considerable flexibility in terms of actual processes and practicalities within the scaffolding provided, there are some key principles that are tied to the values of reflexive TA, and analytic orientations in each phase that we view as core to the practices involved in it.

Familiarization

Analytic mindset: Curiosity and casual engagement

We know from our own extensive experience of supporting reflexive TA projects that familiarization is an often neglected but fundamental starting point for your analysis. We have found that both students, and even some more experienced researchers, tend to

gloss over the value of becoming deeply familiar with their data before starting to code. Coding can feel more tangible and like “real” analytic work—so we understand this. However, we would emphasize that familiarization is the key that underlies how your coding can reach beyond superficial readings of data and become produced as a byproduct of deep understanding from immersion in the data. Gareth often uses the analogy of snorkeling on the Great Barrier Reef to highlight the value of familiarization. If you're anything like him, deep water feels intimidating, and sometimes scary—certainly overwhelming when it doesn't feel like you have a connection to the security of the familiar and known. This can be a lot like looking at a big pile of transcripts (or survey responses), where the sheer volume of the material can feel like intimidating waves in deep water. But the purpose of snorkeling (and familiarization) is just to look, to put your head beneath the surface of the water a bit, to be curious and thoughtful without expecting too much (or too little).

Although some versions of thematic analysis (e.g., template analysis¹⁷) use this phase to produce something close to themes, in reflexive TA, the output of this phase in reflexive TA is casual notes about the data (see [Box 2](#)). These notes and the engagement that produces them are your first (relaxed) interactions. If you generated the data (and transcribed them if they include audio data such as in interviews), it is more than likely you will already have some familiarity with it. However, it is good practice to engage with data as texts and read through them at least a couple more times, taking notes as you go. We recommend not doing this on the data themselves, as this can constrain your thinking to margins—it is worth having a blank page that you can write or type your thoughts about what seems to be happening in the data, your responses to it—including how you feel about its content.

Generating codes

Analytic mindset: Systematic and focused labeling

Many of those with a background in qualitative research will have some awareness of the idea of coding because many different analytic methods include some form of this process (e.g., different versions of grounded theory,¹⁸ various approaches to content analysis,¹⁹ and interpretative phenomenological analysis²⁰). If familiarization was akin to putting your head beneath the surface of the waters to have a look around, then coding can be considered a deeper dive to explore the detail of the coral and the fish swimming in the ocean of data. This phase requires the researcher to be more systematic and arguably more analytic mindset than the first phase—it can be helpful to think of coding as offering an opportunity to engage with the data at this deeper level and ensuring that you are consistent and rigorous in your approach. Your research question is fundamental to good coding. Irrespective of whether you are doing theory-driven or data-driven analysis (or a mixture of both), your research question is the first and primary lens to apply to your analysis. We like to keep our research question on a sticky note—either on the transcript

BOX 2 Familiarization notes example.

Identifies the capabilities that are important to him. Instead of working on weaknesses, works on strengths and what's important.

Didn't want to engage with the “meaningless” tasks of rehab.

When viewing injury in the flush of youth, it can often be diffused with tragedy, but there are also opportunities and capabilities that might not be available as a person ages.

Didn't want to get stuck wasting his younger years grieving for the loss.

Lots of distance between what he was capable of then and what he is now.

Did a lot of work in the early period after the injury. Described a disconnect between physios and himself—he thought he was capable of more. They only wanted to give him “basic functionality.”

Idea of being “past the point of rehabilitation” once you can do transfers etc. Decision making around this—how much of this should remain the patient's call—likely a funding decision.

Very quickly became seen as a prospect for wheelchair sports—especially wheelchair rugby.

Impacted by aging was able to shift (wheelchair to powerchair). Also shifted to the more “sedate” sport of archery and has excelled there as well.

page, we are working on, or on the corner of our computer screen—see [Box 3](#) for an example of coding.

In recent years, there has been considerable discussion of what coding means. The point is to take a deep dive, break the data down, and start to make sense of them. The process involves closely reading sections of data and assigning labels (or codes) to these chunks of text. This can be done either by orienting to the data and letting the research question be the primary guide (data-driven or inductive) or be led more by theory (theory-driven or deductive). Therefore, the theoretical framing adds a second lens to that of the research question to help make sense of the dataset (e.g., using notions of men's embodiment). However, inductive coding will very rarely be absent of some theoretical input. Instead, as you analyze the data, the relevance of theory as a “traveling companion” means that in deductive coding you are always answerable to that lens in deciding what is relevant and important for your analysis. This can be at the level of your ontological and epistemological lens (what is real? how does the body intersect with the social in these data?) and could also involve a particular theoretical framework that enable data to be understood and coded in particular ways (e.g., critical studies of men and masculinity).

BOX 3 Coding example.

P1: the fatigue would be one of the biggest things I think (pause) I could just (pause) yeah you just gets so tired (pause) that fatigue would be the biggest thing I don't know how to deal with it (inbreath) [GT: yeah] because (pause) it's not really getting any better [GT: mmn] (pause, inbreath) *people bring you problems* at your tiredness and want to get the quicker solution **do this** you know [GT: yeah yeah yeah] I work (pause) a lot in trust (inbreath) and I've lost a lot of trust in myself, so [GT: yes] (inbreath) maybe that's why trust becomes so important [...]

GT: are you are you grateful that you have stuck it through?

P1: yeah I am now [GT: yep] yep

GT: and how long did it take you to get to that?

P1: (inbreath outbreath) six and a half seven years [GT: yeah] (inbreath) when you can start seeing some progress like for (pause) two or three years there was just nothing [GT: yep] (inbreath) it's called a plateau it's a bloody desert

Fatigue as persistent and debilitating
 Capability undermined
 Self-management not effective
 Currency of trust
 Trust becomes valuable
 Sense of standing still
 Uphill battle for progress

You also need to think about the depth of your coding. Semantic codes keep close to participants' meanings, like observing a beautiful fish on a coral reef and describing its characteristics, such as color and shape. Latent codes move beyond the most obvious characteristics and might refer to ideas such as the genus and subtype of the fish, and its relationship to the reef and other ecologies—ideas that come from existing theory and knowledge. Early rounds of coding may result in a list of mainly semantic codes, particularly for those relatively new to research—which is fine. An example of a semantic code in **Box 3** is *fatigue as persistent and debilitating*. Semantic codes orientate to participants' words and should mirror their meanings (without replicating them precisely). Semantic codes often need no further explanation—it is clear how this code captures men talking about their experiences of fatigue in a particular way. It may be that latent codes become easier to produce as you continue to code and as you become more experienced. A latent code is typically informed by concepts or ideas from the researcher's wider knowledge, such as *affective reciprocity* (or the notion that people share their joys and heartbreaks with those around them—especially their clinicians—and expect the same in return). It moves beyond rephrasing the text, and instead, a deeper level of interpretation is required. It may be that those with similar knowledge of literature and theory could easily understand the code, but others might need to develop their understanding of affect theory to benefit.

Code labels offering real insight are useful resources and become particularly necessary during the next phase when you will use your codes without the data they were generated from. In the men's data, the code name “*uphill battle for progress*” in **Box 3** succinctly sums up the struggle associated with injury or illness using an evocative metaphor. Code labels may not always be this satisfactory! It can be challenging to generate labels that are short enough to be workable, while ensuring that they contain the detail of your interpretations. Initially, for every chunk of data, you will produce a new code. We recommend coding all the data rather than making what could be a risky decision that parts are not relevant to the research question

(although in some cases, it might become apparent that parts of the dataset really are irrelevant to your research question, for example, when a participant digresses so far from the topic that their talk becomes entirely unrelated). We have both experienced situations where relevance evolves in various ways as the analysis continues. As you progress, you will need to check whether you can reuse existing codes to capture ideas that continue to recur in the data, as well as develop new codes. It is a good idea to be as focused as possible and try to stay consistently engaged as you work through coding your entire dataset.

Constructing initial themes

Analytic mindset: Playful, thoughtful exploration

The mantra that themes do *not* emerge from data is now well rehearsed.^{1,2} Themes in reflexive TA are meaning-based patterns produced through active engagement with the codes that were generated in the earlier phase. We note that for novice researchers, there may be a lack of clarity around the difference between a code and a theme. Broadly speaking, codes are generated early in your analytic processes and are nuggets of interest. Themes tend to be created by clustering together multiple codes that function as the building blocks of the theme to assist the researcher in developing overall patterns of meaning. We elaborate on the process of moving from codes to themes in the remainder of this section, but for now, it may help to have in mind that codes tend to be based on a single idea, whereas themes are made up of multiple ideas.

You should have a variety of codes that tap into the different facets of the dataset, and these now act as resources from which to construct some *initial* themes. While this can seem daunting, themes in this phase should be seen as prototypes not end-products. Your initial themes should be seen as possibilities for telling the story of your dataset and therefore as a way for you to test out connections

and relationships between codes and groups of codes. On this basis, it can be quite common to construct more themes than you will need to tell the story of your dataset—with the expectation that *final* themes will involve a process of collapsing some, discarding others, and constructing whole new themes out of what remains. This is all part of the process! Because you are exploring possibilities, landing on something and fully investing in it too early can be risky. Allow yourself the mental flexibility to see these constructs as playfully testing out ideas and exploring connections, giving you new insights about your dataset.

The process of constructing themes should also be fun rather than onerous. Some people might do this process using an excel spreadsheet or a table of some kind; others use physical sticky notes with a code dedicated to each note (Gareth uses the online platform Miro to do this digitally). However it is done, the process should enable clustering of codes around significant ideas that are relevant to the research question. Initially, these clusters will be loose and small, where connections are tested out, thought through, and then added to. As this happens, the idea supporting each cluster will shift and adjust. The longer the process goes on, the fewer small clusters will exist, as ones that relate to each other are merged into something larger and more meaningful. These merges (and potential splits) are products of the analyst's interpretation—decisions made at the intersection of the data, the research question, and the researcher's interpretation. Clusters can also be formed around a particularly strong code as the starting point—this is referred to as promotion. However, what is more typical is linking together codes where the underlying concept that holds a cluster together develops based on the analyst's own sense-making.

Themes in reflexive TA are held together by a central organizing concept that captures the meaningfulness of the theme. The aim is to avoid broadly clustering around a topic or category irrespective of how the different data specifically relate to one another—these are insufficient as themes.¹ In the men's embodiment project, an example of the differences between these might be in a cluster that forms around the topic of *fatigue*. Although it could capture a vast array of codes, there would not necessarily be anything truly meaningful holding them together. By contrast, *fatigue disrupts the performance of abled masculinity*, tells us something about the fatigue and its effects, and allows quite diverse codes to be brought together. You might also be able to identify the ways that a critical realist theoretical position has shaped this initial theme through the material of the body (fatigue) intersecting with the social (masculinity and ability as a set of performances). However, this new cluster might not tell a sufficient story about the data as it stands—it might not capture many codes, or it might not contribute strongly enough to the developing story of the analysis (i.e., fatigue might only be a small part of these men's experiences). Therefore, it might need to be brought together with other clusters that speak to physical changes and masculinity. A new prototype theme might cluster around a new central organizing concept: *meanings of masculinity change with shifting*

BOX 4 “It's just like being a regular person but being a lot more aware”: Beyond pragmatic embodiment.

All participants emphasized that prior to their injury or illness, they had viewed their bodies in a fairly taken-for-granted and functional fashion, tied to their roles as workers, partners, and parents (pragmatic embodiment⁸). Irrespective of their impairment(s), the men spoke of a significant transition from one embodied experience to another after their health event. Initially, this was described in terms of moving from health to ill-health, threaded through with ideas of biographical disruption—or the notion that their imagined futures looked much different from what they had till this point. The implications of this transition for their understanding of themselves and their bodies were often profound, described as needing time to resolve and integrate psychologically. At a certain point, the men repeatedly identified another transition, where a new definition of health, irrespective of their earlier bodies and capabilities, began to take hold. This new definition gave them a sense that they understood their bodies—past and present—in ways that others (including previous selves) did not. This was often framed as a special ability or insight that others without their experience did not have access to.

capabilities. Although this might be getting very close to a final theme, this is still a prototype. It needs to be placed alongside other prototypes to assess the value that the combined themes have in telling the best possible story of your dataset (something to address in the next phase).

If you are working with others, this process could also involve you each generating your particular story of the data and then discussing similarities and differences together. Themes produced by various people could then be discussed for their different merits, or capacity for emphasizing one idea over another. The notion of consensus is not the driving feature of working in teams in reflexive TA, so if your themes are all entirely different, do not despair—what is important is the meaning-making process and the increased engagement you have by discussing one another's interpretations of the codes.

Theme review and development

Analytic mindset: Clarifying, questioning, developing

It can be easy to assume at this point that because you have some themes, your analysis is done. However, reviewing them serves as a quality check at the very minimum but can also lead to further development that improves the final analysis. To engage

with this phase, it may first be useful to revisit your dataset and your coded data, to clarify that your themes map well onto the resources from which they were developed. You might want to check that you have not either moved too far away from the data or selected only what was of most of interest to you (perhaps using your reflexivity to ensure that there has not inadvertently been any “cherry-picking”). When you write up, you will use data extracts to evidence the claims that you are making about your analysis. Therefore, checking that you can see the evidence of your thematic ideas in your dataset and coded data are sensible. If you can clearly see that themes still map back to the resources from which they were developed, then you are in a strong position to proceed.

It is also a good idea to review your themes, both as individual entities and as a set, to ensure that they are the best they can be. We have found the creation of theme documents really helpful here. These contain the current central organizing concept for the theme, sometimes a theme definition (see below), and data extracts to evidence the claims you are making about the data in preparation for writing up. Various macros (e.g., <https://osf.io/m3kz8/>) and Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS; e.g., NVivo) can come into their own here, automating some of the process of bringing coded data across from one document to another. For instance, the macro above converts *Microsoft Word* comments into an *Excel* spreadsheet, which can then be easily sorted into individual columns. Having all these resources within documents are useful for a number of reasons. They can enable you to ask whether you have moved beyond simply organizing the data to having an analytic hook that enables you to say something more than simply summary (as discussed above in the section on constructing initial themes). They might also be helpful for you to see how a little more development is needed to get to telling your analytic story or stories. Last, having these shared documents can act as an audit trail of sorts, which is extremely helpful for team-based analysis, as team members are able to access the same information to make shared decisions from.

As you engage in the reviewing and developing phase, it can be useful to have your research question in mind. It is possible that you might have strayed away from the focus of your research, so you might need to refocus or adapt your research question (if the data justify it). It might also be helpful to remember that your aim is to tell an overall story of the data and not to faithfully report every little thing for every single participant (or source). This is more difficult than it sounds. It is not uncommon to feel reluctant to let go of wanting to report all the detail or specific ideas that particularly resonate with you but that seldom occur or are not relevant to the overall patterns. This brings us to our final point around remembering that this is *reflexive* TA, and your reflexivity is an important tool during the review and development phase. This should be your reading of the data, an interpretation that is informed by your theoretical lens, your understanding of the area you are researching, and the connections you have made between various aspects of the dataset.

Naming and defining themes

Analytic mindset: Creative crystallization

Having reached the last two phases, you have drawn together a number of resources developed through increasing engagement with your dataset. The task in this phase relies on your drawing on these materials and distilling them into titles and definitions for your themes. This is something worth spending time on, as it can be essential to telling the best possible story of your dataset. In fact, someone should be able to get a strong overall sense of the story of your analysis by reading only your titles and theme definitions. In this way, they are a perfect supervisory tool—we often get our students to send us their theme titles and definitions as a great opportunity to check in, provide feedback, and, if necessary, intervene.

We highly recommend writing theme definitions for your initial themes. This is one of those times that the idea of “steps” really falls apart and the relevance of being recursive and flexible in your approach to the phases comes into play. Theme definitions can be a useful tool to help you make sense of your data and the story you are telling about it at *any* point, including during the earlier review and development phase, when naming and defining, and when writing up. Theme titles for your initial themes can be much looser than those you would expect for final themes. They might just be a way of positioning things until you are able to spend some time creatively crystallizing the central organizing concept, the boundaries of the theme, and the connections between various elements (that in a critical realist perspective may involve suggesting causal relationships between ideas).

In some ways, your themes, and the list of codes that you developed them from, are somewhat abstract. Theme definitions are more concrete—explicit articulations of the important elements of the theme in the form of a paragraph. Trying to pin down what you want to say about each theme and limiting it to a paragraph can be a good way to ascertain whether it is working well and can therefore help with (a) further development of a theme and (b) writing up, as the points you need to highlight become clearer. When you try to write a brief theme definition do you have little to say? Are you struggling to articulate the key idea of the theme? If so, then it may suggest that the theme needs further development or indicates that a theme that looked good in theory is not substantial enough and could therefore be dropped or merged with another. If you find that you have so much to say that it becomes impossible to keep it brief, then this could suggest that the ideas you have for your theme are too disparate (is it a topic summary rather than a theme?), or that you might have packed too much into one theme. Resolving these types of issues through more analytic work can bring ideas together or help you articulate things more clearly.

Ideally, theme names will provide a “headline” that captures the central organizing concept and gives your reader instant insight into the meaning of the theme. One tip for creating engaging theme names is to draw on participant quotations or quotes from your data to form part of the name. You can then add some clarification of

what the theme is about in a bit more detail by adding a colon and your own words (see Box 4). However, this is not always possible or indeed the only way to go about naming. Fundamental though, is that theme names are creative distillations of your theme definitions, so we recommend beginning with your definitions and using this process to shape the theme names.

Writing up

Analytic mindset: Creative, expansive, and connection-forming

In reflexive TA, writing up is part of the analysis and therefore an opportunity to further test out and finesse your themes and the connections between them. You will have the starting point for writing your report from the resources you developed during earlier phases. You could initially draw on your theme definitions and then select some data extracts to include before weaving your analytic narrative to tell the reader about your analysis. There will not be space for *all* the extracts you identified as pertinent to your themes—and it can be challenging to let some go. It can become easy to become attached to multiple quotations from the same participants (or source materials), especially if they phrase things particularly eloquently. But it might help to remember that you are aiming to do two things here: (i) provide the most evocative data extracts to evidence your analysis and (ii) demonstrate that the claims you are making are apparent across multiple participants (or sources) to show that your themes are *patterns* evidenced across the data.

In the write up, it is important to ensure that you have a balance of data extracts, analytic commentary, and some discussion that incorporates the literature. We recognize that practices vary across disciplines and that, for those in foundational sciences education, it may not be common practice to include research literature within results sections of papers. However, we do recommend incorporating the literature. Doing so can enable consideration of how the results shore up (or not) what has gone before (including highlighting any novel contributions). It can also allow a researcher to engage in a deeper analytical discussion through the extant literature, as well as reducing the risk of repetition when researchers leave linking back to the literature until the final part of their article. Instead, the final discussion can be used to reiterate take home points and overarching conclusions. However, there is a balance to be struck. We have seen theme reports that read somewhat like a literature review, and it is important to have in mind that rather than simply discussing other literature, you are aiming to use it to add something to, or say something about, your analysis.

We also see results sections where a couple of common issues occur. The first is authors letting the data speak for themselves. The data are the starting point of your analysis rather than the analysis itself, and therefore, your narrative is a necessary component to make sense of data extracts. The second is researchers falling into the trap of paraphrasing the data, where extracts are

rephrased and simply repeat what participants have said, rather than making any point about or offering any analysis of them—this is to be avoided. You will have provisionally named themes in earlier phases, but perhaps, you can be more creative or edit these as you engage in this final phase. As you craft your report, you may have some final noticing or ideas about how to finesse the shape and structure of your analysis. However, these are likely to be minor tweaks at this point. Nonetheless, you are at your most deeply immersed by this point, and it is worth considering the writing up phase as a final chance for review. For more detail on the features of writing for reflexive TA, alongside other quality control concerns, we highly recommend Braun and Clarke's values-based reporting guidelines for reflexive TA.⁸

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have situated and introduced reflexive TA within a contemporary research context and noted the suitability of the method for those new to qualitative research, through to those with many years of experience. We briefly set out the importance of theory and focused in on critical realism as the approach taken within the example study, as one option among many that reflexive TA is appropriate for, given its emphasis on flexibility. We provided a methodological guide detailing the phases of reflexive TA and noting the importance of each of them, from the often-overlooked foundations of familiarization, through to the final phases of writing up. We hope that this article provides an accessible but in-depth introduction to reflexive TA relevant to researchers across a range of disciplines. For more detailed explanations of the method, we can recommend our short guide² and Braun and Clarke's in-depth text.¹ Further, there is a wealth of literature and other materials that support this method, enhancing its scaffolding of qualitative analysis for a wide range of people.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Gareth Terry: Conceptualization; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; investigation; formal analysis; data curation; funding acquisition.

Nikki Hayfield: Conceptualization; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis.

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ORCID

Gareth Terry  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6377-6194>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Gareth Terry's work is at the intersections of gender, bodies, and health. He has explored men's sexual and reproductive health and decision-making, and men's embodiment and experiences of illness, injury, and body modification. Gareth teaches about qualitative methods (especially reflexive TA) in university courses and through workshops (online and in person). He has written a number of articles, chapters, and books related to qualitative methods.

Nikki Hayfield's research interests are primarily exploring peri/menopause and women's relationships and reproductive lives. She also has expertise around bisexualities, pansexualities, asexualities, and sexualities (including heterosexualities) more widely. She has published on a range of topics including peri/menopause, childfree identities, bisexualities, marginalisation, and relationships. She uses qualitative data in my research and have written papers, chapters, and a book about qualitative research methods.

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