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REVIEW

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Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis

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ABSTRACT
Since initially writing on thematic analysis in 2006, the popularity of the method we outlined has exploded, the variety of TA approaches have expanded, and, not least, our thinking has developed and shifted. In this reflexive commentary, we look back at some of the unspoken assumptions that informed how we wrote our 2006 paper. We connect some of these un-identified assumptions, and developments in the method over the years, with some conceptual mismatches and confusions we see in published TA studies. In order to facilitate better TA practice, we reflect on how our thinking has evolved – and in some cases sedimented – since the publication of our 2006 paper, and clarify and revise some of the ways we phrased or conceptualised TA, and the elements of, and processes around, a method we now prefer to call *reflexive* TA.

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Thematic analysis (TA), and specifically the approach we have developed (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012, 2013), is a widely used method in qualitative sport and exercise research. When we first wrote about TA, we observed that the method was 'a poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 77) in psychology. This observation applies equally to the early use of TA in sport and exercise research, with common practices including both references to 'themes emerging' from qualitative data with little or no discussion of analytic philosophy and procedure, and the use of under- (or un-)theorised 'mashups' of, for example, content analysis and grounded theory techniques to identify themes in qualitative data (e.g. Bain, Wilson, and Chaikind Westoaks 1989; Scanlan, Stein & Ravizza 1989). More recently, TA is (mostly) demarcated and acknowledged as a distinct method in sport and exercise research, but limitations and confusions remain in how TA is implemented and understood. There are, of course, examples of good practice in TA in sport and exercise research (e.g. Hallett and Lamont 2015), alongside many examples of poor and confused practice. The latter include, as we explain further below: a) untheorised mashups of our approach[1] with grounded theory techniques, and/or use of coding reliability measures; b) treating TA as one approach; and c) confusing summaries of data domains or topics with fully realised themes (patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept) (e.g. Evans, Adams, and Hall 2016; Hill et al. 2015).

It might be inferred that our concerns about how TA is being implemented in the field of sport and exercise research indicate we're succumbing to methodolatry (Chamberlain 2000) or proceduralism (King and Brooks 2017a), that we're treating the method like a baking recipe that must be followed precisely in order to ensure a successful outcome, that we're prioritising procedure over reflexivity, theoretical engagement and creative scholarship. We reflexively claim we are not. Our concern is not that there are mashups and other creative uses of TA per se – indeed, these are welcome, *if* they are done deliberately and thoughtfully, as expansion and refinement of methods is a sign of a vital field. But

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many of the (problematic) uses and interpretations of 'our' approach to TA seem to be unknowing, unreflexive and indicative of some degree of conceptual confusion.

We would be the first to hold *our* hands up and say 'mea culpa' to that charge. When initially articulating a TA approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), we took some things for granted; we (unknowingly) assumed that our paper would only be of interest to a fairly small audience of people who 'got it', and who shared our understanding of qualitative research. Beware your unarticulated assumptions – Exhibit A, in why reflexivity matters! We did not anticipate that paper to have such impact and wide uptake; it is now one of the most cited academic papers of recent decades.

The interest in our approach has created lots of opportunities for teaching and talking about TA, in a wide variety of contexts and countries (from Iceland to Iran). This of course means questions, lots and lots of questions. The questions we encountered were often not complex theoretical-methodological questions that we'd wrestled with earlier in our careers, and as doctoral students in the methodologically and theoretically rich environment of Social Sciences at Loughborough University in the late 1990s. The questions often reflected more rudimentary concerns (How many codes should I have? How do I ensure my coding is accurate?), highlighting both our privilege as scholars who had been deeply immersed in qualitative learning contexts and showing how much we'd taking for granted in terms of shared understanding and experience of qualitative research. Contemplating these questions, and learning more about TA in the process, has helped us to reflect on, evaluate, and more transparently and fully articulate, the assumptions about qualitative research that informed how we initially outlined our approach.

In this commentary, inspired by Mauthner and Doucet (2003), we consider how our training experiences, research values and theoretical commitments shaped our original articulation of our approach to TA (Braun and Clarke 2006). Our aim is to explain more clearly the assumptions underpinning our approach, to demarcate more precisely what our approach offers sport and exercise researchers (and researchers in other fields), and how this differs from other approaches to TA. In doing so, we explain our recent decision to label our approach 'reflexive TA' (see Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2018) and consider the centrality of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity to our articulation of TA. We also highlight the importance of methodological scholars locating their stance and acknowledging their position(s), and we consider some of the misconceptions and confusions that have developed about TA as a result of a failure of TA proponents, ourselves included, to fully articulate and locate the philosophical assumptions underpinning their particular iteration of TA. We'll begin by considering how our background and training informed our original articulation of TA.

Reflecting back: how our training, values and commitments informed our conceptualisation of TA

We met in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University, part of a large and lively community of (mostly qualitative) PhD students studying there in the late 1990s. Many of our PhD peers have subsequently written about qualitative research (e.g. Peel et al. 2006; Speer 2002; Wiggins 2016). We think this reflects our intensely methodologically-oriented doctoral training. We spent a lot of time engaged with, sometimes fiercely debating, research-as-research, epistemology, ontology, methodology, method, and the social and political in relation to research. As role-models, we had scholars who (literally, in some cases) 'wrote the book' on *critical* qualitative research – discursive, rhetorical and constructionist approaches; feminist approaches (e.g. Antaki 1994; Billig, 1987; Edwards and Potter 1992; Kitzinger 1987; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995). We've described this elsewhere as being 'in the beating heart of critical qualitative psychology' (Jankowski, Braun, and Clarke 2017, page 46). Our PhD supervisors – Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson – and their colleagues cared about, discussed, debated, and guided others in the doing of (critical) qualitative research. They modelled the value of being a scholar who cared about the doing of qualitative research and encouraged a critical reflexivity about method. This context (unintentionally of course) turned us

into intellectual terrors: at worst, we were arrogant and bratty; at best, this deep foundation in thinking about research that we had attuned us to be critical of a seeming lack of deep thinking and 'knowingness' about methodology, epistemology and ontology, and the presentation of research that was (to us, at least) theoretically troubling. By knowingness, we mean evidence – in the writing – of research being treated as a *deliberative* process, one that involves decisions related not just to design and method, but ontology, epistemology and methodology, and rationales for these, individually and collectively. Knowingness demonstrates engagement with research as a thought-out adventure, rather than simple 'recipe following' activity (to deploy Carla Willig's 2008 expressive distinction).

The roots of thinking about writing our original TA paper came from early experiences of going to conferences and seeing people claim to have used, analytically, 'a combination of discourse analysis and grounded theory'. We'd shake our heads in confusion, thinking 'these orientations are (typically) philosophically incompatible', and usually seeing an analysis that really was not one or the other. This was not the 'analytic pluralism' that has more recently developed (e.g. Dewe and Coyle 2014). In this, we occupied a position of superiority – we looked, heard, and judged – a position akin to the idea of 'smug marrieds' that Helen Fielding evocatively described in *Bridget Jones' Diary*. Another way to look at it – somewhat kinder to ourselves – is that our positioning reflected our educational privilege. At the time, we didn't realise quite how lucky we were to have had supervisors and other academic role models who thought and cared deeply not only about the pragmatics of doing good qualitative research, but about the reflexive, conceptual bases for knowledge generation processes and practices. Who asked us the – sometimes painful – tough questions about what we were doing, and why. Our PhD supervisors particularly also instilled in us a sense that qualitative research is about fun, play and creativity. Instead of asking *why* (*why* do a qualitative survey?), they asked *why not?* Try it out, see what happens, but think deeply about your rationale before your jump in. They encouraged us – and gave us confidence – to 'experiment' in the broadest sense with research and research methods, something we have continued to do throughout our careers.

Our 2006 paper stemmed from dual frustrations: at the 'sloppy mishmash' (Morse 1989: 4) of theories, methods and techniques we saw described at conferences and in published research; and at there being lots of research (from ourselves included) that claimed to 'do TA,' but that did not transparently describe the processes engaged in to produce the themes reported. We also wanted to articulate an approach to TA that reflected an orientation to qualitative research that was *fully* qualitative – qualitative with regard to both philosophy and procedure. Most existing TA approaches, like that expressed by US psychologist Richard Boyatzis (1998) in his book *Transforming qualitative information*, did not – from *our* perspective *as terrors* – quite 'get it': to us, then, 'proper' qualitative research dare not contain even a whiff of positivism. Boyatzis framed his approach as an attempt to 'bridge the divide' between positivist (quantitative) and interpretive (qualitative) research, and advocated the use of 'coding reliability' measures to provide warrants of the quality and reliability of coding, and control the threat to reliability researcher subjectivity presented, in a language that would be intelligible to quantitative-positivists. For us, it was not possible to 'bridge the divide' and retain the integrity of qualitative research.

We intended our approach to TA to reflect our view of qualitative research as creative, reflexive and subjective, with researcher subjectivity understood as a resource (see Gough and Madill 2012), rather than a potential threat to knowledge production, as it arguably is conceptualised in Boyatzis' and some other approaches to TA. For us, qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated, and qualitative data analysis is about telling 'stories', about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the 'truth' that is either 'out there' and findable from, or buried deep within, the data. For us, the final analysis is the product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection, something that is active and generative. We emphasised that themes do not passively emerge from data to capture this process (for a compelling account of this process, see Ho, Chiang, and Leung 2017). We also sought to develop a way of doing TA that encouraged a rigorous and systematic approach to coding and theme development, but that was also fluid and recursive, rather than rigid and structured and requiring the use of a codebook or coding

frame. We wanted a TA method that offered an adventure, not a recipe, to again paraphrase Willig (2008). We intended our approach to offer the qualitative researcher *flexibility* in terms of the theory informing their use of TA, and how precisely they enacted TA (a constructionist or essentialist framing, an inductive and/or deductive orientation, and latent and/or semantic coding), but in doing so, it *required* the researcher to articulate the assumptions that informed their approach and how exactly they enacted TA. It offered an approach that required reflexivity, theoretical knowingness and transparency.

Moving forward: unpacking reflexive TA

As previously noted, we assumed most people would 'get it', would understand our assumptions. How wrong we were! We see countless examples of researchers, both in sport and exercise and in other fields, not 'getting it' – explicitly claiming to follow our process and procedures, but outlining and doing something different, either partially or fairly comprehensively. We see our approach mashed-up with other TA approaches that differ profoundly in terms of procedure and underlying philosophy, typically without any discussion or acknowledgement of the differences. Grounded theory concepts and procedures are attributed to TA. Or our approach is 'supplemented' with other analytic procedures, sometimes because our approach on its own is deemed not 'sophisticated' enough for anything other than (often atheoretical) data description or summary (of surface meaning). Our conceptualisation of themes – as stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset – is confused with 'domain summaries' – summaries of the range of meaning in the data related to a particular topic or 'domain' of discussion. Our approach is sometimes presented as involving a rigid, linear series of stages. Or as offering the researcher 'either or' choices: coding can be semantic *or* latent, inductive *or* deductive, rather than a mix of semantic *and* latent, inductive *and* deductive.

These are the common 'misapplications' that we see. Our failure to anticipate the ways in which our approach might be misunderstood partly reflects our failure to fully articulate our qualitative values and assumptions in our 2006 paper, which itself, as noted above, partly reflects our educational privilege and our lack of understanding of how lucky we were in terms of the doctoral training we received. We recognise now the vast interest in qualitative methods, but that most people do not have or have not had access to the educational scaffolding that has supported our development and practice as qualitative researchers and methodological scholars. However, as well as *now* being better able to articulate our assumptions and the distinctive characteristics of our approach, we have also come to see how our thinking around TA, and our understanding of the landscape of TA, is not static. Qualitative researchers are always thinking, reflecting, learning and evolving – we do not reach a point where we have nothing more to learn. We are *journeying*, not arriving! Therefore, one of our *key* appeals to researchers drawing on our approach is to read some of our more recent writing, to gain a sense of how our thinking around and articulation of our approach has evolved over the years (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2016; Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016; Braun et al. 2018; Terry et al. 2017).

Conceptualising TA then, and now (and, developments in our terminology)

In our 2006 paper, we described TA (in general) as a theoretically flexible method rather than a theoretically informed and constrained methodology. Now we think TA is best described as theoretically flexible only as a *generic* method; specific iterations of TA encode particular paradigmatic and epistemological assumptions about meaningful knowledge production and thus their theoretical flexibility is more or less constrained. We are (hopefully) not 'terrors' anymore, or at least are more knowingly-placed and delimited in our critiques! We use this final section to describe some key shifts in our thinking around TA (summarised in Table 1).

Our view of different approaches to TA is that they reflect different philosophical assumptions about, and orientations to, qualitative research, rather than proponents simply 'getting it' or 'not getting it'; with us taking the roles of judge and jury with regard to what constitutes 'getting it'.

Table 1. Key conceptualisations around thematic analysis: Then and now.

Then	Now
Not 'getting it' (them) versus 'getting it' (us)	There are several clusters of TA approaches each with different philosophical assumptions and procedural practices that reflect these assumptions (we call these coding reliability TA, codebook TA and reflexive TA).
TA is theoretically flexible	In specific iterations of TA, flexibility is more or less constrained by paradigmatic and epistemological assumptions around meaningful knowledge production; reflexive TA procedures reflect the values of a qualitative paradigm, centring researcher subjectivity, organic and recursive coding processes, and the importance of deep reflection on, and engagement with, data.
Themes *are* themes	There are different conceptualisations of a theme – domain summaries versus patterns of shared meaning, underpinned by a central meaning-based concept.
Searching for themes	We now prefer the term 'generating (initial) themes' to emphasise that themes are not 'in' the data, pre-existing analysis, awaiting retrieval.

That said, it is not always clear to us that the proponents of specific iterations of TA have developed their approaches fully acknowledging their own underlying research values and assumptions, or indeed situating themselves within the landscape of qualitative research – which, as we've noted, we initially did *not*! Furthermore, most TA proponents do not locate their approach within the wider terrain of TA – some (e.g. Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012) do not even acknowledge the existence of other approaches, and thus how they differ from the approach they outline. Recognising the diversity and *patterning* of the field, we are now always careful to locate our approach to TA; we encourage other TA methodologists to do the same.

We also recognise that there are radically different conceptualisations of themes. We conceptualise themes as patterns of *shared meaning* underpinned or united by a core concept (we later conceptualised this as a 'central organizing concept' [Braun and Clarke 2013; Braun, Clarke, and Rance 2014] to emphasise a uniting idea). But our understanding of themes – something that remains consistent in our thinking around TA – is neither the 'obvious' nor the taken-for-granted one. Too often we see these different conceptualisations evident in the implementation of what is claimed as doing TA according to our guidelines, with authors presenting summaries of data *domains* as 'themes' (Clarke and Braun 2018). Domain summary themes are organised around a shared topic but not shared *meaning* – they aim to capture the *diversity* of meaning in relation to a topic or area of focus. Theme titles are often reflective of data collection questions (theme titles that start 'Type of', 'Benefits of' and 'Drawbacks of' are very common; see Evans, Adams, and Hall 2016) or consist of one word that identifies the domain (e.g. satisfaction). We hope it's clear how fundamentally different these ideas are, in what they aim to do with data and analysis. In our more recent work (Braun and Clarke 2016; Braun et al. 2018; Clarke and Braun 2018), we have distinguished between these two conceptualisations of themes in TA, and also argued that, from our perspective, domain summary themes typically constitute under-developed themes (see also Connelly and Peltzer 2016); they are not compatible with *our* approach to TA.

In our most recent work, we have offered a tripartite typology of TA, consisting of what we cluster and call coding reliability, codebook and reflexive approaches (see Braun et al. 2018). This typology has evolved and developed over several years from an initial distinction between positivist coding reliability approaches and our approach (and may evolve further) (Braun, Clarke, and Terry 2014; Clarke and Braun 2016). In interpretively mapping the terrain of TA, we have tried out different names for our approach, seeking to avoid calling it the 'Braun and Clarke' approach (as some others do), not just because that feels too egotistical, but more importantly because it does not say anything useful about the distinctive characteristics of our approach.

We initially thought the term 'organic' captured the open, exploratory, flexible and iterative nature of the approach we outlined, compared to the more structured approaches to coding and theme development associated with (post-)positivist coding reliability approaches (like those of Boyatzis 1998,; Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). In coding reliability TA, analysis *begins* with theme development. Themes are typically conceptualised as data domains (or

'buckets', as one of our students memorably dubbed this type of theme), which are often developed from data collection questions or following data familiarisation. Coding, guided by a pre-determined codebook or coding frame, is understood as a process for correctly identifying the material relevant to each bucket. Multiple coders are the norm, with coding reliability measures used to test for consistency of judgement – with an aim for 'reliable' or 'accurate' coding. We found Kidder and Fine's (1987) small q/Big Q qualitative distinction – between qualitative research as a) the use of tools and techniques (typically within a positivist paradigm; *small q*) or b) encompassing a philosophy *and* procedure (*Big Q)* – provided a useful way of conceptually demarcating our (Big Q) 'organic' or 'flexible' approach from positivist-oriented (small q) coding reliability approaches (e.g. Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016; Clarke and Braun 2016; Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015). However, when presenting this Big Q/organic and small q/coding reliability TA typology, we were often asked about where approaches like framework analysis (e.g. Ritchie and Spencer 1994) and template analysis (e.g. King and Brooks 2017b) would fit. We subsequently expanded our typology to include these and other similar approaches, under the banner of *codebook TA*. They sit somewhere a bit 'in-between' – although these approaches utilise the more structured coding (with codebook) approach and early theme development of coding reliability TA, they are embedded within a (Big Q) qualitative philosophy.

Although we still frame our TA approach as Big Q TA and organic TA, we increasingly prefer the term *reflexive* TA – hence the title of this commentary. This name seems (for *now*, at least) to best capture what is (most) *distinctive* about our approach, compared to other versions of TA. The researcher's role in knowledge production is at the heart of our approach! Reflexive TA needs to be implemented with theoretical knowingness and transparency; the researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA; and these are consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research. They are aware of the need to make decisions around analysis, and they knowingly engage and make them (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2017). The coding process requires a continual bending back on oneself – questioning and querying the assumptions we are making in interpreting and coding the data. Themes are analytic *outputs* developed through and from the creative labour of our coding. They reflect considerable analytic 'work,' and are *actively* created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity. Themes do not *passively* emerge from either data or coding; they are not 'in' the data, waiting to be identified and retrieved by the researcher. Themes are creative and interpretive *stories* about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves. *Quality* reflexive TA is not about following procedures 'correctly' (or about 'accurate' and 'reliable' coding, or achieving consensus between coders), but about the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process. We increasingly refer to terms like 'developing' (Braun, Clarke, and Weate 2016) 'constructing' (Braun et al. 2018) or 'generating' (see Table 1) to capture this process. If more than one researcher is involved in the analytic process, the coding approach is collaborative and reflexive, designed to develop a richer more nuanced reading of the data, rather than seeking a consensus on meaning.

The take away . . .

We hope this reflexive commentary provides qualitative researchers – in sport and exercise and beyond – with a clearer account of the assumptions and values that have informed our thinking and practice around TA (with the caveat that things may still change into the future, as other assumptions or ideas get clarified or shift). We end with some take away points to facilitate knowingness around purpose and sensibility for TA, to inform better TA practice:

- Being explicit, thoughtful and deliberate ('knowing') in the application of method and theory is important.
- Assumptions and positionings are always part of qualitative research. Reflexive practice is vital to understand and unpack these. It is good practice to reflect on and identify *what* you're assuming, and then interrogate whether those assumptions hold for any particular project.
- There are *different* approaches to TA – and they're not necessarily compatible with each other. Being aware of this and doing TA in a deliberate ('knowing') way, can help avoid confusion and mismatches in concept and practice.
- Use a TA approach that suits your research purpose and analytic sensibility (theoretical and conceptual frameworks).
- If you're doing reflexive TA, do read *beyond* our 2006 paper. Our various papers cited above signal key places to look for clarification (see also our The University of Auckland TA website: https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-research/research-groups/thematic-analysis.html).
- Quality matters. Understanding what you're doing, why you're doing it, and what the criteria for doing it well are, are vital for doing (reflexive) TA well.

Note

1. We use the shorthand 'our approach' here for ease of reference, but we are not the only ones writing about this form of TA, nor do we wish to suggest some proprietary claim, no matter how much 'trademarking' TA would no doubt please some within the neoliberal university economy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Virginia Braun is a Professor in the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland. She is a feminist and (critical) health psychologist and teaches and researches in these areas. She has an ongoing interest in qualitative research and wrote (with Victoria Clarke) the award winning textbook Successful Qualitative Research (Sage). She has written extensively on thematic analysis (with Victoria and others) and co-edited Collecting Qualitative Data (Cambridge University Press) with Victoria and Debra Gray. She also has a particular interest in the story completion method and recently co-edited (with Victoria, Hannah Frith and Naomi Moller) a Special Issue of Qualitative Research in Psychology dedicated to this method.

Victoria Clarke is an Associate Professor of Qualitative and Critical Psychology at the University of the West of England, Bristol, where she teaches about qualitative methods and sexuality and gender to undergraduate and postgraduate students. She has published an award winning textbook Successful Qualitative Research (Sage) and numerous publications on thematic analysis with Virginia Braun, and the edited text Collecting Qualitative Data (Cambridge University Press) with Virginia and Debra Gray. Most recently, Victoria and Virginia, along with Hannah Frith and Naomi Moller, co-edited a Special Issue of Qualitative Research in Psychology on the story completion method.

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